

Mainstreamspanking article:

Danny and the Deep Blue Sea

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John Patrick Shanley's *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* has been described as a play in which nothing happens. A man and a woman meet by chance in a New York bar. She takes him home with her, and they go to bed together. He asks her to marry her, she accepts, then changes her mind next morning. But at the end of the play, it looks as if they might stay together after all. But one decisive thing certainly does happen in the course of the action: he spansks her.

Now, actors and especially actresses *love* this play, because of the way it challenges them. As a story, it's very simple, but the characterization and the emotions are deep and complex. Danny and Roberta are mentally scarred individuals. When they meet, he has just been in a fight in which he believes he may have killed someone. He is a ball of pent-up aggression, ready to attack anyone without provocation. She is leading a train-wreck of a life whose problems go back to something she did as a teenager to get herself out of trouble with her father, which we'll call incest and leave it at that.

But Roberta's problem is that she can't leave it:

ROBERTA: *Ya can't do a horrible thing like that, Danny, an' not be punished. It was me that did it.*

DANNY: *Whaddaya talkin' about?*

ROBERTA: *I did a bad thing.*

DANNY: *All right! So ya did a bad thing. Ya told me.*

ROBERTA: *An' ... An' ... nobody punished me.*

DANNY: *Good.*

ROBERTA: *No! No, it ain't good! I did a bad thing an' nobody punished me, and so... it stayed with me.*

So she has been hating herself ever since. Danny's response to this is uncharacteristically sensitive: 'I gotta say something. A crazy thing. To you. An' you gotta let me say it. I ... forgive you.' He elaborates: 'It's over now. You've felt bad long

enough. You did a bad thing. An' it's been bitin' you in the head for a long time. It's a long enough time. You paid for what you done.'

But Roberta won't have it. She needs to be forgiven, but she also needs to be punished, not by herself but someone else.

ROBERTA: *You can't forgive me.*

DANNY: *Yes, I can.*

ROBERTA: *No!*

(He pulls her to him, and over his knee. He spanks her.)



Adam Rothenberg spans Rosemarie de Witt in a 2004 production in New York

DANNY: *That's for doin' what you did. All right? That's the punishment.*

ROBERTA: *I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. It just happened. It was... I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Please...*

DANNY: *I forgive you. It's done. I've done it. It's done.*

What's clever and subtle about this is that the punishment should take the form of a spanking, and that it should be administered by a man whose usual reaction to trouble is to start a murderous fist-fight. It's a punishment, which is what she needs, but between adults it's a trifling, childish punishment that implicitly diminishes the gravity of her misdeed, as if she's been giving herself hell over it only to find that it rates no more than a minute or so in purgatory. That's why, for Roberta to find an equilibrium and heal properly, it has to be a *spanking* – no more and no less.

So what happens in the play, over and above a spanking, is forgiveness and closure. But Shanley also described it as 'an apache dance', after the violent, sexy French dance in which the man flings the woman around. So it's a modern take on the kind of love story in which the man takes the woman in hand, and across his knee, only without all the gender-conservative baggage that so troubles contemporary audiences. Add to that the play's popularity with performers and you have a classic of the modern American

theater – and, in consequence, one of the most frequently performed stage spanking scenes of our time.

Danny and the Deep Blue Sea was first seen at a new plays festival in Louisville, Kentucky, in February 1984; the production quickly transferred to New York. The first Roberta was June Stein, and her Danny was John Turturro. Here they are:



Just how widely is the play is produced nowadays? Let's look at some examples, that will also illustrate what a variety of interpretations it gets in performance. As we shall see, it's especially popular in its native New York, but productions are far from confined to US shores. We begin with a Norwegian-language version performed in Oslo in January 2013. The play was translated and produced by Camilla Roman, who also plays Roberta... so she really has only herself to blame for what Erik Skøld does to her here:

Later in 2013, there was a rather intense Danny in a Berlin production:

And in Australia, the 2014 production at Subtext Theatre, Victoria, adopted the publicity strapline 'Love is Violent'. So naturally Tanya Walker got a more extended spanking than usual at the hands of Ange Arabatzis:

I said the play is popular with actors because of the way it challenges them, so it should be no surprise to find it on the stages of many a drama school and acting workshop. Here's a workshop production at the Bonetown Theatre, Burlington, Vermont, on June 28, 2009, which makes a good job of what you might call the spanking's meaningful perfunctoriness. And Roberta has a nice bottom too!

Another workshop production by Etcetera Productions perhaps made it a bit *too* perfunctory. It ran October 2-17, 2009, with Danielle Dryer as a rather boyish Roberta, who's being both spanked and directed by Christopher Johnson:

In May 2010, these two students in an American drama class at Surry Hills, Australia, were set a problem: how does a physically slight Danny spank a statuesque Roberta, with the added complication that he has nowhere to sit down?

On the whole, I think they flunked that one! But perhaps not as badly as these guys in 2014:

He is supposed to **spank** her – not just smack her bottom!

Quite simply, they ducked out of it. And even when the scene is played as written, it's not unknown for a reviewer to complain that the spanking was obviously faked. For instance it was said of the 2006 New World Arts production in Goshen, Indiana, that Michelle Milne – another actress who *really* wanted to play Roberta – 'should have chosen to endure a little pain to preserve the atmosphere of the play'. But that's a very naive comment from someone who ought to know better. Theater is the art of illusion, and if it's done well, nobody needs to endure much pain. Drama students also use Shanley's play to learn how to do fight choreography – and, yes, in theatrical terms a spanking does technically count as a 'fight'. Here's a moment from the 'fight reel' from a 2015 student production:



And now for some professional stage violence. The participants are Raymond Knight and Carly Neigum, at the 2014 Nanaimo Fringe Festival in British Columbia, seen as the scene was never meant to be seen:

I'd argue that's also a way the *play* was never meant to be done: that belt's gotta hurt bad! Luckily for Carly, it mainly strikes the back of his hand rather than her bottom – but this would be less obvious from the audience's point of view than the camera's. One thing that emerges from this is that many a Roberta is relatively unknown: it's a play that suits trainees and hopefuls just as much as it does the most accomplished members of the profession. But in 2011 a *very* familiar actress took the role in a Los Angeles production: Juliet Landau, who was the psychotic Cockney vampire Drusilla in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (a role in which, at one point, she frivolously asked to be spanked), and whose Roberta won her an award for the best dramatic performance of the year. Here she is with Matthew J. Williamson as Danny:



And that raises another important point about the spanking scene. The characters have just got out of bed. What will they be wearing? Juliet Landau was spanked in a very pretty mini-slip and apparently either no panties or, at most, a thong. (Sorry, there's no photo of the actual spanking available!)



In contrast, here's a Roberta in a long nightie:



Other versions of Roberta have already got themselves dressed, like Emily Kaczmarek, seen here being spanked by Nick Stag in a 2013 production in New York:



In 2014, again in New York, Laura Madden was only half-dressed when Bradley Jennings Evans spanked her:



Which is, at least, somewhat less than she wore in rehearsal:



On the other side of the world, Melbourne saw another slip-clad Roberta in early 2016:



But short little slips and T-shirts have a disadvantage for the wearer, when the spanking is being done properly: *self-preparation!*



That's from a Spanish production of 2012, with Itziar Miranda as Roberta and Alex Garcia as Danny. And you can see her bottom bounce, too. Here's the trailer:

And what's true in an outstanding staging like that can still be true in a rather loose, casual handling of the spanking, such as we see in this 2012 screen version from the New York Film Academy, directed by and starring Robert Gil Baptista:

(To go directly to the spanking, fast forward to 5.30.)

And very occasionally, if we're really lucky, Roberta doesn't even have that much coverage. Step forward, Samantha Rose Hothi, who played Roberta in a New York production of 2015, and was a good enough sport to let herself be soundly spanked on the seat of her panties by Ethan Jovanovic:



Hats off to plucky Samantha for her bravery! And may many another a production follow her example!

But before we leave the subject of Shanley, let's give an honorable mention to his later black comedy, *Dirty Story* (2003), which dramatizes the relationship between Israel and Palestine in terms that are not completely unlike the relationship between Danny and Roberta: a couple meet in a Manhattan park and embark upon a sexual, sadomasochistic liaison which includes, near the end, a momentary spanking.



The last scene of the play opens with a spectacular, and rather bizarre, dance number in which the character of Wanda (originally played by Florencia Lozano, and representing Israel), wearing a red beret and combat pants, 'dances like a military go-go goddess demanding tribute'. She seems to conjure her lover Brutus (David Deblinger; Palestine) onto the stage, whereupon he 'mock-spanks her in a rage, while she acts mock-shocked'. It's nowhere near as crucial a moment as the climactic spanking in *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea*, and the play itself is a lot less good – and what's more, I suspect that this time the 'spanking' is really just a smacked bottom. But let's not be ungrateful – especially as there's bound to be another production of *Danny* along soon!

(For more *Danny*, go [here](#).)