
Game Theory

by
Peter Sagal

*premiered in August, 1997 at
Actors Theatre of Louisville*

*Directed by Jeanine DeFalco
Dramaturg: Meghan Davis*

Cast

Annie (Mark) Gina Giambrone
Paul Philip White

*Costume Designer: Kevin R. McLeod
Lighting Designers: Michele Gallenstein and Brian Shippey
Sound Designer: Shane Rettig
Properties Designer: Mark Walston
Stage Manager: Megan L. Kelly
Assistant Stage Manager: Omar Kalal*

CHARACTERS

MARK: mid twenties.

PAUL: mid thirties.

(Race and sex are flexible.)

Game Theory

*(Two men in business suits, MARK, mid-20's, and PAUL, mid-30's,
stand on either side of a line drawn on the ground.)*

Start

MARK. Let me see if I understand this game....

PAUL. What's to understand?

MARK. I just want to say it out loud, so we both understand.

PAUL. What's to understand?

MARK. Why don't you explain it, then?

PAUL. You have to convince me to step over the line. I have to convince you to step over the line.

MARK. Why?

PAUL. To teach us negotiating skills.

MARK. That doesn't make any sense.

PAUL. Sure it does. It's just a game.

MARK. What are the rules? Games have rules.

PAUL. No rules; just the arbitrary goals. I get you to come over to my side, you get me to come over to your side. Thus we learn the skills of negotiation and persuasion.

MARK. But it can't work. I mean, I gain nothing by going over to your side of the line. That's not negotiation, negotiation you have to offer something. Mutual benefit.

PAUL. Okay. I'll buy you lunch if you come over here.

MARK. Oh, come on.

PAUL. Really.

MARK. That's not negotiation, that's bribery.

PAUL. Like you said, there are no rules. Just results.

MARK. "You Are the Bottom Line."

PAUL. What?

MARK. The motto of the camp.

PAUL. I didn't know.

MARK. They got it written on the gate. In the grillwork.

PAUL. Come on, what do you say, huh? Step over the line, I'll buy you lunch.

MARK. How do I know that you will?

PAUL. Because I'm a nice guy. I keep my word. Ask anybody.

MARK. Nobody here to ask. Everybody else is on the Trust Tower, dangling each other on ropes.

PAUL. Then you'll just have to trust me.

MARK. Besides, getting a free lunch has got nothing to do with the game. If I cross over the line, I lose the game.

PAUL. So?

MARK. So that's the point, isn't it? Not to lose.

PAUL. I thought you thought the game didn't make any sense.

MARK. Maybe not, but that's why we're here, to play the game. There's something to learn here.

PAUL. You know my boss sent me here.

MARK. So did mine.

PAUL. My boss is very eager to see how I do.

MARK. I don't think anybody is going to grade us. This is supposed to improve our interpersonal business skills, our sense of self.

PAUL. Well, If my sense of self doesn't improve significantly, it's going to be out of a job. So what do you say?

MARK. I think you're worried too much. It's just a game. There are lessons to be learned if you win or lose.

PAUL. So let me learn from winning. Then we can share our insights.

MARK. No, wait. Let's be logical about this. What are they trying to teach us?

PAUL. To figure out how to win.

MARK. What would be the point of that?

PAUL. Winning.

MARK. Winning what? How often in business do you have to convince someone to cross a line?

PAUL. It's a metaphor.

MARK. Right. For what?

PAUL. I don't know, for quarterly sales; tell you what, I'll buy you dinner, too.

MARK. All the meals are included. Low fat and nutritious.

PAUL. Then when we get out.

MARK. We're going about this the wrong way. We've got to

think like the people who put use here. They're consultants. Corporate management consultants, right?

PAUL. Yeah.

MARK. How do they pitch this to our Vice President of Human Resources? Send us your junior execs, and for five thousand a head we'll teach them to cross lines?

PAUL. It's possible.

MARK. So the question is, how does your Human Resources veep think? An oxymoron, I know, but still. Remember when he put one of those kitten hanging from a twig posters in every single cubicle? "Hang in there?"

PAUL. What's your point?

MARK. That there's something Soft and Cuddly here. Something warm. Hidden beneath the apparent cold binary cruelty of a win-lose situation. They want to teach us something. How to think outside the lines—as it were.

PAUL. Tell you what—I'll just give you cash. Buy your own dinner when you're back in the world. Get something with cream sauce. Something with meat, for God's sake.

MARK. I don't eat meat. I like the food here.

PAUL. If you don't cross, I'll punch you. I'll tear you limb from limb!

MARK. You'd have to cross the line to get at me. And then I'd win.

PAUL. You're a lousy businessman. You couldn't sell water in a draught!

MARK. What are you doing now?

PAUL. I'm trying to provoke you into attacking me. Then you have to cross the line.

MARK. No good, I study Zaiki-chuan, it's this progressive martial art where we learn to simply ignore all attacks.

PAUL. Look—how old are you?

MARK. What does that have to do with anything?

PAUL. The game. Trust me.

MARK. Twenty-five.

PAUL. So is everybody. You're all twenty-five, twenty-six, couple of years out of college or business school. I'm thirty-five; hanging around you people I feel like Humbert Humbert.

MARK. Humbert who?

PAUL. Never mind. The thing is, you're all here to get started.

end

I'm here because I've tried everything else. It's my *job*, do you understand?

MARK. What is your job, by the way?

PAUL. Vice President of Human Resources.

MARK. Oh. Sorry.

PAUL. It wasn't always this way. I was like you, they put me in sales, dangled those year-end bonuses like meat on a stick and we all bayed and yapped and went at it. But I wasn't any good, you know, they gave us this crap to sell and I knew I didn't want any and I couldn't think of why anybody else would.

MARK. I see.

PAUL. No, you don't! You're young, you think anything's possible, you've always been brilliant, you've always been picked first, you think it's never going to end! But it will, it will. The last VP of Human Resources just vanished one day. Didn't even clean out his desk. They told me to take his place and I felt a cold wind. Now I sit there, and I order kitten pictures or pictures of marathon runners and sunsets, with these slogans: "Go the Distance." "Talent Is No Guarantee of Success." But what is? There aren't any posters that tell you that!

MARK. Hey—calm down, okay? It's just a game.

PAUL. It's not! It's my life! I'm sitting there one day, wondering when it's going to be my turn to vanish, and I find the brochure for this place. "Executive Boot Camp," it says. "Send your managers to our wilderness to teach them to survive in yours." And the testimonials! The skills, the confidence! Rappelling down cliffs without a care in the world! It's what I needed. I wrote up a memorandum right away.

MARK. Well—thanks. I'm really enjoying it.

PAUL. This is my last chance. Don't you see? You're young. What does it matter to you to lose this game? It's everything to me. Please. Come across the line. Let me win.

(Pause.)

MARK. That's not necessary.

PAUL. Yes it is, I just told you—

MARK. No. I mean for either one of us to win. Or lose. We can both win.

PAUL. Are you crazy? It's one line. Two sides. One winner, one

loser.

MARK. Sure. That's what it looks like. But they're trying to teach us to think laterally. If the choice is apples or oranges, we're supposed to think *tutti frutti*.

PAUL. I don't follow.

MARK. The rules say, you win if the other person crosses the line. But they don't say only one person can win.

PAUL. You mean—

MARK. We both cross the line, at the same time. We both win.

PAUL. That doesn't happen in real life.

MARK. We don't expect it to happen. That's what they're trying to teach us. Cooperate to achieve all your goals. I can see that on a poster, can't you?

(Pause.)

PAUL. Hmm. We cross at the same time?

MARK. Exactly. Then arm in arm we go off to lunch. It's cous-cous with roasted chipotle peppers today; I can't wait.

(Pause.)

PAUL. This is suppose to make us better executives?

MARK. Better people. Count of three?

PAUL. Okay. I count, though.

MARK. Deal.

PAUL. One, two, three.

(PAUL crosses over. MARK takes a step but does not cross.)

MARK. Two out of three?

(Fade to black.)

END OF THE PLAY