

The Damascus Trilogy

by DJ Sanders

In 1898, the Swedish playwright August Strindberg wrote *To Damascus* to explore his experiences with insanity, alchemy, and faith during his famous “Inferno” period. *To Damascus* was met immediately with great success on stage as his soon-to-be third wife portrayed the Lady, a character based on his second wife and her reactions to his marriage to his first wife. Soon after, Strindberg wrote *To Damascus, II*, which expounded on the issues explored in the first play. By 1901, Strindberg had completed *To Damascus, III* forming a trilogy of plays exploring marriage, faith, and the quest for fame.

To Damascus, I-III trace the journeys of the Stranger as guided by the Lady. Along the path they meet myriad characters who torment, challenge, and guide their journey through an asylum, ravine, religious structures, a banquet, sulfur baths, and various other locations.

Strindberg’s “Damascus Trilogy” broke from theatrical norms and introduced expressionistic writing to the theatre community. Later, when Strindberg wrote *A Dream Play*, he referred to his previous dream plays, *To Damascus*, in its introduction. Henrik Ibsen had read *To Damascus, I* before writing his final masterpiece, *When We Dead Awake*, which probably could not have been written without inspiration from Strindberg’s first dream play.

While *To Damascus, I* is frequently performed in Europe, parts II and III are never performed in their entirety. Some directors choose to cut entire scenes from all three plays and perform “excerpts” from or an “abridged version” of the trilogy, but this destroys Strindberg’s original structure. A performance of all three plays would run over six hours and require a cast of nearly twenty performers, thereby making this trilogy impractical for most theatres to produce.

DJ Sanders’ *The Damascus Trilogy* assists theatres in reintroducing this landmark trilogy and influential piece of drama into today’s production cycle. *The Damascus Trilogy* compresses over six hours of material into a running time of less than two and one half hours and may be performed with four actors. Not a single scene has been cut, but rather each scene has been abridged and adapted maintaining the structural and thematic integrity of Strindberg’s trilogy.

The Damascus Trilogy focuses on the Stranger and the Lady as they embark on their journeys to Damascus. The several dozen other roles can all be played by a Man and a Woman who constantly switch characters from scene to scene giving this turn-of-the-century epic a vaudevillian flavor. The action is fast-paced and allows directors and actors the freedom to use their imagination when staging *The Damascus Trilogy*.

Sample scene from
The Damascus Trilogy
Journey II

by DJ Sanders

Scene Four (portion)

The Tavern -- The Banquet

(The LADY is still in Lamaze position and at this point begins to scream as she is in labor.

The MAN (doctor) enters and looks around)

MAN

Look at this scene. Do they really intend on rewarding this lunatic? And giving him the title professor? In what area lies his expertise? Surely not metallurgy and applied chemistry!

(The WOMAN (professor) enters looking officious)

WOMAN

Ladies and gentleman. If I may have your attention. It is with great honor and esteem that I stand before you to offer our congratulations to a man of great talent. This man has, through his genius, brought about a new invention which shall go down as one of the great discoveries of our time and in all of history. This award which we offer is hardly prestigious enough to fully reward one of the greatest men of this great century! On behalf of myself, the board, and all mankind, we congratulate you. Ladies and gentleman, let us give a warm welcome to the Great Goldmaker!

(The STRANGER enters and the room is filled with applause. The WOMAN hands the STRANGER a laurel wreath. The STRANGER stands up ready to make a speech. For a moment the applause fades out and the lights come up on the LADY screaming in labor. The STRANGER almost seems to hear it until the sound of the applause becomes louder, drowning out the sound of the LADY. The STRANGER smiles and the applause dies down)

STRANGER

Thank you. Thank you all. I must say that one discovery I have made far greater than being the first to make gold, is that of humility.

MAN

(loud and sarcastic)

Hear, hear!

STRANGER

I am certain that many of you do doubt my work. I cannot blame you for doubting me and my results, for if I faulted you for your disbelief, I would be a hypocrite, for even I could not fully believe it. But when I entered this room and saw all of you here and knew that your reason for being here was to commend me for my efforts, and when I heard your thunderous applause of approval--then, my doubts were changed and now I can fervently proclaim: I believe!!

(Thunderous applause and cheering. The cheering dies down for a moment and the LADY is seen again screaming in labor. The STRANGER almost seems to hear it but the applause and cheering drown her out)

MAN

(loud and sarcastic)

Bravo! Bravissimo!

STRANGER

Thank you. I thank you all. Now, a toast!

WOMAN

Yes, a toast! I must take one more moment to thank our esteemed guest. I hope you will stay around a moment to mingle with us...commoners.

(The WOMAN and STRANGER both laugh sarcastically)

STRANGER

Of course, I will. I figure it is the least that I can do. But you must excuse me one moment.

WOMAN

Of course.

(The STRANGER exits. The MAN approaches the WOMAN)

MAN

Ah, this is a grand occasion.

WOMAN

Yes. What a great man!

MAN

I couldn't agree with you more. This man receives such a prestigious award and on the very same day becomes a father.

WOMAN

He's become a father?

MAN

I'm not certain if he has just yet...

(The MAN acts like he is listening for something. The LADY is seen briefly screaming in labor)

MAN (Cont'd)

Not just yet! But very soon. But still, this makes the man all the greater, don't you agree?

WOMAN

Yes, of course.

(The STRANGER returns)

MAN

And here is the man of the hour. Please allow me to make a heart-felt speech on your behalf.

STRANGER

If you must.

MAN

Yes. I insist! Ladies and gentlemen. This is a most grand occasion! Not for the food or the drink because as we quickly found out the cuisine is third rate and the drinks are watered down--but our guest of honor is truly a grand individual! Because how many people do we know of who have actually made the claim of making gold? That is a grand proclamation. So now the question stands, has this man really made gold? I don't know. And to be honest, I don't care! But to be completely honest, I don't think he has. But let us assume for just one moment that he has made gold. Let us work with that assumption for just one moment. This man has indeed solved this great mystery that no other man has been capable of solving in decades. But as this man claims what he claims, I shall not fault him for it because I am certain that he has substantial proof to back up his proclamation. Therefore I raise my glass and salute you and now give you the floor so that you may enlighten us all with your brilliance!

(Thunderous applause, the LADY in labor, back to thunderous applause)

STRANGER

Yes. Thank you my fine friend. I will not begrudge you for having doubts and I would gladly set your doubts to rest had I not placed all my experiments' files in the care of a legal consultant who has instructed me not to discuss my work outside of the laboratory.

MAN

So you ask us to accept you on blind faith?!

(The crowd becomes angry)

STRANGER

Why have you all asked me here? To honor me or mock me!?

(The crowd dies down and the WOMAN and MAN exit)

STRANGER (Cont'd)

Where are you all going? How can you abandon your guest of honor!? Was this your plan? To insult me?

(The MAN (beggar) enters and approaches the STRANGER)

STRANGER (Cont'd)

Ah, my dear, the beggar!

MAN

I'm not a beggar! I have a job!

STRANGER

Yes, forgive me. I had forgotten. You are your own man.

MAN

It appears that all have abandoned you. But I am here to invite you to accept an award on behalf of the drinking society. We shall honor you as a scientist.

STRANGER

But there was the board and the banquet.

MAN

Yes. But we are willing to grant you our highest award. And our drinks aren't watered down!

STRANGER

Very well, then. Honor me!

MAN

Woman! Bring this man a drink!!

(The WOMAN (waitress) enters with a drink and hands it to the STRANGER.
The MAN exits)

WOMAN

Well if it isn't the famous goldmaker! What an honor we have here. Tell me, what is your secret? What led you to making this discovery?

STRANGER

One day it happened to cross my mind. What if you could change garbage into gold?

WOMAN

Hell, that's our motto here! "You can change garbage into gold!"

(The WOMAN exits and the MAN, in horrible drag, enters and sits on the STRANGER's lap)

MAN

Don't you recognize me?

STRANGER

I'm afraid that I don't.

MAN

That is quite a pity.

STRANGER

Are you one of my many victims? Some woman I seduced many years ago?

MAN

You did seduce me. But not in the way you might have liked to. I read one of your books. It was you who taught me to allow my inner instincts to come out and be expressed.

STRANGER

(standing up)

Perhaps I should get going now.

Sample scene from
The Damascus Trilogy
Journey III

by DJ Sanders

Scene Three (portion)

The Terrace

(The LADY is dressed like a judge and holding a gavel. The STRANGER stands off to one side)

LADY

Next case! The people versus the man who killed his fiancée. You may come in.

(The MAN enters)

LADY (Cont'd)

For those in the courtroom, let me quickly review the facts of this case. This man is accused of shooting his fiancée with the intent to kill. Premeditated murder is a very serious crime and we intend to see to it that justice be done. At this point we shall allow the defendant to speak.

MAN

Thank you, your honor. In my defense, I would like the court to take a moment and hear my story. From an early age, I was always an innocent child. Deception and hatred were both foreign to me. When I met my fiancée I saw her as the human embodiment of all the qualities in which I believed up to that point. Her physical beauty was merely a package containing an even more attractive person. In our first month together, we swore our faithfulness to each other and soon after set out to complete our nuptials with a ceremony of holy matrimony. Only three days before the happy day did I come to discover that all my years of loyalty were in vain for she had been cheating on me for several months. I had never encountered such ugliness and deceit in my life. Her actions took a hold on me and at that moment hate was allowed to enter my heart. Filled with such anguish, my only choice was to destroy that which had destroyed my innocence. So I shot her. This was not a crime of revenge, but rather of reconciliation with myself so that I could gain back what had been taken from me.

LADY

Is that your story?

MAN

Yes, your honor.

LADY

After hearing such heartfelt words, I must judge you "not guilty." Truly this was an evil woman and she deserved to die. Case closed.

(The WOMAN rushes on)

WOMAN

Your honor, if I may say a few words in my dead daughter's defense.

(The MAN walks off)

LADY

Very well. Proceed.

WOMAN

My daughter is guilty of the said crime of cheating, for that her soul must seek repentance. But she too was once innocent until that fateful summer when she met a birdcatcher. Fascinated with the small flying creatures, my daughter was no doubt enamored with this man who apparently not only was talented in caging birds, but also capturing young girls' hearts. It was this birdcatcher who stole my daughter's innocence by breaking her heart and taking away her ability to fly. I assure you that had this man not broken my daughter's heart, she never would have cheated on her fiancé and he never would have had reason to kill her.

LADY

Very well, then I rule the fiancée without guilt and I rule that the birdcatcher is the one who should be placed behind bars.

(The MAN (birdcatcher) enters)

MAN

Your honor, if I may say a few words in my defense.

(The WOMAN exits)

LADY

Very well, go ahead.

MAN

There was a time when I knew innocence, but as I reached a certain age my body was beginning to develop and certain parts of my body began to grow faster than others. For me, it was my nose. At the time when people first noticed this subtle but significant change, I was close friends with a certain girl who had befriended me.

MAN (Cont'd)

It was she that my lips first touched, but it was the poisonous words uttered from those same lips that destroyed my sense of innocence as she turned to taunt me for the size of my protrusion. Therefore I must say in my defense, that had this girl who was my first kiss not tortured me with her words I wouldn't have had the ability to break that woman's heart so she would not have been able to cheat on her fiancé and then he would have had no reason to kill her.

LADY

Very well. You too are exonerated. The girl with the poisonous words is to blame.

(The WOMAN enters)

WOMAN

Your honor, if I may say a few words in my defense.

(The MAN exits)

LADY

Very well. You may be heard.

WOMAN

I was responsible for saying those cruel words to that birdcatcher, but I too was once innocent and incapable of such vileness. But at the early age of five I met a boy who was the first to hold my hand. He promised me that he would not go around holding any other girl's hand, only mine. But that next week I saw him at the park holding another girl's hand and that was when my innocence died. Therefore I must say in my defense that had that boy not held that other girl's hand I would not have been able to tease that man about his size which caused him to break that woman's heart leading her to cheat on her fiancé causing him to murder her!

LADY

Very Well! In That Case!

(The MAN (Adam) enters)

MAN

If I may interrupt!

(The WOMAN exits)

LADY

Who are you?

MAN

I am Adam!

(A silence)

MAN (Cont'd)

Back in the Garden of Eden, I once knew innocence and I once knew beauty. God had granted me all that a man could ask for. Dominion over the entire world, food of plenty, and a woman at my side. We were given but one rule to follow: not to take of the forbidden fruit. I was content to live in paradise until Eve decided to tempt me with partaking in the forbidden. And because I believed her to be good and pure, I took a bite and tasted those succulent juices only to discover the sour times that followed. Therefore, I must ask this court to recognize the true guilty party in this case.

LADY

You make a strong argument. The court hears you and--

(The WOMAN (Eve) runs in)

WOMAN

Wait! I must be heard!

(The MAN exits)

LADY

Who are you?

WOMAN

I am Eve, the first woman, and I stand accused of bringing sin and pain into the world.

LADY

How do you plea?

WOMAN

Not guilty.

LADY

Not guilty?!

WOMAN

For I did not tempt Adam of my own accord, I was prompted by another.

LADY

There was no other.

WOMAN

Yes, there was.

LADY

Who?

(The MAN (serpent) slithers on)

STRANGER

It is the serpent!

LADY

Serpent! This court asks you, are you guilty of prompting Eve to tempt Adam causing a boy to hold another girl's hand which allowed a girl to tease a man who then in turn broke a woman's heart who then cheated on her fiancé who then turned and killed her?

(Pause)

LADY (Cont'd)

What say you, serpent!

MAN

It didn't start with me.

LADY

Then Where Did This All Begin?!?!

(A thunder crash and the stage goes to blackout.

When the lights come up the MAN is the tempter, the LADY is the LADY.

The MAN, the LADY, and the STRANGER are onstage)

STRANGER

So who was the guilty one?

MAN

The answer to that is never revealed.

For more information or to obtain the full script, please contact

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