



A musical adaptation of Plato's "Symposium," set in a mythical 1930s New York.

Book by Murray Ross, Mark Arnest and Lauren Arnest

Lyrics by Lauren Arnest, Mark Arnest and Murray Ross

Music by Mark Arnest

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The Setting

The lights go up on Agathon's very elegant Manhattan penthouse, decorated in Greek revival style: tile floor, reclining couches, columns, and a view from the window overlooking Athens/New York. The guests enter during the hangover music, shunning the

proffered cocktails. They are all wearing tuxedos, except Agathon, who wears a smoking jacket.

The Story

It's the night after an awards ceremony in which Agathon was honored as best dramatic playwright. Pausanias, Phaedrus, Aristophanes, and Eryximachus – the crème de la crème of high society, plus the famous philosopher Socrates – meet at Agathon's penthouse. Hung over from last night's festivities, they decide not to drink and instead to entertain each other with conversation (alas, they will not stick to their resolution, and everyone but Socrates will be good and schnockered by the evening's end). Eryximachus proposes a contest in which each of them will speak about love.

The youthful Phaedrus begins with the cheerful "Wherever Love Goes," in which he proposes that love makes us better than we would otherwise be, because lovers want to appear honorable to their beloveds. Pausanias follows with the jazz-influenced "Two Aphrodites," in which he explains that there are two goddesses of love: the lesser Aphrodite, who causes us to chase after women and boys, and the greater Aphrodite, who leads us to young men. Eryximachus develops the theme of two loves in his "Medicinal Love," in which he proposes that love and his field of medicine are virtually identical: Both seek harmony and moderation of extremes.

The famous comic playwright Aristophanes follows with a comic fable about our origins. At one time, he says, people were round, with four arms and four legs apiece, but Zeus cut us in half to make us more manageable. He then turns serious, saying that we now pine away for our other half. He expresses our loneliness – and the joy of finding one's other half – in "Lost and Found." Agathon then sings "This Is Love," a pretty but insubstantial song in which he describes love's effects – which are, basically, to make everything seem better.

The stage is set for Socrates. He doesn't sing; instead, after a dialogue in which he leads Agathon to realize that he's all wrong about love, he conjures Diotima, a mystery woman who taught him everything he knows about love. Diotima presents two distinct stories. The first is a comic tale about love's origin and nature, as a spirit that leads us to beauty. The second, the aria "All About Love,"

explores the ideal nature of beauty itself. She vanishes as her aria fades into mist.

The evening seems to be over, but suddenly a very loud and very drunk Alcibiades bursts in. Informed of the contest, he praises not love but Socrates. In the comic tango, "Nothing at All," he describes his unsuccessful attempts to seduce Socrates. He gradually realizes that he's been praising love after all – love as embodied by Socrates, a difficult, challenging love that appeals to what's best in each of us. Socrates, says Alcibiades, reminds him of that old song, "you know, that one where wisdom reigns over passion, love equals virtue, and so-on." He launches into the "Anthem," and soon everyone joins in. However, the alcohol takes over, and during the second verse, they all pass out – except for Socrates, who puts blankets over his sleeping friends, turns out the lights, and exits.

Background

A symposium was a Greek drinking party. Plato's dialogue, which recounts a probably-historic event in 416 B.C., is the most famous discussion of love in classical literature. The characters are, for the most part, historical. Aristophanes, of course, was classical Greece's most famous comic playwright. If Plato seems unsympathetic to him, it's nothing compared to the way Aristophanes savaged Socrates in "The Clouds." Agathon was a tragic playwright, though only a few lines of his work have survived, and Pausanias was his lover. Unlike most Greek male couples, they maintained their relationship into Agathon's adulthood. Phaedrus is a minor Socratic figure, who's also a character in another of Plato's dialogues, called – you guessed it – the Phaedrus. Eryximachus figures in some other writings of the era. Diotima (who appears in the original in flashback form) seems to be Plato's invention, though the type she represents – the mystery woman – is fairly common in Greek literature. Alcibiades was Athens' golden boy – Pericles' god-son, and the focus of the city's military and political hopes. Unfortunately, he turned out to be a scoundrel.

For a lot more background, click here for links to related sites. These include the texts of the "Symposium" and the "Phaedrus," Plutarch's life of Alcibiades, Aristophanes' "The Clouds," and gateways to musicals and gay culture on the web.

Production Particulars

Length: Approximately 90 minutes with no intermission.

Set: One set, preferably in the round.

Staging: The prop requirements of “All About Love” are minimal. The only stage magic is Diotima’s entrance and exit, which should be mysterious and perhaps shrouded in smoke. However, this was not the case at the original production – she rang a doorbell to get in – and nobody seemed to mind.

Cast: Six singing men, one non-singing man, one singing woman, one optional non-speaking woman. These are Socrates (non-singing), Phaedrus (light tenor, short tap routine), Pausanias (baritone/tenor), Eryximachus (baritone/tenor), Aristophanes (bass/baritone), Agathon (lyric tenor, short dance routine), Diotima (soprano), Alcibiades (strong baritone/tenor). A flute girl (non-speaking) is optional.

The vocal ranges given above are negotiable, since, due to the miracles of computer notation programs and MIDI, the songs are more or less transposable (Aristophanes, for instance, was a baritone in the original production). Only Diotima requires a first-class voice with a two-octave range (though obviously, it never hurts to have actors who can sing!). Lead sheets are available for all the songs.

The musical accompaniments for the original production were taped, augmented by a live pianist. Since then, the show has been partially re-worked for an ensemble of piano, bass, drums, flute/clarinet, violin, and cello. Contact Mark Arnest.

Original Cast Recording

[Click here](#) for information on the "All About Love" CD.

Contact Information

Contact CU–Colorado Springs Theatreworks or Million Monkeys for information about staging “All About Love.”

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Director's Notes

All About Love may sound more like Cole Porter than Greek dialogue, but underneath it is still Plato, a condensed and slightly modernized retelling of *The Symposium*, the most influential discussion of love in all classical literature. Plato, of course, never intended his dialogue to be staged – in fact, he was an eloquent enemy of all things theatrical. If he'd had his way, all actors would have been crowned with myrrh, anointed with fillets wool and firmly escorted out of town. Yet paradoxically, he wrote philosophy as a playwright writes plays: *The Symposium* is a dramatic conversation, carried on by characters based on actual human beings, full of dramatic irony, wit and surprise. Seven men gather at a friend's house to drink and talk, and they decide to devote the evening to love, or rather to talking about love. They each take turns making the best speech they can in praise of love, waxing as rhapsodic as they can. Was there ever such a set-up for a musical? These guys are all dying to burst into song, and finally, in *All About Love* they actually do. We updated the setting to Manhattan, c. 1930, and Mark's score propels the dialogue forward; it's carefully orchestrated to lead us from up from earthly into heavenly love, from relatively cheerful simplicity into something rich and strange.

The original conversation is conducted by upper class urbanites with a gift for poetry and lyrical flight; the tone in both the original and in our updated version, is sophisticated – Plato’s clever sophists and Porter’s witty playboys live in comparable worlds 2,000 years apart.

Once you put Plato’s words into the mouths of actual people you are struck by something often ignored: all these people are either gay or bisexual, and the love under consideration has a clear basis in homoeroticism. For most of the last two millennia, commentators have failed to point out that the largest, most wide-ranging discussion of love in western history is carried on by a group of homosexuals; in dramatic production the fact is simply inescapable. There are two couples in the party. Agathon, the glamorous host who has just won the Athenian play writing contest, is the beloved of the older Pausanias. Eryximachus, the medical man, is the lover of Phaedrus, the young enthusiast who makes the first speech in praise of love. Aristophanes is a solitary figure; his public charm masks an interior loneliness, and he is conspicuously alone. Alcibiades, whose dramatic entrance late in the conversation is a real coup de theatre, seems to have a boundless appetite for sex and power in all forms; like Byron he’s charismatic, witty, and excessive, “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.” And Socrates is of course Socrates; pedestrian, homely, always the observer, and yet with the seductive power of a flute-playing satyr. It’s a very lively group, and a very particular one, which partly explains why Mark has made each voice so musically distinct (every singer has almost a genre all to himself).

Plato is notoriously the most accessible and the most elusive of philosophers, and *The Symposium* has delighted and vexed readers for two millennia. The discussion of love is notably pre-Christian, and so it remains even stranger now than it was in its own time. Most of us would not use “love” in the large sense that it is used here, where it may refer to attraction and desire in all its forms. We are used to separating thought from feeling, whereas Plato likes to keep them together, continually informing and playing off each other. Perhaps no one has been more keenly aware of pleasures of thinking, the erotics of reason. We do not pretend to have solved any of *The Symposium’s* many mysteries. But we hope to have given a new dimension to its great vivacity and charm; with Mark’s music and Lauren’s lyrics, Plato’s dialogue has been given a radiant new

life.

I would like to thank our Theatreworks staff, my colleagues and co-conspirators, for encouraging this project. The Gill Foundation has been particularly generous; so has the Colorado Council for the Arts. It is a distinct privilege to conduct such a rare and classic experiment as *All About Love*.

--Murray Ross

Email Murray

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Composer's Notes

When Murray Ross approached me about doing a musical based on Plato's *Symposium*, I jumped at the chance. After all, not only did the idea seem absurd, but I had no experience writing show tunes – and in fact my love/hate relationship with musical theater had generally leaned towards the hate side.

But I was pleasantly surprised. The result inhabits a kind of nether-world between cabaret and conventional musical theater. I hope that some of the joy I felt in creating this music comes through.

What I love most about *The Symposium* is its integration of the world. Sure, it's hierarchical, and unlike Cole Porter, you won't catch Plato saying that anything goes. But through his mouthpiece, Diotima, Plato attacks dualistic divisions into black and white, saying that all kinds of love have their place on the road to true beauty. And though Diotima seems to imply that the heavenly ladder is a one-way ascent, Plato goes on to warn us, through Alcibiades, that backsliding has tragic consequences.

As for the music: To paraphrase Aaron Copland, the challenge was to write music that's simple and direct without being stupid. In this case, there were four challenges. The first was to write graceful, light, effervescent tunes that fit in the 1930s setting while sounding fresh and original. Second, the music had to grow out of the characters' personalities. (In the case of Pausanias, the least vividly drawn of Plato's characters, we worked backwards, fitting the personality to the music.) Third, in spite of the very wide stylistic

range, each song had to sound at least not outlandish in its immediate context. One method of accomplishing this – if it was accomplished – was by creating thematic connections between the songs. For instance, the opening melodic contour of Alcibiades “Tango” relates both to his preceding entrance music and to the following “Anthem.”

And fourth, there was the challenge of turning Plato's intellectual thicket into song lyrics. Rather than confess to Murray that the task was utterly beyond my capabilities, I put my wife Lauren to work. What she accomplished went far beyond my own workmanlike hammering into verse. The odds are that any elegant turn or phrase of memorable poetic image is hers.

--Mark Arnest

Email Mark

All About Love – The Original Production

All About Love was produced by University of Colorado at Colorado Springs Theatreworks from August 29 to September 14, 1997, at Dwire Hall in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The production was facilitated by a grant from The Gill Foundation. Several newspapers and radio stations in Colorado Springs and Denver reviewed the production.

Production Staff:

Direction by Murray Ross

Music Direction by Mark Arnest

Set Design by Russell Parkman

Costume Design by Betty Ross

Lighting Design by Brian Garrett

Sound Design by Doug Wilson

Stage Management by Phil Hampton

Photography by Tom Kimmell, Kimmell Graphics

Poster (shown above) created by George Migash