

THE BIG DARK

A Play in One Act

by

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Cast of Characters

<u>Philippides:</u>	A private dick.
<u>Satyr:</u>	Creature in serious need of ironing.
<u>Kid:</u>	Oedipal taverna employee.
<u>Demeter:</u>	Possessive goddess of grain and bountiful harvests.
<u>Pan:</u>	Musically inclined god of flocks and shepherds.
<u>Arethusa:</u>	Fruit-loving former wood nymph.
<u>Hekate:</u>	Linguistically challenged goddess of the crossroads.
<u>Apollo:</u>	God of just about everything you can think of.
<u>Helios:</u>	Suspiciously lucky sun god.
<u>A Voice:</u>	Cameo role.
<u>Carrier Pigeon:</u>	Fast means of communication.
<u>Hades:</u>	Fastidious king of the underworld.
<u>Hermes:</u>	Literal-minded messenger of Zeus.
<u>Persephone:</u>	Sweet-toothed daughter of Demeter.

Production Notes

The play is performed on a bare stage that, with the rearrangement of basic set pieces, can become any location needed. The action between settings is continuous, and locations change as Philippides narrates. Many characters appear only once, so doubling of roles makes a small cast possible. Throughout, the action described by Philippides happens in sync with his narration.

PHILIPPIDES (CONT.)

cheek, the door opened and a tall blonde ankled over the threshold.

(DEMETER enters.)

PHILIPPIDES

It was two hundred and fifty pounds of dowager draped in a green frock that was not quite as long as the *Iliad*. She stopped, examining the room like a horse doctor performing an autopsy.

KID

Looking for something, lady?

DEMETER

I need a man.

(The SATYR sits up and tries to smooth out his fur.)

DEMETER

(To the SATYR.)

Sorry, another time maybe.

(The SATYR belches, scratches himself, and lies down again.)

DEMETER

Word around the agora says this is where Philippides hangs his hat.

PHILIPPIDES

The chapeau ain't for sale.

DEMETER

Then try this one on for size. I need a man good-looking enough to pick up a nymph who has a sense of class, but he's got to be tough enough to swap punches with a battering ram. I need a guy who can drink like Dionysos and backchat like Phoebus Apollo, only better, and get hit on the head with a chariot and think some chorine in the theatron topped him with a baklava.

PHILIPPIDES

Piece of cake. You need the Gorgons, Herakles, and the Myrmidons.

DEMETER

You might do – rinsed off a little. Five drachmas a day and ex's.

PHILIPPIDES

What's the plot?

DEMETER

Not here.

(DEMETER glides over to a table by an imaginary window and sits down. PHILIPPIDES shuffles over to join her.)

PHILIPPIDES

Awfully bright spot for a business meeting. The sun is slicing through my eyeballs like a sous-chef on a deadline.

DEMETER

Big Yellow's days are numbered if I don't find my daughter.

PHILIPPIDES

Got uppity and skipped town?

DEMETER

You find her and I'll make it worth your while. If you don't find her . . .

(The lights flicker and the room grows dim.)

PHILIPPIDES

(Rising and starting to leave; to the audience.)

This dame was making me nervous. The only thing scarier than a skirt with a magic wand up her sleeve is a landlord with a steel rod up his rent book.

(He sits down again; to DEMETER.)

I'm listening.

DEMETER

Nine days ago she went to the Vale of Enna to pick flowers with some friends. I don't know what went wrong. All I heard was her screaming. I ran to the meadow, but when I got there, she was nowhere in sight. Her pals were as scarce as earrings on a fish and about as useful.

PHILIPPIDES

You got the gendarmes on this?

DEMETER

Listen, bud, if I wanted to guarantee she was never found, I'd ask a copper. I've been searching for her myself ever since she disappeared. I've looked everywhere – over the earth, under the oceans, up in the heavens. There isn't one piece of real estate on the planet I haven't scoured.

PHILIPPIDES

What makes you think *I* can find her?

DEMETER

Jason told me what you did on the Golden Fleece caper. He said despite the fact you look like warmed-over spanakopita you're a whiz when it comes to locating missing objects.

PHILIPPIDES

(To the audience.)

Remind me to drop by Jason's with a cudgel and thank him.

(To DEMETER.)

How do I find you?

DEMETER

I'll be sitting on a rock in Eleusis. When you've got something to report, give me a yodel. You know how to yodel don't you? Just pull your lips apart and gargle.

(DEMETER reaches into her bosom, extracts a bag of coins, and drops it on the table.)

DEMETER

(Seductively.)

There's plenty more where that came from.

PHILIPPIDES

(To the audience.)

I took her word for it.

(PHILIPPIDES palms the bag. DEMETER rises and sashays toward the exit.)

PHILIPPIDES

This daughter – she got a name?

DEMETER

Persephone. And don't ask me to spell it.

(DEMETER exits.)

KID

Holy Mother of the Gods! Persephone's mom, Demeter, right here in my taverna!

PHILIPPIDES

(To the audience, as he walks out of the bar.)

I flipped him a wink and made like doing legwork for a goddess was slightly less interesting than finding an insect in your armpit. The kid was still goggling as I strolled into the sunshine. The satyr had passed out. At least I think he had. You never know with satyrs.

(The location changes to a sylvan glade. PAN sits against a tree, playing his pipes.)

PHILIPPIDES

The Vale of Enna was one of those nauseating places where birds twitter endlessly and springtime never takes a coffee break. I was looking for clues to Persephone's evaporation and having as much luck as a quadriplegic rabbit when I heard someone laying down a riff behind an oak tree. I sidled up to the tree and peeked through the branches. A little guy with a big paunch was sitting on a patch of moss, with his kisser wrapped around a bunch of hollow reeds. He wasn't wearing much except a bare chest and a couple of hairy gams. The tune was so catchy it took me a whole second to notice the matched pair of horns sprouting out of his forehead. He turned a glassy eye in my direction

PHILIPPIDES (CONT.)

and smiled a slow, lazy smile. The kind of smile that crawls up your face all by itself while you're otherwise engaged.

PAN

Hey, Jack, got any stuff? . . . Yeah, yeah, hey nonny nonny . . .

PHILIPPIDES

Sorry, just ate my last bowl of curds and whey.

PAN

Oh fa la la . . . not to worry . . . with a hey, with a ho, and a hey nonny no . . . this'll hold me till my man shows up . . . hey ding a ding ding . . .

PHILIPPIDES

(To the audience.)

Then I saw he wasn't *playing* the pipes, he was *smoking* them. A cloying aroma caressed my nostrils as he inhaled and exhaled like an aulos player on a toot. Every so often he kicked a mockingbird that he had chained to his ankle, and it croaked out a melody that sounded exactly like a bunch of hollow reeds.

(To PAN.)

Ever hear of a dame called Persephone?

PAN

Oh, man . . . it's too early for questions . . . yeah, yeah . . . nonny, nonny, nonny . . .

PHILIPPIDES

He opened his mouth for another suck on the pipes, but I got there first. I can be fast when I have to. I grabbed the pipes out of his limp fingers, kneed him in the wishbone, and twisted his tail into a question mark. He lay on the ground whimpering like a puppy who's lost his favorite chew toy.

PAN

Hey ding a ding a ding a ding a ding a . . .

PHILIPPIDES

All right, fat boy, I'll ask you again — ever hear of a skirt named —

PAN

Lay off, man . . . I heard of her . . . but I ain't seen her lately . . . I seen some other interesting things, though . . . colored lights, dancing mushrooms, unexplained fantastic obelisks . . .

PHILIPPIDES

UFOs aren't in my line, buster. Stop squealing and give me the dope.

(PAN starts to reach into a pouch, but PHILIPPIDES grabs the pouch and pockets it.)

PHILIPPIDES

Stop doping and give me the squeal.

PAN

She was picking daisies . . . hey, nonny nonny . . . there was a loud noise . . . like an explosion in my head . . . the ground opened up and Persephone exited stage left . . .

PHILIPPIDES

Anybody clapped glims on her since?

PAN

Yeah . . . now who was it? . . . Ares, Ariadne, Aristaeus . . . you know . . . one of them fancy Greek handles . . . yeah, I remember . . . it was Arethusa . . . fa la la la.

PHILIPPIDES

The woodland nymph Arethusa?

PAN

The *former* woodland nymph Arethusa . . . she got changed into a fountain . . . it's a long story . . .

PHILIPPIDES

Never mind. Where's this Arethusa bed down?

PAN

Second grove on the right . . . look for the cleft in the rock . . .

PHILIPPIDES

(Tossing him the pouch.)

Maybe next time you'll think twice about being a weisenheimer. Have a nice day – and don't take any wooden dryads.

(Strolling further into
the glade as PAN exits.)

He staggered out of sight, hugging the pouch as if it was his long-lost sister. The mockingbird was yapping away like a nightingale. At least I think it was. You never know with mockingbirds.

(An incoherent babbling
sound is heard as
PHILIPPIDES approaches a
gushing fountain.)

PHILIPPIDES

I heard Arethusa before I saw her. She was burbling and babbling the way dames do when they got no one to shove a grapefruit in their face and tell them to can it. It was a good ten minutes before I could wade in and unload my question.

(Addressing the
fountain.)

Bottle it, lady – I just want to know if you've seen Persephone.

ARETHUSA

(Rising up out of the
fountain.)

Have I seen Persephone? Have I seen Persephone? That's what everybody wants to know, *everybody* I'm telling you – the high rollers, the low bidders, the big spenders, the small potatoes. Even the lounge lizards with the scaly teeth and the slimy mustaches are *begging* me to tell them. It's the sixty-four-thousand-drachma question: Where's Persephone? Have *you* seen Persephone? What happened to Persephone? Who's got a lead on Persephone? WHERE THE HELL IS PERSEPHONE?! Ha, ha, ha! Get it? Get it? Come on, you get it, don't you? Aw, come on, crack a smile, Lead-Puss. You know how to smile, don't you? Just stretch your lips sideways and burp. Playing hard to get, huh? Oh, all right, forget it, pretend I never mentioned it. Don't mind me, I'll just SILT here in the dark and SULPHUR. Hey, where are you going? Don't skip out on me! I'll tell you everything I know. Hey, come back! You want to know where Persephone is, don't you? I'll tell you, I promise I will. The Oracle at

ARETHUSA (CONT.)

Delphi won't tell you – she's a nebbish, a nudnik, a no-good namby-pamby milksop – *she* won't tell you, but *I* will. I'll lay it out nice and easy. So-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o . . . you want to know what happened to Persephone. It all started when I went swimming in this stream, see, and don't look at me like that, what did I know? I was a nymph, for gods' sake – pure, chaste, virginal . . . stupid. So I strip off my clothes and climb into the stream, and suddenly I hear this voice, and it's murmuring, "Hey, baby, want a ride in my undertow?" It's the river god, Alpheus, and I'm thinking, whoa, better hit the road, so I start running, but this Alpheus, he's really making tracks, and I can feel his hot breath on my tender parts, so I call out to Artemis for help, her being the goddess who's had the most practice in saving maidens from a fate worse than . . . well, I don't know what – and before you can say "Silenus was saliently salacious with the satyrs," I'm a fountain! You could have knocked me over with a feather – well, not really, me being a body of water and all – and anyway it doesn't do any good because Alpheus knows it's me and he's still trying to get me to go with the flow, if you get my drift. So I call out to Artemis *again* and let her know this time she better deliver. Now Artemis gets smart, and she makes this gigantic hole in the ground, which I immediately plunge into, leaving Alpheus cooling his heels in the foyer and looking mighty confused. I go all the way through the earth and come up here in Sicily, which is not the really interesting part because you can see that for yourself, but the really *interesting* part is that while I'm cascading through the Underworld, I come across Persephone! She's sitting on a throne, proud as punch, and looks like she's having the time of her life. I don't stop to chat, although I'm tempted, what with all the pomegranates lying around – I'm just *crazy* about pomegranates, they got these sticky red seeds that make a great crunching sound – but I just keep going and never look back, unlike *some* mythical heroes I could mention, and now I'm trapped here in this cleft till doomsday, which can't come an eon too soon, as far as I'm concerned, and then *you* show up and want to know have I seen Persephone, and *I* say, "Have I seen Persephone? Have I seen Persephone? That's what –

PHILIPPIDES

(To the audience, as he
walks out of the glade.)

Thus spake Arethusa. As I jogged out of the grove, she was still burbling. At least I think she was. You never know with fountains.

(The location changes to
a crossroads. HEKATE
crouches where the roads
meet.)

PHILIPPIDES

Now I was caught between a rock and a hot place. I could tell Demeter her beloved daughter was stuck where the sun never shines, or I could pay a visit to Hades myself, make a snatch for the kid, and risk sleeping the big sleep in the process. I wasn't feeling sleepy, so I picked one from Column C instead: get the dirt from Hekate. I found her at the crossroads where I knew she'd be. One road led to Elysium, the other to Tartarus. And there was Hekate, smack in the middle, hunkered down between heaven and hell, like all dames. All in all, it was the best spot for catching gossip. Snitch, fink, narc, stool pigeon – call it what you will, it ain't a pretty occupation. But then Hekate ain't a pretty lady. I approached the old gargoye with one part drachmas and four parts caution. Long time, no see, Hekate. What's the word on the street?

HEKATE

Hekate hears what Hekate hears.

PHILIPPIDES

Heard anything about Persephone and Hades?

HEKATE

Hekate knows what Hekate knows.

PHILIPPIDES

Know anything about a cutie from Enna and the King of the Underworld?

HEKATE

Hekate smells what Hekate smells.

PHILIPPIDES

Talk like a sphinx and earn yourself a place in the Hags' Hall of Fame. Nice work if you can get it. Now, cut the

PHILIPPIDES (CONT.)

crap and give me the scoop. And here's a little something to sweeten your tea.

(He flips her a coin.)

HEKATE

Ask Helios.

PHILIPPIDES

That's it? "Ask Helios"?

HEKATE

Hekate says what Hekate —

PHILIPPIDES

(To the audience, as he walks away from the crossroads.)

I cut my losses and left Hekate combing the dictionary for one-syllable verbs. At least I think she was. You never know with gargoyles.

(The location changes to a dingy gambling joint.)

PHILIPPIDES

For a boîte at the far edge of town, Helios's Hideaway wasn't hard to find. It was lit up like a bacchante on a jag, and was as noisy as a gaggle of lawyers chasing a runaway chariot. I went around to the back door and knocked. A small, square panel slid open and a fly-specked eyeball asked me my business.

VOICE

(From behind the door.)

What's your business?

PHILIPPIDES

Sisyphus sent me.

(The door opens and PHILIPPIDES enters the joint, which is lit brightly and full of swirling bodies.)

PHILIPPIDES

The place was full of heat, sweat, and loud music. A couple of bright young things stumbled past me on their way to the rest room. They were giggling, and somehow I knew they weren't going to get any rest. I was cozying up to a double ouzo when I noticed a crowd gathered in one corner. It had that intense concentration that comes only with prize fights or domestic altercations. I oozed into the corner. Two studs were down on their knees, throwing craps. Each stud had a head full of curly gold locks and biceps that were not quite as big as the Parthenon. Their other parts were in proportion. They could have been twins, except for the fact that they weren't. Stud Number One was massaging a pair of dice and wailing at the top of his voice.

APOLLO

Come on baby, come on baby, this is my lucky day baby, I can feel it, yeah baby yeah, come on sweetheart, don't let me down, don't let me down, baby, come on now, come on, give me what I need baby, give it to me honey, give it to me, sugar, give it to me –

HELIOS

For Kronos' sake, roll 'em!

PHILIPPIDES

Stud Number One blew on the dice so hard their spots did the cha-cha, then he rolled them across the floor. Stud Number Two grabbed the cubes before they had a chance to cool their heels.

HELIOS

Ha! Medusa eyes! You lose!

APOLLO

Aw, Helios, give me a break. I always lose. It's not fair. I thought we were supposed to take turns.

HELIOS

What you think don't matter, Goldilocks. The bones say *you* pull the sun across the sky today. So saddle up them burros and get packing.

VOICE

You heard him, Apollo – get your ass in gear!

APOLLO

(Whining, as he exits.)

It's not enough I gotta predict the future and invent the crossbow and discover polyphony – I gotta cart Mr. Rise-and-Shine all over the cosmos, too. What a life.

PHILIPPIDES

(Approaching HELIOS.)

I need the lowdown on the Underworld, Helios, and I need it fast if you boys want to stay in business.

HELIOS

Well, if it isn't Philippides, rogue-about-town and lowlife par excellence. I take your subtle reference to the Underworld to mean how Hades shanghaied Persephone, dragged her across the Styx, made her his bride, crowned her Queen of the Dead, and now owes Zeus a whopper for being in on the deal. What do you want to know?

PHILIPPIDES

(To the audience, as he exits the joint.)

I like a guy with a big mouth and a small sconce. This Zeus angle knocked me for a loop, though. When the King of the Gods greases the skids, you're a fool to rush in by yourself. This was now a two-person operation. I decided to make a pit stop in Eleusis. The eyeball frowned at me on the way out. At least I think it did. You never know with eyeballs.

(The scene changes to Eleusis. DEMETER is sitting on a rock.)

DEMETER

It's about time, shamus, I'm growing moss in my privates. What's the score?

PHILIPPIDES

Hades shanghaied Persephone, dragged her across the Styx, made her his bride, crowned her Queen of the Dead, and now owes Zeus a whopper for being in on the deal.

DEMETER

That does it! I've had it up to *here* with Zeus and his escapades. It's time for action!

(DEMETER makes a sweeping motion with her hand and the stage goes dark.)

PHILIPPIDES

Hey! It's black as a banker's bowels in here. Who put out the lights?

DEMETER

I'll give you three guesses, and if the first two aren't right, you're even dumber than you look.

PHILIPPIDES

(Striking a match to provide a bit of light.)

You doused the sun, just like that, with a wave of your hand?

DEMETER

And I ain't bringing it back until I get Persephone out of hock.

PHILIPPIDES

But that could take months! Without the sun, the fruit will shrivel on the vine, the beef will keel over on the hoof, the grain will never ripen! People will starve!

DEMETER

Let 'em eat crow.

PHILIPPIDES

(To the audience.)

Now, it so happens that I am intimately acquainted with crow, and I can tell you it is not a tasty dish. There was no time to lose. I dispatched a carrier pigeon to Mt. Olympus pronto.

(PHILIPPIDES whistles shrilly and the CARRIER PIGEON runs across the stage and exits.)

CARRIER PIGEON

(As he runs.)

ATTENTION ZEUS STOP DEMETER MAD STOP APOLLO ON THE LAM STOP SEND REINFORCEMENTS STOP

PHILIPPIDES

Zeus responded by return pigeon.

CARRIER PIGEON

(Entering from the
opposite direction,
running swiftly across
the stage and exiting;
as he runs.)

ATTENTION MORTAL STOP CHILL OUT STOP HA HA STOP AM SENDING
HERMES TO HADES FOR IMMEDIATE PICKUP STOP CIAO STOP

DEMETER

I'm not entrusting my daughter to a fly-by-night like
Hermes! We're off to hell, shamus, and we ain't taking a
handbasket.

(DEMETER blows out the
match, and the stage
goes dark again. The
following lines emerge
from the darkness.)

DEMETER

What are you waiting for? Follow me and jump in!

PHILIPPIDES

You expect me to jump into that hellhole? Forget it,
sweetheart. I got drinks at home waiting for me to drain
them.

DEMETER

Jump, gumshoe, or I'll fix it so you never drink again.

PHILIPPIDES

It was a long way down. I passed the time by digging into
my memories of fifth-grade mythology. What I dredged up
didn't make me happy. Paragraph 5, clause 18, viz. and to
wit: if the kid had had anything to eat in the Underworld,
her little excursion would turn into a permanent abode.

DEMETER

Look alive – here's our stop!

(The lights come up dimly on a scene of scattered debris and people. Two thrones are at one side, with HADES and PERSEPHONE sitting on them. HADES pats his lips with a napkin, and PERSEPHONE licks red goo off her fingers. HERMES stands next to them, writing in a notebook.)

DEMETER

What a mess!

PHILIPPIDES

Mess didn't begin to describe the Underworld. The flotsam and jetsam of the ages were scattered around like confetti at a New Year's bash. Among the debris, I recognized a couple of friends I hadn't seen in an eternity. I would have enjoyed a jaw, but Demeter didn't even stop to shake hands. She hotfooted it right over to the big cheese, towing me after her.

HERMES

(As he writes.)

"To hell and back, one goddess, slightly used, in good condition. Shipping method - "

DEMETER

(To PERSEPHONE.)

You idiot! How many times have I told you not to take candy from strangers!

PERSEPHONE

Nice to see you, too, Mom.

HADES

I beg your pardon, madam - the young lady has eaten no candy. She merely ingested a handful of pomegranate seeds.

HERMES

(Stopping writing and looking up.)

How many seeds?

HADES

I am not in the habit of scrutinizing the comestibles. Do you keep track of everything your wife eats?

DEMETER

Wife?!

PERSEPHONE

Oh, Mom, grow up.

HERMES

I have to know how many seeds before I can accept the package.

PHILIPPIDES

(Prying PERSEPHONE'S
fingers apart.)

Half a dozen, I'd say.

HERMES

Six pomegranate seeds.

(He writes the number in
his book and checks it
against another page.)

Let's see . . . six pomegranate seeds gets you six months up above and six months down below. With the sun as collateral.

DEMETER

It's an outrage! I won't stand for it!

HERMES

Nobody's asking you to *stand* for it, lady, they're asking you to *sign* for it.

DEMETER

Oh, all right, but Zeus hasn't heard the last of this.
(She writes in the
book.)

Come on, Persephone honey, let's blow the joint.

HERMES

Not so fast. She's C.O.D.

DEMETER

C.O.D.?

HERMES

Collateral on Delivery.

DEMETER

I wasn't born yesterday, feather-foot – she ain't been delivered yet.

(DEMETER snatches
HERMES' pencil and snaps
the point off.)

HERMES

Point taken.

(To PERSEPHONE.)

You're good to go, doll-face.

PERSEPHONE

(Jumping off the throne;
to HADES.)

Sayonara, sweetie. And don't wait up.

HADES

Vaya con Dios.

HERMES

You can hitch a ride if you want, but snap it up – I got a bunch more deliveries to make.

PHILIPPIDES

We grabbed onto Hermes' feathered anklets and took off like a bat out of you know where.

(The stage goes dark,
and a whooshing sound is
heard. When the lights
come up again – bright
and golden – the stage
is empty. Birdsong fills
the air.)

DEMETER

Well, that was a hell of a trip.

(Breathing deeply with
satisfaction.)

It's good to be home. I owe you, Philippides.

PHILIPPIDES

But you only got her for six months. Then she goes back to the Underworld and takes the sun with her.

DEMETER

That don't mean I don't owe you. A gal can make a lot of hay in six months.

(DEMETER gives
PHILIPPIDES a long kiss
on the lips.)

DEMETER

(To PERSEPHONE, as the
two women exit.)

Haven't got any buns in the oven yet, have you, dumpling?

PHILIPPIDES

(To the audience.)

Her kiss was just the way I like 'em – hot and starchy, like a field of ripening wheat. Maybe it was my imagination, but the years seemed to drop off me like the husk off a corncob. I felt like a young sprout again, betting against the odds, scrambling for the big time.

(As he strolls toward
the exit.)

I headed for the taverna with a spring in my step and a pot of gold at the end of my rainbow. The sun was safe for another six months. At least I think it was. You never know with myths.

(PHILIPPIDES exits as
the golden light
intensifies and the
birdsong swells.)

THE END