

THE CATARACT

A play by Lisa D'Amour

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Time:

The approach of the 19th century, history cascading into the future, the present pulsing with potential, progress, mystery, desire.

Place:

Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Characters:

Cyrus Finch: A 33 year old man of Scandinavian descent. He has a strong jaw and callused hands. He puts his faith in hard work and consistent effort. This is what keeps a man's spine straight, and his gaze firm and focused.

Lottie Finch: Cyrus' wife. A 31-year old woman of Scandinavian descent. She has tight features and tight buttons. She has a sense of the supernatural, but keeps it in check through her irrepressible work ethic.

Dan Gold: A 29 year old man originally from the Alabama Gulf Coast. A conflicted soul who was raised to work hard, but somewhere along the line he fell off the path.

Dinah Le Blanc: A 28 year old woman originally from New Orleans, LA. She is of French Creole descent, with olive skin, deep eyes and a deeper smile. The world pulls her in many directions, and she is most at home when she doesn't resist.

Playwright's Note:

The Cataract was developed at the A.S.K. Theater Projects New Play Retreat, and through workshops at New Dramatists and The Playwrights' Center.

A Note on the Style and Setting

THE CATARACT is set in 1883 in Minneapolis on the Mississippi River at the site of a waterfall that is being gutted and dammed. The play's physical world of stone, water, and wood is emblematic of the interior landscapes of its four characters: Cyrus and Lottie (a stalwart couple from the North) and Dan and Dinah (vagabond lovers from the South).

The words of this play are deceptively simple, stilted even. The style of the dialogue serves to strip the characters' world of the clutter of realism, while requiring that the characters and their world remain wholly real.

There is a system of silent communication in this play that lives in directed gaze and gesture. The gestures and silences that appear in the text have the same weight as spoken word, and serve to anchor the play in a specific rhythm. This rhythm becomes essential in understanding the strict order and subsequent unraveling of the couples' shared world: it is undeniable and unavoidable to the characters, and should be undeniable and unavoidable to the structure of the piece.

I encourage the reader to visualize a world sliced open, so that the mechanisms of that world are fully exposed: both the natural forces, and personal/subconscious inner lives. Imagine the stage setting to be open, like a dollhouse cut in half: most often, the audience will be experiencing multiple realities. For example, Dinah and Lottie in the kitchen while Cyrus and Dan work at the river; the two couples, each in their bedrooms; one character spying on another, even as the first is being watched by a third. We are on the outside of this diorama, looking in.

Finally, I encourage readers not to read this as a traditional "history play". This play documents nine days in the lives of four people, and their struggle to keep a lid on the tidal waves of desire that live inside each of them. I have included historical details of the time and space of this play below. They are of interest, and important in creating the texture and specificity of this world. However the characters of the play can be experienced on their own terms.

Historical Background

The Great Milling Era in Minneapolis in the late 1880's was a time of great progress and prosperity. At least 8 large flour and lumber mills lined the banks of the Mississippi, many of them powered by water diverted from St. Anthony Falls, the only waterfall on the entire Mississippi.

St. Anthony Falls was eventually destroyed by a combination of natural erosion, and man-made attempts to tunnel under the falls to harness the water power. Today, St. Anthony Falls looks more like a broad cement slab with water running down it than a natural waterfall.

The Stone Arch Bridge was built as a railroad bridge that would allow supplies to be carried quickly and conveniently to the mills. Today, the Stone Arch Bridge is a pedestrian bridge designed for bikers and sight-seers.

Dan and Dinah the banks of the Mississippi
River in Minnesota.

Lottie and Cyrus are sitting down for dinner
in their home on the West bank of the
Mississippi.

DAN

Dinah, this is Minnesota. We are in Minneapolis, Dinah. It's been an upriver journey but now we can rest. Minnesota. Here's the river and there is the city. It's no New York but it's bigger than Natchez, Mississippi any day of the week. And how about that, arriving one day and getting work building a bridge the next. This place is going to help us find our heads. It's been a long journey, up the wily Mississippi, we've made our bed in a lot of places. You getting that cut on your gut was the last straw. Here, the cut will heal. Here, we will be happy. This city's gonna keep our heads on straight.

DINAH

I love you, Dan.

DAN

I love you, Dinah.

LOTTIE

Pass the syrup, Cyrus.

CYRUS

Lottie, we need the money.

LOTTIE

I said pass the syrup.

CYRUS

Lottie. We need the money.

Cyrus passes the syrup.

DINAH

This is the right thing to do.

DAN

Of course it is. Of course.

LOTTIE

Where do they come from?

CYRUS

They come from the South.

Lottie grimaces.

LOTTIE

When will they be here?

CYRUS

They will be here in the morning.

Lottie grimaces.

DINAH

Even the moon looks happy here.

DAN

Two moons. One for me.

He points up.

And one for you.

He points at the reflection of the moon
in the water.

DINAH

Perfect.

DAN

Yeah, well I got everything arranged before we arrived.

Dan reaches into his work boot and pulls out
a small bouquet of flowers.

DAN

Evening Primrose

DINAH

(delighted.)

Enothera biennis.

CYRUS

I'll get their room ready. We need the money, Lottie. You can ignore them if you want.
Although who knows, it might be interesting -

Lottie flashes him a look.

CYRUS
You can ignore them if you want.

The next morning. Cyrus introduces
Dinah and Dan to Lottie.

CYRUS
These are the new people. Dinah and Dan. Dinah and Dan, this is Lottie.

Before Dan can even hold out his hand
to introduce himself, Lottie speaks.

LOTTIE
Can she sew?

Dinah shakes her head no.

LOTTIE
Can she cook?

DINAH
Grits.

Lottie looks at Cyrus, bewildered

Cyrus can we talk on the back porch?

Lottie and Cyrus walk to the back porch.

LOTTIE
She cannot sew. She cannot cook. Her jaw resembles that of an ox. I just don't
understand how ends will ever meet with this.

CYRUS
She can cook grits.

LOTTIE
What are grits?

Cyrus is at a loss.

CYRUS
Well, what about him?

LOTTIE
He looks healthy. Is he mysterious?

Cyrus looks back towards the house,
scratching his head.

CYRUS
No.

LOTTIE
He seems fine.

CYRUS
If he stays she stays. I have spoken at length to them about this and that's the only deal they will strike.

LOTTIE
Can he darn a sock?

Cyrus sighs and goes back into the
house.

CYRUS
(To Dan.)
Can you darn a sock?

Dinah pokes Dan in the back (say yes,
say yes....)

DAN
I can darn a sock.

Cyrus goes back on the porch.

CYRUS
He can darn a sock.

LOTTIE
Tell him to meet me in the kitchen, near the pile of undarned socks. You can show her where they will sleep. I will watch him darn a sock, and make the decision final.

Cyrus and Dinah in Dan and Dinah's room.
Dinah puts down a small bag of clothes and
a large leather-bound book, carried with a
leather strap. Cyrus is nervous.

CYRUS

This is where you will sleep. It is a firm bed. It is filled with the down of geese.
Canadian Geese. Which spend their summers in the state of Minnesota.

This is the trunk where you can place your belongings.

This is the window. The sun shines through it. Or not. Depending on the weather.

He puts his hand on the windowsill,
demonstrating how she can stand there.

Nice day, isn't it?

This is the washbasin where you may wash your face. You can fill the washbasin with
this pitcher.

This is the bowl into which you may relieve yourself if you feel the need to relieve
yourself at night when you may not want to make the trip out to the um outhouse that
stands out back, outside the house.

DINAH

Alright.

CYRUS

Um...This is the door. Is there anything else?

DINAH

(Teasing him.)

Where am I supposed to sleep again?

CYRUS

This is the bed.

DINAH

Right. What do you do during the day around here?

CYRUS

I build a new bridge that connects the east side of the river to the west through a series of
stone arches. Just south of the cataract.

DINAH
The cataract?

CYRUS
The cataract.

Pause. Dinah doesn't know what a cataract is. She only knows it is an eye disease. She decides not to push it.

Your husband will also be building that bridge.

DINAH
What are we going to do around here while you two are out building a bridge.

CYRUS
I don't...know...perhaps darn socks?

Dinah walks to the window and puts her hand on it, the way Cyrus demonstrated.

Dan enters.

DAN
Guess what! I darned all the socks!

DINAH
Now what am I supposed to do with myself!

Dinah flips herself onto the bed and starts crying. Dan is embarrassed. Cyrus begins to give Dan the tour.

This is the washbasin where you may wash your face. You can fill the washbasin with this pitcher.

This is the window...

DAN
Could we go through this later? Is now not the best time for this?

CYRUS
Of course.

Dinah is really pitching a fit, now.

Tomorrow, I will take you to the river. To the Bridge.

DAN
Thank you, Cyrus. I am glad we found our way to Minnesota, and to your house. It is important to wander, but it is also important to stay still. I am glad we found this place.

DINAH
(To Dan)
I hate SOCKS, I hate DARNING and I hate YOU!

CYRUS
Welcome, Dan.

Dinah is in her room, dressed for bed. She is unfastening the leather strap from her book.
Lottie finishes preparing for bed in her and Cyrus' room. Dan is outside, looking at the moon. He has been there for some time. Cyrus is finishing something in the kitchen. He glances out the window for a quick moment, sees Dan, wonders for a moment what Dan is doing, then looks away. Cyrus goes into the bedroom.

LOTTIE
I think its good that we decided to take in the Southerners, Cyrus. I think it is good because they are so common I doubt anyone else would have taken them in. It's good to be kind to common folk. This is how you darn a sock. This is how you keep a pot of beans from boiling over.

CYRUS
I think Dan is an extraordinary man. He is always thinking about the world and his place in it.

Dinah wipes any dirt from the book with a cloth.

LOTTIE

That's not so extraordinary. If he knew his place in the world, he would be there by now.

Dinah gets in bed with the book, and reads.

CYRUS

Maybe his place is here.

LOTTIE

Here? In this house?

Dan strides into the house, slamming the door a little too loud. He is a good mood. He goes into his bedroom.

CYRUS

No, Lottie. In Minneapolis. Maybe his was an upriver journey, and now he has arrived.

LOTTIE

I don't think he is going to stay here. Have you seen the way he looks at the moon?

CYRUS

(lying)

No.

LOTTIE

His eyes fill up with tears and he starts breathing funny. Like he wants to go there or something. Like he's got some grand dreams that seem far, far away.

CYRUS

They are fine people. Dinah and Dan.

Dan takes off his shirt and his boots and slides into bed next to Dinah. Dinah reads to Dan from the big book.

DINAH

The gifted gardener is blessed with an imagination that can see the ideal picture that exists only in his brain. In planning a garden, the gardener must peer far into the future, through many years of toil and growth, and, with the inner eye alone, see the finished picture that will be complete long after he has turned to dust...

LOTTIE

Shh.

CYRUS
What.

LOTTIE
Shh.

CYRUS
Lottie, what?

LOTTIE
I think they are talking about us.

Cyrus and Lottie listen.

DINAH
Art is long and life is short. The gardener rarely lives to enjoy the mature majesty of the oak he has planted, though he sees clearly, in his mind's eye, the oak's ultimate aspect...

Dan has fallen asleep: a light snore.

CYRUS
I think they are reading.

LOTTIE
Cyrus.

CYRUS
What?

LOTTIE
Reading doesn't make noise.

CYRUS
Out loud, Lottie. I think they are reading out loud, in bed.

LOTTIE
To each other?

CYRUS
To each other.

LOTTIE
(Trying not to laugh.)
They are so common I think the hairs will fall out of my head! Good night Cyrus.

CYRUS

Good Night, Lottie.

Lottie extinguishes her candle and settles in for sleep. Cyrus lies there, eyes open. It is obvious he is listening very hard to try and hear what Dan and Dinah are reading.

DINAH

The gifted gardener sets his inner eye solidly on the future, knowing that his unbridled imagination might easily run away with the greatest immediate opportunity.

END OF EXCERPT