

## ***GOLDEN APPLE***

Early morning, 24 B.C. in the country villa of the Roman poet Vergil. The villa is rustic and homey. Vergil is not one for ostentation, and frankly he doesn't make all that much money. Vergil lies on the floor in fitful sleep and awakes out of a dream of voices singing some strange poem to him.

Vergil confides in his domestic slave, Flora, that he has been ordered by the Emperor Augustus to write a Roman epic. The poet is supposed to tell the story of the Trojan prince Aeneas and the Carthaginian queen, Dido. But Vergil is stuck with writer's block and nothing will come. All that he has so far is a large notebook, bound in leather, which contains the prose outline of his plot.

Vergil opens the manuscript and reads the plot of Dido and Aeneas to Flora. Immediately the walls of the cottage fade away and a tableau vivant of Carthaginians is seen. These ghostly presences act out the story which Vergil tells. Their acting doesn't rise much above slapstick. Queen Dido meets Aeneas and falls in love with him. Aeneas has a really buff son, Julius [non-speaking role], who simply stands around posing in the equivalent of Trojan speedos. Aeneas and all the Trojans run off to discover Italy, abandoning Queen Dido. Dido, heartbroken, kills herself. This is all acted out (badly) as Vergil reads. Then all of the visionary characters fade away in darkness. We are back in the villa.

Luckily, Flora is something of a pharmacist and practical witch. She prepares a potion which will allow Vergil to see into the past so that he can observe the real Dido and Aeneas. Then he can finish his poem with the facts that he finds. Vergil swallows the potion and leaps, with manuscript in hand, into the faintly lit scene of Carthage. Flora figures the trip might be fun, so she takes a swig of her own potion and follows Vergil.

Vergil and Flora find themselves in the city of Carthage. The city has just been built, everything is spanking new, and the Carthaginians are celebrating the birthday of their new city. Queen Dido is addressing the crowd, when a stranger is presented to her. It's Aeneas, who has been shipwrecked on the coast right outside the city. But nothing about the real Dido and Aeneas matches the version Vergil wrote down in his book. Aeneas doesn't even have a son; he has a daughter named Julia. Vergil, who can't believe what he sees, flips the page back and forth reading it over. As he flips the page, the characters move backwards and forwards repeating the same scene.

In desperation, Vergil flips rapidly backwards through his manuscript to the arrival of the Trojans in Carthage. As he does so the Carthage scene fades out and we see a bunch of Trojan sailors who sing a sea chanty that basically says how tired they are of sailing. Aeneas and Julia join the group. Julia misses her mother, who died in Troy. Happily, the Trojan sailors have all adopted Julia as their own. They find a road marker pointing to Carthage and all march off to the city.

Vergil is confused. Nothing fits with his poem. He flips forward to review the romance of Dido and Aeneas and we, too, find ourselves in Dido's private chambers. Dido and Aeneas talk, and Aeneas falls head over heels in love with Dido. The Carthaginians hope that Aeneas will stay and marry Dido, so that they will have a king along with a queen. Julia cannot believe that her father would betray the memory of her mother by remarrying. She rallies the Trojan sailors to rise up and leave Carthage.

At this point the stage is split into four different simultaneous story lines. Aeneas is singing loudly about his love accompanied by a chorus of Carthaginians. Julia is singing angrily about betrayal, with a

chorus of Trojans supporting her. Dido is alone trying to decide what is best for her city. Meanwhile, Vergil and Flora are watching it all, and try to speak to the characters to get them to act more like the poem.

In the midst of all the confusion Dido sings out and silences everyone. She has decided. The responsibilities of queenship override romantic attachments. Dido tells Aeneas to go; she offers Julia her friendship and bids farewell. She sends her Carthaginians back to their homes and orders the Trojans back onto their ship for departure. Aeneas is frantic, but Dido is firm. All leave except for Dido.

Vergil alone is left on the darkened stage. He is in despair because his poem is completely ruined. None of the facts fit his epic. In the midst of his sorrow, though, Dido sings to him --this is the first time one of the characters in the story interact with the poet. Gravely, and gracefully, Dido tells Vergil that he must listen to the voices of his dream. They are the voice of art itself, and art has the power to remake our pasts and fashion new futures beyond the confines of brute fact.

Dido vanishes leaving Vergil alone on stage. He finally realizes the power of art. With a dramatic gesture he calls out to Flora to fetch his pen. "It's time to begin!" he shouts.