

Amandante

an opera libretto
inspired by Plato's *Symposion*
written by Paul van der Woerd
for music by Maxim Shalygin

"To the feasts of the good, the good come uninvited"

Greek proverb
cited by Socrates
quoted by Aristodemus
in Apollodorus' retelling
according to Plato's *Symposion*
translated by P.B. Shelley in *The Banquet*

So I find words I never thought to speak
T.S. Eliot

Dramatis Personae

in order of appearance

Agathon's wife

A wine merchant

A female flute player

Agathon, a poet and playwright

Alcibiades, a statesman and general

Pausanias, a legal expert

Urania, the Aphrodite of heavenly love

Pandemia, the Aphrodite of vulgar love

Moon, primal double-bodied hermaphrodite

Sun, primal double-bodied chauvinist male

Earth, primal double-bodied female

Socrates, a philosopher

Diotima

Prologue: Fuck Ideas Not Women

A narrow, empty lane at the back door of Agathon's house. The blind garden wall is covered partly in a grapevine and partly in a graffiti that, overlooking negligence and litter, reads, "FUCK IDEAS NOT WOMEN." Early afternoon.

Agathon's wife enters from back door, with wine merchant, flute player and Agathon off-stage.

ALL VOICES

This is the day after.
This is the day before
another night to go
into eternity.

AGATHON'S WIFE

At least my Agathon has plans.
The other day he had success,
the masses cheered his plays. Tonight
he'll have a cheesy meet and greet.

His mantuary's ready to receive his friends.
Of course I've done some cooking for the guys.
One has to play one's role. But I
can see already now how it will end.

Wine merchant enters from square.

WINE MERCHANT

Hullo there, ma'am.
Where do you want me
to drop this delivery?

AGATHON'S WIFE

Wherever you like.
It will find its way.

WINE MERCHANT

Oh, sure. I can assure you picked
the finest wines we offer.

And, as you know, we know
a thing or two about spirits.

AGATHON'S WIFE

Don't tell me knowing something comes
with drinking. It rather goes,
as will the food I have prepared.
I have been cutting eggs in half
and salting them for half a day
— I think, for God's sake, all in vain.

One indispensable ingredient
of every dish is company — or so they say.
But all these guests expired long ago,
far past their dates. To pepper their symposium
I got a girl to play the flute.
Assholes.

Flute player enters from square.

FLUTE PLAYER

Good afternoon milady, mister.
If I am not mistaken
it's here that I am ordered
to take care of the music...

WINE MERCHANT

I see tonight they'll lose
their heads not over wine.
[on his way through back door to put delivery in place]

FLUTE PLAYER

[first to wine merchant, then to Agathon's wife]
Steer clear of straight lines.
As I heard through the grapevine,
it's quite some folk I must amuse.
There will be lots to choose.

AGATHON'S WIFE

I feel some tongues are loose

already now, and more will be.
They will have something to discuss,
oh boy, the world will love to hear.
No better match than love and hearsay,
no harder choice than word or mouth.

FLUTE PLAYER

My fortune is: I don't have any text.
I'm going to be playing to a tune
that will enchant the sun, the earth, the moon,
without me knowing well what will be next.

AGATHON'S WIFE

In short, you'll mix to tickle
both the body and the brain.
I wonder what will be the aftertaste
of all your merry melodies.

Wine merchant re-enters from back door.

WINE MERCHANT

[to flute player, pointing to Agathon's wife]
She wonders what will be the aftertaste
of all your merry melodies...
[to Agathon's wife]
Thank you for using our services.
Please kindly rate the experience.

FLUTE PLAYER

Let's see who does, to whom, a service.
We're still experiencing.

WINE MERCHANT

[to both]
And yes, do share,
by all means share.

Wine merchant exit into square.

FLUTE PLAYER

He means, by any means he'll get his share.
With us, that's still a question.
I'll give the stage a check now,
then change and prep myself.

Flute player exit through back door into house.

AGATHON'S WIFE

My dearest husband's main philosophy
is sheer debauchery. Humanity,
I bet, will longer keep
his habits than his plays.

Up front his guests will shortly come.
Let's realise the beauty, and forget
about the art at the back end.

Agathon's wife exit through back door into house.

The sound of someone taking a shower from behind the scene, bathroom-singing.

AGATHON'S VOICE

... anywhere
Love is in the air
Smelling of your hair
Dearest, you're so fair
Take me anywhere
Love is ...

Scene 1: The Inflammation (after Phaedrus)

A field in the open, with a crossing of two dirt roads, one of which leads in the direction of the city. Afternoon.

Alcibiades on his way to the city, now marching, now strolling, now turning back and then returning.

ALCIBIADES

I burn, a candle
on the altar of
the God of Love.
Lit by lightning, I
feed my flame.
I'm lost.

What did I do
to deserve the state I'm in?
Love has got the better of me,
blazing to bring out the best,
boning me down to an upward-
smouldering fuse.

A blessing or a curse?
For better or for worse,
I, betting on that horse
that's better in my soul,
give in to greater force
than that of great remorse,
run, unafraid, afoul
of all that's worth it whole.

A planet greets
its star again.
My earth is light
and so am I,
an open field,
the morning of
a battle day.
I'll fight my way.

All the trouble people take
for the sake of love!
Nature and culture contrive
to give birth to beauty only
to conquer a world, a beloved,
and lay the one at
the feet of the other.

Love breathes into me,
who love, the spirit it
produces from itself.
Exalted, I adore
the devastating depth
of feeling high from be-
ing better than I am —
from falling to my love.

I burn, a candle
on the altar of
the God of Love.
Lit by lightning, I
feed my flame.
I'm lost.

Scene 2: The Interview (Pausanias)

In the city gate. Late afternoon.

Pausanias standing and pondering. Alcibiades showing up from the countryside, hurrying into the city. Voices of both Urania and Pandemia from behind the scene.

PAUSANIAS

Alcibiades,
where are you heading?

ALCIBIADES

Don't bother, my dear.
I'm going to crown
the most beautiful
of all men. You frown?

URANIA'S VOICE

No. Do by all means.

PANDEMIA'S VOICE

Yes. Don't mean it, dare.

PAUSANIAS

Don't tell me you're in love.
Who is the lucky one?
A man you're worthy of?

ALCIBIADES

The best part is that he
is worthy, too, of me.
Of course it's Agathon.

PAUSANIAS

You look as if you know
who should be envious...

ALCIBIADES

... of whom? Of both of us?

URANIA'S VOICE

Love justifies the means.

PANDEMIA'S VOICE

Be mean, love justifies.

PAUSANIAS

There's beauty and beauty.
There's beauty for booty
and beauty that uplifts.

ALCIBIADES

There's knowledge and knowledge.
While yours is sheer baggage,
I know to spend my gifts.

URANIA'S VOICE

Means can't make up for love.

PANDEMIA'S VOICE

Makeup can mean some love.

PAUSANIAS

I feel what you imply.
And I can stomach that,
if what you're aiming at
is not what's in the eye.

ALCIBIADES

O please, Pausanias,
if I were so pedantic,
I'd rather be romantic.
Come on now, let me pass.

URANIA'S VOICE

Idealise.

PANDEMIA'S VOICE

Objectify.

PAUSANIAS

My main concern is what
brings out the best of him.

ALCIBIADES

Your main concern is who
will profit from his whim.

URANIA'S VOICE

Discern.

PANDEMIA'S VOICE

Unite.

PAUSANIAS

I love him to be happy and improve.
Not ev'ry mode of love is beautiful,
but that alone which makes us suitable
for stimulations that our souls behoove.

ALCIBIADES

Give me a break. It's present time
well spent that counts. The Gods
give it to us and us to it
both for what's lowly and sublime.

PANDEMIA'S VOICE

Find the thrill.

URANIA'S VOICE

Thrill the find.

PAUSANIAS

The flower of the form will fade and still
you should be serving as a willing slave
the purpose of becoming more wise, and
more virtuous, through enduring intercourse
in harmony with that which is consist-
ent with itself, with honour and with grace.

ALCIBIADES

I would say that love is all
about one feeling fine together
with no demands or expectations —
one now, forbidding future.

PAUSANIAS

You know you can do better.
A sentimental education,
if not of yourself of the other,
is all that's love about.

PANDEMIA'S VOICE

Taste the face.

URANIA'S VOICE

Face the taste.

ALCIBIADES

I don't believe in altruism,
I do believe in love.

PAUSANIAS

If I were sure you could ignore
their congruence but fit their core,
I would adore to see how you adore.

PANDEMIA'S VOICE

Try the defiance.

URANIA'S VOICE

Defy the trial.

ALCIBIADES

I appreciate how nobly
you hand over your beloved
to a well-versed, stronger lover
and make him happy.

PAUSANIAS

Thank you for your appreciation.
My consolation is my trepidation:
if you behave,
you're not in love.

PANDEMIA'S VOICE

Take the risk.

URANIA'S VOICE

Risk the take.

Interlude: The Interruption (Choir)

The back lane. Early evening.

Agathon's wife and the flute player sitting in the doorway.

AGATHON'S WIFE, FLUTE PLAYER

[joined off-stage by wine merchant's and Agathon's voices]

Now the music is mute,
rationed as is the wine,
pleasure is measured out,
words follow words to tout
love around and to shine.
We would better walk the line.

We don't give up what we have had.
We are parting from a past
that's never had a future.

[to each other]

I love.
I've won
the lottery of love.
I have,
I am,
a ticket to redeem.
I'm loved
and lost
at once.

We don't give up what we have had.
We part from an embrace, not from
somebody but a here-and-now,
a sense that never was to come.

Scene 3: The Extraordinary (after Eryximachus)

A street in the city. Dusk.

Alcibiades walking on, hesitating and daring, getting his self-confidence and courage together.

The wine merchant coming from the opposite direction, heading home to his business, preoccupied with his own thoughts and addressing the first stranger he meets in the street.

WINE MERCHANT

Love is all about selections.
Nature has its predilections
and we're all in competitions
that may end in great deception
or in fatal consummation
for the sake of evolution.
We get in and we get out —
who's within and who's without,
that's what love is all about.
We get in and we get out:
either for the worst or for the best.
There is nothing of more interest
than the race among the raciest...
Love is Nature at its pickiest.

The best activity
to help diversity
is promiscuity.
How else could we choose,
accept a refuse,
or risk that we lose
to someone else
or to ourselves
our dear virginity
and still keep dignity?

Things get under our skins
as soon as love begins
to disidentify from sex.
Then they enthrall, lift up, and vex.

Scene 4: Worlds of Separation (after Aristophanes)

A city square around the corner of Agathon's house. Evening.

Alcibiades standing silently at the corner of the back lane to Agathon's house, apparently waiting for someone or something, circling in every now and then. Voices coming from various directions, with Alcibiades joining in at times.

MOON, SUN, EARTH

I went about with you in glory
till God us humans parted angrily.
In difference we plunged from unity
and learning took the place of knowledge.

MOON

As ocean's moon looks
on the moon in heaven,
I look for that single other
soul I, unbeknownst, have
never been without.
I feel we're close, closed off
to each other by nothing
but a flimsy film of water
fencing two depths.

SUN

As desert's sun looks
on the sun in a mirage,
I look for that single other
soul I, unbeknownst, have
never been without.
I feel we're close, closed off
to each other by nothing
but a steamy, nervous layer
linking two depths.

EARTH

As bedrock earth looks
on the earth in airy spheres,
I look for that single other

soul I, unbeknownst, have
never been without.
I feel we're close, closed off
to each other by nothing
but a concave, foamy vault of light
crossing two depths.

MOON, SUN, EARTH

Am I above, am I below?
Am I within, am I without?
I am in love.
I don't know nothing else.
I am in love. With whom?
Uncertainty,
sweet cruelty
— to know for sure
there is another soul
that, unbeknownst,
has always been with me,
but not to have a clue at all:
Is it in love? With me?
We each are the other
side of a mirror.

Through sea, and air, and rock
a soul thirsts for a word,
divining what it seeks,
tracing obscurely the footsteps
of its obscure desire.

Interlude: The Interlocution (Choir)

The back lane. Late evening.

Agathon's wife and the flute player, heated up, walking around.

AGATHON'S WIFE

In the theatre of Love
we are all props, picked by a picky
hand, but handled with no care.
My playwright, Agathon now tries to
script some of the action.
You know what he will say?
“Love is never touched by violence.”
My goodness!

That he may live in peace
with his street-level wit,
his street-level wisdom,
his street-level beauty.

FLUTE PLAYER

He seems to think that the possessor
is way superior to the possessed.
Although he recognises
that Venus's love possesses Mars...

It's hard when you're the epitome
of luck, success, and certainty,
when love's a thing that never moves,
when love, that fickle godhead Love,
because it never has forsaken you,
is something you don't need.
You love for a reason
and reason gets lost.

Scene 5: The Intro to a Trio (Agathon)

The dining room in Agathon's house. Nightfall.

Agathon taking his leisure at a dinner table set for a company of seven, revelling in his own musings as if addressing and entertaining his guests. Halfway, Socrates enters the room, listening attentively, standing and strolling around and then taking a seat at the table opposite Agathon towards the end of the scene.

AGATHON

Love is in the air
Smelling of your hair
Dearest you're so fair
Take me anywhere

If you think to love in vain
is a pain,
think again:
what about
to be loved
for a reason or for naught?
I don't take it lightly
to be cherished rightly,
so I choose the narrow path,
undergoing godly wrath.

Love is in the air...

Scene 6: The Interrogation (Socrates)

The dining room in Agathon's house. Night.

Socrates and Agathon at the table, opposite each other.

SOCRATES

Sheer praise denies the godhead
the honour that we're due.
Our words do not need beauty
in order to be true.
So let's strip bare our bias
and question what we do.

Now, Agathon,

DIOTIMA'S VOICE

[doubling Socrates off-stage]

Now, Socrates,

SOCRATES, DIOTIMA'S VOICE

please tell me:
If you desire, do you possess?

AGATHON, SOCRATES

Certainly not.

SOCRATES, DIOTIMA

If you love, do you have?

AGATHON, SOCRATES

I don't think so.

Diotima entering the room.

SOCRATES, DIOTIMA

If you long, are you there?

AGATHON, SOCRATES

I would not say.

DIOTIMA, SOCRATES

If Love's unhappy, is it a god?

SOCRATES, AGATHON

I confess, not.

DIOTIMA

You can only be yourself by not existing.

SOCRATES

What do you mean?

Diotima taking a seat, slowly, majestically.

DIOTIMA

You are not what you want.
You want what you are not.
What's you in you is under way
in you and others.

Agathon leaning back, sinking deeper and deeper into his seat.

SOCRATES

Enter the void, the interval
'tween ignorance and wisdom.

DIOTIMA

Deep in each constellation
at the heart of every entity
there is a love-shaped hole,
where two unite to dare
— opposite directions —
the jump from one to nil
and thus do bring about
a jump from nil to one.

DIOTIMA, SOCRATES

Love is the labour of learning.

Interlude: Intimate Indecency (Choir)

The back lane. Late night.

*Agathon's wife and the flute player, trying to keep warm.
Song of Songs.*

AGATHON'S WIFE, FLUTE PLAYER

I look into my lover's eyes
so close to mercilessly gauge
the dioptre. Lost focus point
in shallow depth of field. Oh my!

I feel how mutual respect
and dignity dissolve and merge
with intimacy and the urge
to be myself in full neglect

of decency and shame. I give
my body free from reservation
to farting, scratching, burping in
the closest presence of the other.
Oh my!

My beauty's nothing but a bother.
Enjoy it,
explore it,
employ it,
devour it.
Oh love, please love my imperfection.

Alcibiades rushing past from the square through the lane into the back door, joining Agathon's wife and the flute player in a trio on his way in.

AGATHON'S WIFE, FLUTE PLAYER, ALCIBIADES

[in trio, with Agathon's voice joining in off-stage]

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

Fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you.

Fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you.

Fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you.

Fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you.

Fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck you.

You you you you you you you you you.

You you you you you you you.

You you you you you.

You you you.

You.

Scene 7: The Invasion of Jealousy (Alcibiades)

The dining room in Agathon's house. Late night.

*Socrates, Agathon, and Diotima at the table: the two men opposite, the woman at the head.
Alcibiades dashing in, embracing and addressing Agathon and Socrates in turn.*

ALCIBIADES

[at times joined by Pausanias's, Pandemia's and Urania's voices]

[to Agathon]

I can prize love,

[to Socrates, etc]

I can prize you.

To God it's the same
difference, although...

it is not easy for a man
in my state
to single out your singularities.

I'll think ever better of you —
in the end you'll become a saint.

But no,
oh no.

You make me want to see you
as God has thought you up — you.

You make me want you to desire
just to lie down together, spooning,
pressing limbs in cavities to feel
how our skins both burn away into
each other, closing in as near they can,
so as to know no longer from whose side
they feel our selves, too fused to one.

Getting inside me and me inside,
reaching inside you and you inside,
feeling inside me and you inside,
being inside you and me inside.

Now I must get over

what I feel is everlasting.

I realise:

Love is the you that is not mine,

love is the you that is not I.

Thank love you'll never feel like me.

Epilogue: Wrapping Up

The back lane, just before daybreak.

Agathon's wife, the wine merchant and the flute player doing some cleaning up.

AGATHON'S WIFE

Why is it that I never stop
revisiting, inviting back
into my life, the object of
my first great love, only to find
— we talk, our words play hide and seek —
each time a truth I know deep down
again: that I would never stand
our fate together? Yes, it must,
must be to quench a longing that
I long to stretch until breakup.
Scratching our exhausted granaries,
we've seen all our seasons pass away.

WINE MERCHANT

Why is it that I boldly miss
out on an opportunity
to get to know a close friend
closer, keep my doors closed, and wittingly
do not allow myself
into myself, to open up?
What is this self-destructive force
we throw our selves into, aware
of all it ends like cats in arrogant
submission when caressed
by words or hands? Why is it that
we do not want to lick the shit
out of each other's asses? How
come love can smell and taste like hate?

FLUTE PLAYER

And why is it that now,
in error and in vain,
in love beyond the itch,

some are discussing how
to turn this mess into
an opera? As if
you cannot make a work
of art without insanity
of sorts. Don't try
to break the bars.

AGATHON'S WIFE, WINE MERCHANT, FLUTE PLAYER

[joined by Agathon's off-stage voice in quartet]

No, in the finitude of life I see no horror,
yet I do fear as hell the finitude of mind —
its multiplicity a shattered mirror.

As even love doth part,

let [**A**: naught | **AW**: truth | **WM**: death | **FP**: art] unite.

All exeunt through back door into house, with the sound of rain pouring down.

CURTAIN

Colophon

Amandante is an opera
commissioned by Nova Opera
and published by Donemus Publishing

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