Campion Decent

The Ambiguous Table: Dramatic Representations of Women at Dinner

An actual dinner party is nearly always characterized by the presence of three central elements: a meal, a table, and a gathering of people, who usually converse. In this article Campion Decent considers the dinner party as a social event and questions how artists draw on its elements to inform artistic representations of dinner. He examines the use of dining events in drama, notably in five texts authored by women between the late 1970s and the present day – Tina Howe's *The Art of Dining* (1979) and *One Shoe Off* (1992), Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982), Moira Buffini's *Dinner* (2002), and Tanya Ronder's *Table* (2013). These texts share an emphasis on the symbolic idea of food or dining, feature tables with a woman at their centre and offer dialogue allied to the experiences of women. While the dining events that they depict are populated with vastly different characters and distinct conversations, the tables nevertheless function as potent yet ambiguous symbols both of women's oppression and of the potential for creative freedom. This article draws on research in anthropology, sociology, food studies, theatre and performance studies, and women's studies to illustrate the fertile complexity of ideas involved in the symbolic dinner. Campion Decent has recently completed his doctoral studies at La Trobe University, Melbourne. He is an award-winning playwright, with productions at Sydney Theatre Company, the Griffin Theatre, and the National Institute of Dramatic Art, Sydney. He has presented papers at Stanford University, Shanghai Theatre Academy, and Victoria University of Wellington.

Key terms: dining, Moira Buffini, Tina Howe, Caryl Churchill, Tanya Ronder.

IN HIS BOOK on feasting, Martin Jones asks: 'Why should one of the most basic biological functions, eating, develop into an elaborate costume drama of manners and gestures?'[1] An associated question, pertinent to the interests of this article, might be, 'Why has the theatre so often turned to this elaborate costume drama of gathering for dinner?' Certainly, the shared meal can function either as a powerful signifier of community and unification, or as an opportunity for domestic conflict and uproar.[2] Yet, perhaps a more direct answer to this question can be glimpsed in Margaret Visser's observation that people 'eat whenever life becomes dramatic', or Gaye Poole's assertion that dinner parties in theatre and film 'can function structurally to create climactic opportunities'.[3] As Fabio Parasecoli notes: 'Eating, hunger, and desire are familiar experiences to all audiences, and very easy to relate to.'[4]

In her commentary on the rituals of dinner, Visser discusses the 'dramatic' aspects of dining and presents the notion of 'tables as stages', where dishes of food 'make entrances and exits'.[5] She also discusses the repression implicit in the act of dining, and the rules – or table manners – deployed to mitigate the risk of uproar and violence when humans eat.[6] Poole's analysis of food representation in theatre and film, ranging from Shakespeare's plays to more contemporary works such as Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982), focuses on its 'aesthetic, semiotic, and metaphorical dimensions and reverberations'.[7] She considers its role as a structuring device, as a marker of power, territory, and social cohesion, arguing that the disrupted, interrupted, or failed dinner often signifies a lack of cohesion.

Other scholars have noted the use and consumption of food in theatre and performance, and its particular appeal to artists. Deborah R. Geis, for example, calls it 'a subject of fascination' and cites the work of American playwrights Sam Shepard and

Tina Howe as examples.[8] Carol Martin identifies the 'iconic rectangle' of the dining table as a 'focal point' for a range of representations from Shakespearean banquets through to contemporary family dramas.[9] Yet she explains that the table is not only the 'locus of games, drinks, and meals' for a family, but also appears in public contexts in different guises as, for example, church altar, court bench, in interrogation rooms, and as a dais for a parliamentary despatch box.[10]

Resonating strongly with the function of the feminist table, Martin positions stage performers as 'messengers', and observes how they 'summon evidence and archives from appearing and disappearing worlds that are both real and invented'.[11] She argues: 'Whole worlds can pass in rapid succession as the messengers seated at tables on stage report on a vast tract of time and space. . . . From the table on stage . . . we get in contact with everyone and anyone, with the events of the world.'[12] The performers playing historic women in *Top Girls*, for example, conjure a vast array of worlds and times, where their 'message' of patriarchal oppression draws on archival research, joining historical fact to imaginative association. Churchill literally places her women from different times and worlds in conversation with one another in defiance of history itself.

As Jones points out, the table has become an alternative form of 'camp fire', and, like its ancestor, enables the 'ritual sharing of food around the age-old conversational circle'.[13] He asserts, 'an ingredient of the meal at least as important as the food itself – [is] endless lively conversation'.[14] Mary Lukanuski emphasizes how the need for food and nourishment is key to the formation of social groupings and communities, and points to the natural history dioramas, with their early depictions of hunting and gathering, as evidence. It is in the sharing of food, she asserts, that a 'sense of community is continually defined and maintained'.[15]

Emma Govan and Dan Rebellato cite the birthday party and harvest supper as two of many 'food events' that allow 'collective acknowledgement of milestones' in society. They explain: 'Meals are also used to cement social contracts, from the celebratory wedding breakfast that marks the first meal of a "new life in the community", to state banquets that demonstrate special relationships between countries.'[16]

A meal, a table, and a gathering of people are three key elements of a dinner party and are integral to productions of *Top Girls* and the other plays discussed in this article.

Dinner Settings

Dinner settings are fairly commonplace in recent British and American drama. They feature in David Eldridge's adaptation of *Festen* (2004), Tracy Letts's Pulitzer prize-winning *August: Osage County* (2008), and Tanya Ronder's *Table*. The latter premiered in 2013 at The Shed, a pop-up venue at London's National Theatre, and is a play about 'belonging, identity, and the things we pass on'. In this case it is a 'very special piece of furniture' – a table – that travels through six generations.[17]

Visser positions the table as the most significant symbol of family and/or sharing, retaining the memories of the dramas that have no doubt occurred around it. 'It has for centuries been the locus of the typical household's daily meals,' she writes, 'and represents, as no other piece of furniture can, the family as a whole.'[18] Accordingly, in the opening scene of *Table*, set in the present day, Gideon explains to his granddaughter Su-Lin the significance of the 'substantial wooden table' that stands before them. While she describes it as 'cacked-up', he explains that each mark reveals a story going back generations. Their family table holds in its history a 'coffin scratch', 'leopard claws', 'mad nun's nails', and 'bleach, or possibly urine'. One patch is 'heartburn', another a 'thump', still another 'a joke gone wrong'. There are also 'prayers' and 'tiny shards from twenty-seven million boring conversations'.[19]

The play that follows travels back and forth in time to dramatize the stories behind these marks. Scattered throughout the stories are family fights and family meals, with instructions to lay the table, stay at the table, sit down at the table, sit up straight at the

Su Lin (Sophie Wu) and her grandfather Gideon (Paul Hilton) on the eponymous *Table* in Tanya Ronder's play in the temporary Shed at the National Theatre, 2013. Photo: Richard Hubert Smith.

table, take elbows off the table, and not talk with a full mouth at the table. At one point, the table's legs are sawn off, and later re-attached as its ancestors 'sing' it back to life.[20] The action returns to the present day in the final scene, where the opening sequence is replayed, with Gideon noticing a fresh stain:

GIDEON: Is that nail varnish?
SU-LIN: I spilt Gran's bottle.
GIDEON: Blue? You've made your mark.[21]

Among its other attributes, Ronder's play illustrates eloquently an association between a table, meals, and people gathering to share stories. Jones observes: 'The story of the meal was a story of social relations and the notion of "culture", that key attribute that we humans have, and other species lack.'[22] On the other hand, Visser notes that the Western table 'pins everyone down' to a specific chair, which has the effect of simultaneously uniting and separating people around the table.[23] While conflict is part of Ronder's narrative, *Table* tends to emphasize the ties that bind rather than the disagreements that can unravel a family.

Yet, the table is not always used as a symbol of unification in drama. In *Festen* and *August: Osage County*, for example, the table is used to gather the family and then deploy its members into physical and/or verbal warfare; and research has shown that domestic squabbles often occur around the household table. Both Eldridge and Letts exploit such findings to dramatic effect.[24]

Families Falling Apart

In *Festen*, a wealthy family gathers to celebrate the patriarch's sixtieth birthday. In the dinner scene that opens Act Two, eldest son Christian, whose twin sister Linda committed suicide some time ago, rises to make a speech. He asks his father Helge to choose between two versions of the speech, colour-coded green and yellow. His father chooses green and Christian launches into 'a kind of "truth" speech', which he calls 'When Daddy takes a bath'. It ends with the accusation that his father repeatedly raped him and his sister Linda when they were children.[25]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X16000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The dinner table in David Eldridge's version of *Festen*, as staged at the Steep Theatre, Chicago, in 2011. Photo: Lev Kalmens.

As others at the table laugh nervously, Christian rises again to offer a second toast: 'To the man who killed my sister. To a murderer.'[26] The dinner party, and by extension the play, lurches to its conclusion the next morning, following a mélange of accusation, explanation, recrimination, and physical violence. At breakfast, Helge stands before them with remorse, directing his final words to Christian: 'I want to say, well done. Well fought, my boy.'[27]

The 'family secret' trope appears in *August: Osage County*, too. A sprawling saga set across three floors of the Westons' large country home outside Oklahoma, it has two vivid dinner settings. Closing Act Two is a grandly comic 'funeral dinner' for the recently departed patriarch, Beverly. During grace, notions of 'togetherness', food, and 'nourishment' are invoked, yet Beverly's grieving and 'doped' wife Violet, afflicted with tongue cancer and addicted to pills, stuns the table.[28] She insults the housekeeper, indulges in racist taunts, criticizes the funeral service, and seems intent on carving up the family inheritance as quickly as possible. She is accused of 'viciously' attacking her family, while she argues that she is simply 'truth-telling'.[29]

The scene concludes with a violent intervention, where Barbara, the eldest daughter, '*snaps, screams, lunges . . . grabs Violet by the hair, pulls her up, toppling chairs. They crash through the house. . . . Pandemonium. Screaming. Barbara strangles Violet.*'[30] A second family meal of catfish in Act Three, while smaller in scale, is no less dramatic. It ends with Barbara screaming for Violet to 'EAT THE FISH, BITCH' as they smash vases and plates.[31]

Joanne Finkelstein contends that good manners in 'everyday sociality' such as those at dinner tables are used as a mask to disguise hostilities; true feelings are quelled in speech and act, irritation is controlled, and passion is suppressed.[32] Yet, for the 'family' play to sustain dramatic interest the opposite is almost always true: hostility, irritation, and passion are conspicuously present.

Gender at Dinner

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests that feminist artists are especially attracted to the idea of the dinner party because it allows them to create a community and eat together on their own terms after a lifetime of responsibility for food preparation. It provides a

space for 'women's creativity'.[33] Geis, too, argues that the private domestic space of the kitchen is most associated with women, and bringing food into the public performance space can be a 'transgressive or defiant act'.[34] Sally Cline maintains that because women 'feed, prepare, [and] serve', often struggling in these roles, they have a more 'complex emotional and symbolic relationship' with food than men.[35] Visser agrees that food is primarily a female concern and that feeding the family not only defines a woman's role as mother, but can also give her a certain power in the household.[36]

In reviewing the depiction of the dinner party in the output of several female novelists, Eileen T. Bender also notes 'the ambiguous role of women at the centre . . . simultaneously empowered and enslaved by the incessant demands of a hungry world'.[37] She explains that the dinner party, 'drawing upon multiple associations of food, feasting, and ceremony, offers a particularly intriguing vehicle for the study of [the] feminine'.[38]

Certainly *Top Girls* speaks to the idea of women made prominent as ambiguous symbols of both oppression and creative self-determination. Yet, part of the intrigue of Churchill's staged dinner party is, in effect, the dialectic between accord and discord arising from the table. This dinner is a site for cultural tension, yet the parallel between the stories of oppression at the table demonstrates a degree of common ground among the women present. Churchill's dinner also works to restore a gender balance to the stage by foregrounding women.

Howe's plays *The Art of Dining* and *One Shoe Off* and Moira Buffini's *Dinner* similarly foreground women. A female character is at the centre of each of these tables, and it is primarily her story that propels the action of each play.

If the table is a vehicle for 'endless lively conversation', perhaps these representations, along with Churchill's feminist table, show the potential for a different kind of dinner conversation. Rather than the site of domestic squabble writ large, these tables arguably present a broader conversation of ideas intersecting with history, feminism, and the politics of oppression.

Top Girls at the Arc Theatre, Chicago, 2015. Photo: Emily Schwartz.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X16000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Art of Dining

Howe's *The Art of Dining* premiered Off-Broadway in December 1979. Ostensibly an absurdist-style comedy set in a restaurant, the play, like much of Howe's work, explores ideas of food, meal preparation, female creativity, and art's fragility and redemptive power.[39] As part of the dialogue of the play, Howe manages to distil and interconnect ideas of domestic servitude, creative freedom, mother/daughter relationships, healthy and unhealthy appetite, and feminist salvation.

If food consumption in *Top Girls* is a secondary concern, it becomes the primary interest of Howe's play. The play brings to life The Golden Carousel, a chic neighbourhood eatery in New Jersey that is owned and operated by a married couple. Both aged in their mid-thirties, Ellen is the 'chef extraordinaire' and her husband Cal is the 'supple headwaiter'. Set in the present over the course of one evening, seven diners attend the restaurant: married couple Hannah and Paul Galt, described respectively as 'hungry' and 'hungrier'; Elizabeth Barrow Colt, a shy nearsighted writer who is 'afraid of food' and meeting her new publisher David Osslow; and a trio of women – Herrick, Nessa, and Tony – on a girls' night out. The culinary habits of the latter three are defined respectively as 'good eater', 'more neurotic eater', and 'perpetually on a diet and miserable'.[40]

According to Judith E Barlow, Howe's body of work is characterized by an anarchic sense of humour and comic skewering of the pretentious, while Nancy Backes argues that she often uses humour to make feminist truths more palatable.[41] Barlow, among others, is more equivocal about attaching a feminist nomenclature to the playwright's work, stating that she 'writes from a clearly female perspective even if not from a consistently feminist one'.[42]

Christopher Bigsby goes so far as to claim that Howe's work 'placed her ambiguously in the gender politics of the time'.[43] Geis, however, argues that the action of food preparation is the overriding concern of Howe's theatrical inquiry. Despite noting the related exploration of the female with ideas of eating, cooking, sexuality, and creativity, she maintains that Howe is most interested in the

> spectacle inherent in the theatrical presentation of food and excess, as well as the pleasure of juxtaposing the corporeal/tangible (and 'smellable') realm of real food with the fictionalized/vicarious/untouchable realm of staged performance.[44]

Throughout *The Art of Dining*, for example, food is prepared in a working kitchen that forms part of the set.[45] As Poole reports, a kitchen normally functions as a kind of 'backstage' to the 'onstage' dining area of a restaurant.[46] The patron of a restaurant generally does not have the opportunity to experience the 'theatre' of the kitchen. In *The Art of Dining*, however, the 'backstage' kitchen is brought onstage in full sensory reach of the audience. The effect of this blurring of boundaries between backstage and onstage – and real food and staged performance – permits the spectator to encounter activities usually hidden, yet known and understood. As Geis suggests, it offers a spectacle to an audience that it does not always see.[47]

Dining Out as Diorama

Finkelstein explores the performance of dining out, where the restaurant can function as a 'diorama' or artificial display case. Diners, knowing they are bound by the social obligations of public performance, are in close proximity yet can safely satisfy their curiosity to examine each other.[48] Into this display, she suggests after J. A. Brillat-Savarin, might be placed certain character types – a lone diner, the married couple, lovers, and regular patrons. Regardless of the constituent parts, it is the variety of diner that ensures a diorama worthy of attention.[49]

Howe offers a middle-aged married couple, a professional first date, and a birthday celebration among girlfriends, and creates a diorama that lends itself to multiple readings. Barlow, for example, interprets the play as a metaphor for an artist's struggle, with artist-as-chef Ellen attempting to create

Setting for the production of Tina Howe's *The Art of Dining* at the University of Vermont.

'culinary masterpieces'.[50] Her husband Cal, representing both management and critic, is her chief frustration, over-booking the restaurant and over-tasting the food. 'Cal has literally lost his taste,' Barlow explains. 'No longer able to distinguish cinnamon from salt, he consumes huge quantities and appreciates nothing.'[51] Yet, in a redemptive turn, Ellen perseveres in spite of a husband-as-critic and food-phobic diners.[52] In the final moments of the play

> the restaurant customers gathered communally around the house special, flaming crepes, created and presided over by the female chef. Anguish about body size and food terrors disappear as everyone digs in and Elizabeth Barrow Colt, able to eat for the first time all evening, invokes memories of a primitive 'shared . . . feast'. The closing stage direction notes: *'Purified of their collective civilization and private grief, they feast.'*[53]

Backes, by contrast, reads the play chiefly for its comment on female eating disorders. She argues that the trio of single women – Herrick, Nessa, and Tony – 'satirize classic cases of anorexia and bulimia', while the play itself is a form of 'feminine fantasy'.[54] The Golden Carousel's exotic menu items are made 'safe', 'un-foreign', and 'domesticated' because they are prepared by a woman. 'Here the witch's cauldron yields unique, but very unsinister, fare'.[55]

In this fantasy conventional roles are reversed, too. Usually the preserve of the male, Ellen is the professional chef, while her husband Cal is the waiter, thus subverting the idea of the female as the traditional server of food. The 'over-tasting' Cal also suffers from bulimia. In this reversal, Howe demonstrates 'that it is the political inequality, and not the predispositions of gender, that creates eating disorders'.[56] Backes continues:

> The Golden Carousel, it turns out, is a matriarchal microcosm. The metaphor of the pretty carousel, pointlessly spinning, its parts moving up and down, representing binging and purging, is transformed by a woman into a place where no one need deny or be denied nourishment while enjoying the ride.[57]

Bigsby takes issue with Backes's 'eating disorders' reading, calling it an 'overinterpretation'. 'Far from being a serious analysis of eating disorders,' he writes, '*The Art of Dining* is an exuberant comedy of manners.'[58] Regardless, Barlow, Backes, and Bigsby all agree on the centrality of Elizabeth Barrow Colt. She tells a long story about her mother in Act Two that is significant to the play's themes:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X16000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Angry at having to invent meals that her husband wolfs unthinkingly and her daughter spits into napkins, Elizabeth's mother turns suicidal, slicing herself into the dinners in a nightly bloodletting. . . . It is the ultimate homemaker's nightmare – the hellish vision of any woman who has had to cook three meals a day for an unappreciative family. For Elizabeth's mother, cooking is a required chore not a chosen vocation. . . . The audience is forced to make implicit comparisons between Elizabeth's mother and the central artist in *Dining* – Ellen. Both women preside over kitchens, both prepare food others will consume. The crucial difference, of course, is that Ellen is a chef who has *chosen* her métier . . . and she receives the respect (and the financial rewards) accorded an artist. Elizabeth and Ellen . . . come together when Ellen emerges from obscurity to preside over the flaming crepes. Elizabeth herself offers the benediction for this meal – this shared feast – and for the first time all evening she eats. The food that Elizabeth could not take from the hands of her tormented mother, a woman forced into a role she did not want, she willingly takes from a young woman who, like herself, has selected her own path.[59]

Barlow's lengthy commentary – edited here – demonstrates eloquently the way in which Howe speaks to women's complex relationship with food. She uses the triangular relationship between Ellen, Elizabeth, and her mother to distil and interconnect ideas of kitchen as private and public space, hunger that damages and rewards, family as prison, mother and daughter relationships, and possible feminist allegiance.

Dinner in *The Art of Dining*, then, is used to exemplify each character; to heighten conflict; to explicate a connection between food and sex; to highlight the tension between public space and private concerns; and to link women to food in ambiguous ways. It also addresses the issue of eating disorders, while illustrating the performative aspect of public dining and, prominently, it positions food as the substance of art. *Top Girls* occupies vastly different theatrical territory, yet in both works the dialogue between diners addresses the perceived obligation of the female roles of daughter, mother, lover, wife, and the potential for personal or creative freedom when these roles are redefined.

Unlike *Top Girls* and *The Art of Dining*, Howe's play *One Shoe Off* locates its dinner party in the private, domestic sphere of the home. Staged in New York in 1992, the play received 'universally hostile reviews'.[60] It is, nevertheless, of interest here for its depiction of a 'dinner party gone haywire'.[61] The narrative centres on Dinah, a theatre costume designer, and her husband Leonard, an out-of-work actor and amateur beekeeper, who invite an old colleague and now a noted movie director, Parker Bliss, to dinner. Making up the dining party in their rural upstate New York locale are Dinah and Leonard's new neighbours, Tate, an editor, and his actress wife, Clio.

One Shoe Off

One Shoe Off is ultimately a play about middle-class artists and professionals and the concerns of marriage, fidelity, and adultery. Over two acts guests arrive, eat, flirt, fight, and flee. It is, however, the playwright's 'vegetable riot' that takes this familiar 'dinner-from-hell' scenario into more interesting territory.[62] Early in the text, Howe describes the house as

starting to fragment and sink into the ground. . . . Grass, weeds, and tangled shrubbery are encroaching indoors. Saplings and full-grown trees have taken root in the corners giving the place the look of a surreal ruin.[63]

Penny Farfan observes that Dinah and Leonard's 'disintegrating relationship' is articulated figuratively through these outside forces of nature that threaten to ravage their domestic space.[64] Dinah, whose name purposely rhymes with 'diner', observes 'we're being buried alive' as she rakes leaves from the bedroom floor.[65] Still later, she presents an appetizer of '*a mountain of carrots with their tops still on*'. To her reticent guests she says: 'They grow all over the house. In the kitchen, the den, the upstairs bathroom. . . . Dig in, dig in!'[66] In the next scene, it is already late at night and the promised Thanksgiving-style turkey dinner has not yet materialized. Dinah rushes to the kitchen only to return carrying an enormous raw turkey, declaring she forgot to turn on the oven. Tate, however, devises a plan to feed them all.

Unlike in *The Art of Dining* and *Top Girls*, the main part of the dinner event is not dramatized and dinner is almost over when the curtain rises on Act Two. In this way, *One Shoe Off* implies that dinner will be served but never quite delivers on the promise. Having said this, social excess – and the comedic chaos it provides – is of primary concern to Howe in both *The Art of Dining* and *One Shoe Off*. As Tate says – although it could just as easily encapsulate Howe's playwriting philosophy – 'lunacy's just a heartbeat away'.[67] A few moments later Dinah '*staggers in carrying a gigantic vat of salad*'.

> DINAH: I picked it fresh this morning. . . . From inside the coat closet. It's like a greenhouse gone mad – mushrooms nesting in the mittens, avocados blooming in the galoshes, broccoli sprouting out the umbrellas …
> LEONARD: She's exaggerating.
> DINAH: A wave of vegetable lust is surging through the house, it keeps us awake at night. The pollinating and fertilizing, the germinating and foliating – you've never heard such a din. . . . Green beans quickening, okra stiffening, zucchini swelling… And then there's the roiling of the leafy things that wait! Swiss chard shuddering, spinach seething . . . arugula unfurling on the chairs. Cabbage writhing, endive panting, hearts of palm ululating under the bed.[68]

She continues her 'March of the Vegetables' aria, with Leonard begging her to stop, until, finally, Parker intervenes and pushes her to the floor. Dinah screams, sits, rises, groans, and wishes the night was over, then announces dessert to her increasingly forlorn guests.

After home-grown pumpkin pie, with honey nougat meringue courtesy of Leonard's bees, the guests depart, leaving Dinah and Leonard alone to bemoan the 'total disaster' of their evening.[69] He confronts her with a long unasked question about her adulterous yearning for Parker. She admits to it, but says she never acted on it. That's good enough for Leonard. Throughout the night a gale has also been blowing. Nature might be trying to bury and buffet them, but order – and marriage – is ultimately restored. As they embrace, Leonard says with admiration, 'You're like the cauliflower under our bed, fierce and tenacious,' and the play's final image is of them as they '*hold their ground against the gale which finally starts to subside*'.[70]

In its portrayal of dinner, *Top Girls* infers ideas about women's appetite and the consumption of food in circumstances in which they are without the constraining presence of men. The freedom to choose from the menu is strongly accentuated, while food is used to illustrate character. *One Shoe Off*, by contrast, links an excess of metaphoric language and imagery to a broader exploration of the 'institution of marriage' and the outside influences that threaten it, be they of human or environmental making.[71] In a sense, too, Howe collapses together the growing and the eating of vegetables, removing all the intervening stages that might be expected as preparation for a dinner party. Here the raw fecundity is juxtaposed with the dinner party rather than being rendered invisible.

Poole cites the banquets in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *The Taming of the Shrew* as cases of the 'disrupted' meal, or the more comic 'interrupted' feast, noting that these discontinued dinners endure today as 'one of the principal traditions of food on stage'.[72] Howe's *One Shoe Off*, then, is a modern riff on the tradition. The play further speaks to the idea that, in many cultures, accepting an outsider into one's home is 'potentially dangerous', and that even a well-known guest can be thought of as a 'temporary "pollution"'.[73] Nature certainly functions as an outsider that shares Dinah and Leonard's home and their guests momentarily 'pollute' the strange world of vegetative growth they cohabit. Like *The Art of Dining*, *One Shoe Off* delights in the absurd but, most conspicuously, it portrays both a failed dinner and the effect of the outsider. These aspects are even more pronounced in Buffini's *Dinner*.

The Menu in *Dinner*

Despite emerging out of the gender politics of the 1970s and 1980s, Buffini's *Dinner* uses a wickedly dark 'couples-in-crisis' scenario to conduct a larger conversation about the excesses of middle-class consumption.[74] Buffini herself notes that the play is about 'the richest class in our society eating itself'.[75]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X16000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Buffini structures her play in four scenes named 'Aperitif', 'The Starter', 'The Main', and 'Dessert'. She also places the names of dinner courses alongside the play's character list. The menu's prominent position presages the dynamic role played by food in advancing the action of the play. At one point the hostess even says about food: 'It takes on a character. It looms.'[76] Like Howe, Buffini takes her audience into a surreal landscape.

Dinner premiered at the National Theatre in 2002 before transferring to the West End the following year. It centres on Paige, as she hosts a dinner party to celebrate the publication of her husband's new bestseller. It is a satire of considerable craft and complexity and warrants a fuller analysis of its myriad elements. The focus here, however, is narrowed to consideration of the key aspects that relate to its depiction of the dining ritual: the hostess, the waiter, the uninvited guest, violence at the table, and, of course, the meal.

Visser notes that the role the hostess or host takes is critical in creating a memorable dinner party. He or she must make sure the right guests are present to create the right atmosphere.[77] Buffini shows Paige to be critically aware of this responsibility. She is razor-sharp, like Marlene in *Top Girls*, and makes sure the drinks are plentiful, especially for herself. She organizes a game – albeit cruel in nature – for the moment when the dinner conversation stalls. At one point she offers a pricey keepsake to the uninvited Mike. He says, 'You think of everything,' and she replies, 'The sign of a good hostess.'[78] Paige even has a joke at the ready when required: 'I think every hostess should have a joke up her sleeve. When her guests have drunken, sobbed, and letched their way through her repast there's nothing quite like a funny joke to finish things off.'[79]

Paige performs the role of 'hostess extraordinaire' with deadpan glee. She is aware of the expectations of etiquette that are attached to her class and, at the same time, is resolute in her plan to wreak revenge on her deceitful husband Lars. She is ably assisted in her task by the silent waiter she has hired from an obscure website for the exorbitant sum of £25,000. Paige controls the waiter throughout the evening, telling him where to place a flower arrangement, how to open the door, and when to bring drinks, an ashtray, or a chair. When the waiter threatens to disobey, she snaps at him: 'Remember what you're here for and be very, very careful what you do.'[80]

Certainly, questions of class figure in the character of the waiter in *Dinner*. Yet, a more explicit debate is performed through the character of Mike, the uninvited guest to Paige's party. He stumbles in to use the phone after an accident in his van, and it is quickly evident that he represents a poorer class:

MIKE: Fuck, I should of known better asking from people like you. What a waste o' time.
PAIGE: What do you mean, people like us?
MIKE: Rich cunts.[81]

Despite initial resistance, Paige invites Mike to stay for a drink and 'see how the rich cunts live'.[82] Her guests are smitten by his colourful language, his job driving a van, and his stories of jailed and alcoholic friends. He 'ups the ante' by claiming his van is stuffed with stolen goods from the house next door. Lars politely enquires if he stole the Klimt painting. Demonstrating little appreciation for art, Mike reports he left it behind:

PAIGE: I'm sorry, are we gawping?
MIKE: Just a bit
PAIGE: You'll have to excuse us. It's been years since any of us spoke to anyone working class.[83]

Later in the night, Mike confesses he invented his 'life of crime' and really delivers cakes. Paige's guests wonder if his lie was designed to amuse, or to make himself seem more interesting in their eyes. They ultimately shrug it off as a 'class thing'.[84]

Although resorting to stereotypes, Buffini uses her scenario to attack the middle class rather than stigmatize the working class, even if she does not entirely avoid the pitfall of ascribing a sentimental nobility to Mike. As he says at one point:

And supposing, once I'd achieved my fantasy – been accepted at your table and treated like

The first American production of Moira Buffini's *Dinner* at Bay Street Theatre, Long Wharf, NY, in 2009. Photo: Gary Mamay.

> your home was mine – supposing I found that the shining people were actually hollow and lost and alone? Suppose I found that for all their glittering ideas they were twice as empty and miserable as me? You see, what if my aspirational fantasy turned out to be shit in my hands?[85]

The Pervasive Threat of Violence

The uncivil Mike is positioned as the potential external threat to proceedings – 'Will he rob us? 'Will he behave?' – yet it is the civil waiter that enacts the greatest violence. This threat of violence runs through Buffini's play like an electric current. At the beginning Paige explains that she would kill herself with a 'pump-action automatic shotgun' if she thought her guests might not attend. Lars jokes glibly: 'What's wrong with pills?'[86]

When the scientist Hal arrives he reports an eerie fog outside and that he half expected Jack Nicholson to appear 'with a big blood-spattered axe'.[87] Most notably, during Paige's party game, which entails each guest speaking for two minutes on a pre-allocated topic, Siân is given the subject of 'murder weapons', and between them the guests rattle off more than eighty gruesome 'weapons' of death.[88]

Parasecoli notes that food itself can sometimes be 'a weapon'.[89] In Paige's hands this is true, insofar as her menu would almost certainly result in food poisoning. Visser observes that there is a presupposed violence in the consumption of food. Diners are 'slicing and chewing', attending to animalistic needs. At the table, they are 'armed and vulnerable', and at 'such very close quarters' that it might be easy, without rules, to get 'the guests mixed up with the dishes'.[90] With Paige's unusual menu of Primordial Soup, Apocalypse of Lobster, and Frozen Waste there is even more chance for confusion.

The opening stage direction of the play – '*A table set for a lavish dinner*' – hints at a sumptuous traditional feast.[91] However, this notion is quickly undercut when Paige says of her planned menu: 'It's my creation – like Frankenstein's monster.'[92] When the diners 'tentatively' begin to eat their starter the stage direction unambiguously notes, '*the soup is disgusting*'.[93] When questioned by her guests, Paige reveals the soup is 'an onion, celeriac and parsnip base' to which she has added

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X16000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

algae, a bouquet garni, a 'dash' of sulphur, and some yeast. She has prepared it over three weeks:

> I was pulling my hair out thinking how can I cook this without Lars knowing? How can I keep it as a special surprise? And I came up with a genius solution. I put the pan on the sunbed out in the summerhouse. That way, it's had not only heat, but light to photosynthesize. I've been out there to stir it every other day. . . . It's called Primordial Soup. . . . The living starter. Enjoy.[94]

Later, after a request from Lars for some Parmesan cheese to enhance its flavour, Paige declares: 'This soup is an irrepressible force of life. And that's why I wanted to share it with you all. When we're surrounded by so much excess I think it's wonderful to remember that we were once such persistent slime.'[95]

Paige's next challenge to her diners is Apocalypse of Lobster, so-named in a nod to her husband's concept of the 'psychological apocalypse' that is the subject of his best-selling book. As Wagner plays, the Waiter enters with live lobsters, '*claws tied with satin ribbons*'. Paige instructs her shocked diners:

> There's a pot of boiling water in the kitchen and an ornamental pond out there on the patio, which I've had the waiter fill with brine. If you want your lobster to live, take it out and release it to its natural element. If you want to consume it, take it into the kitchen, put it face first into the boiling water, listen to it scream, and when it's cooked the waiter will bring it in for you. You can crack it open, remove its stomach sacs and intestines and eat it with the attractive salad. That way lies lobster apocalypse and that way lies salvation. The choice, ye gods, is yours.[96]

The final dish of Frozen Waste, signalled by Paige as her 'just desserts', is 'the contents of yesterday's bin', with added sugar.[97] Mike likes it and asks if there is more, to which Paige replies: 'I'm afraid not. But I could always rustle some up. Our bin's a cornucopia of excess.'[98]

Earlier in the evening, when discussing Lars's book, Mike asks, 'But there's always a waste product with food, isn't there? I mean whether you've consumed lobster or a curry or whatever.' He draws a parallel between food and life when he further asks, 'What's the waste product with experience? I mean what do you do with it? . . . I just want to know what you do with your shit.'[99] Paige's answer in a dessert of frozen waste appears to be 'you eat it', both in relation to food and life. Earlier still, Lars observes, in conversation with Hal: 'And the world is a mad cacophony of excess. Every living thing is either consuming or in a state of decay.' Hal says that Paige is the 'ultimate consumer', to which Lars retorts, 'Oh, look harder; she's decomposing.'[100]

The substance of food provides a thematic cornucopia for Buffini. Through descriptions of food, *Dinner* invokes impressions about life and death, violence, consumption, and decay. While Buffini emphasizes the decay of food, Howe in *One Shoe Off* aligns it with unstoppable growth. More broadly, Buffini's text, like Howe's plays, illustrates and critiques an over-supply of food as indicative of social excess. *Dinner* also has a memorable protagonist in the sharp-tongued hostess Paige. As with the historic women in *Top Girls*, the 'chef extraordinaire' Ellen in *The Art of Dining*, and the vegetable-fixated Dinah in *One Shoe Off*, food becomes a phantasmic manifestation of female subjective experience.

Clearing the Table

At the end of most dinner parties the table is laden with the detritus of dining: leftover food, dirty plates and glassware, strewn napkins, the telltale marks of the spills and thrills celebrated or endured. The time comes, as it usually must, to clear the table.

The detritus of this article, arising from discussion of dinner party settings, finds an accumulation of observations about appetite, class, conflict, consumption, conversation, eating, excess, family, food, gender, hunger, sharing, sex, and violence. It adds up to a perhaps overcrowded table of ideas and, if nothing else, demonstrates the rich network of concepts that these plays draw on when representing the dinner party.

Furthermore, drama draws on the precedents of the literal dinner party to arrange the three central elements of a meal, a table,

and a gathering of people into different configurations to achieve its representation. The feminist dinner party is characterized by the presence and agency of women at the table, and distinguished by conversations that address the interests of women. Women at the table become, after Martin, 'messengers', who report both their experiences of living under patriarchy and their endeavour to achieve a sense of freedom in an oppressive regime.

These tables also reflect the multifaceted and complicated relationship women have with food. In *Top Girls*, as Poole points out, food functions to define the women at Churchill's table and contribute to the idea of their difference. Food choices reflect their class and culture.[101] In *The Art of Dining*, a woman's creativity in the kitchen is on full display. In *One Shoe Off*, a 'vegetable riot' takes root indoors and overwhelms both house and housewife. Finally, in *Dinner*, Paige wields food as a weapon in her offer of an idiosyncratic and inedible menu.

Yet it is equally true that these representations point to the mimicry of material food in art and theatre. The ghostly traces of real meals figure in all these representations. In *Top Girls*, real food might or might not be used in performance, as two recent productions in Australia showed through their different approaches.[102] Even when it is used, it is not necessarily a faithful recreation of the food described in the text. Similarly, *The Art of Dining* calls for the use of real food but it is doubtful that a menu of the complexity indicated could be created without recourse to professional kitchen staff.

In these instances, the theatrical meal simulates the real one. More generally, as in *Table, One Shoe Off*, and *Dinner*, food performs an exclusively symbolic function. In *Table*, it is modestly embedded in language and used as prop. In *One Shoe Off*, it is chiefly deployed as metaphor and its consumption is largely omitted. In *Dinner*, Paige's menu is fanciful and must remain immaterial. It would, without doubt, elicit food poisoning if executed as described. In these cases the use of food is truly citational. Regardless, food preoccupies the women at these represented tables and speaks to its broader place in the lives of actual women.

Notes and References

1. Martin Jones, *Feast: Why Humans Share Food* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 19.
2. David Farrell Krell, 'Eating Out: Voluptuosity for Dessert', in Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz, ed., *Eating Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 79; Mary Lukanuski, 'A Place at the Counter: the Onus of Oneness', ibid., p. 113; Fabio Parasecoli, *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2008), p. 60; Gaye Poole, *Reel Meals, Set Meals: Food in Film and Theatre* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1999), p. 55; Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: the Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), p. 97, 341.
3. Visser, *Rituals of Dinner*, p. 22; Poole, *Reel Meals*, p. 29.
4. Parasecoli, *Bite Me*, p. 66.
5. Visser, *Rituals of Dinner*, p. 130.
6. Ibid., p. xii, 4, 93, 341.
7. Poole, *Reel Meals*, p. 1.
8. Deborah R. Geis, 'Feeding the Audience: Food, Feminism, and Performance Art', in Scapp and Seitz, ed., *Eating Culture*, p. 218. See also Charles G. Whiting, 'Food and Drink in Shepard's Theater', *Modern Drama*, XXXI, No. 2 (Summer 1988), p. 175–83.
9. Carol Martin, 'Table on Stage: the Rise of the Messenger', in Atay Citron, Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, and David Zerbib, ed., *Performance Studies in Motion: International Perspectives and Practices in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), p. 61–3.
10. Ibid., p. 72.
11. Ibid., p. 61–2.
12. Ibid., p. 72.
13. Jones, *Feast*, p. 283.
14. Ibid., p. 24.
15. Lukanuski, *Place at the Counter*, p. 113.
16. Emma Govan and Dan Rebellato, 'Foodscares! The Pleasures and Dangers of Culinary Theatre', *Performance Research*, IV, No. 1 (Spring 1999), p. 34.
17. Tanya Ronder, *Table* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2013).
18. Visser, *Rituals of Dinner*, p. 82.
19. Ronder, *Table*, p. 12–13.
20. Ibid., p. 97.
21. Ibid., p. 106.
22. Jones, *Feast*, p. 9.
23. Visser, *Rituals of Dinner*, p. 130.
24. Ibid., p. 97.
25. David Eldridge, *Festen* (London: Methuen Drama, 2004), p. 27–9.
26. Ibid., p. 33.
27. Ibid., p. 63.
28. Tracy Letts, *August: Osage County* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008), p. 84–5.
29. Ibid., p. 93.
30. Ibid., p. 96–7.
31. Ibid., p. 131–2.
32. Joanne Finkelstein, *Dining Out: a Sociology of Modern Manners* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 130.
33. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium', *Performance Research*, IV, No. 1 (Spring 1999), p. 24.

34. Geis, *Feeding the Audience*, p. 222–3.
35. Quoted in Poole, *Reel Meals*, p. 179.
36. Visser, *Rituals of Dinner*, p. 276.
37. Eileen T. Bender, 'The Woman Who Came to Dinner: Dining and Divining a Feminist "Aesthetic"', *Women's Studies*, XII, No. 3 (1986), p. 316. Bender focuses on the work of Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood, Willa Cather, and Joyce Carol Oates.
38. Bender, 'The Woman Who Came to Dinner', p. 321.
39. Judith E. Barlow, 'The Art of Tina Howe', in Enoch Brater, ed., *Feminine Focus: the New Women Playwrights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 241–54; Barlow, 'Howe, Tina', in K. A. Berney, ed., *Contemporary Women Dramatists* (London: St James Press, 1994), p. 112–15; Barlow, 'Tina Howe', in Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman, ed., *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), p. 260–76.
40. Tina Howe, *The Art of Dining*, in Howe, *Coastal Disturbances: Four Plays by Tina Howe* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1989), p. 57.
41. Barlow, 'The Art of Tina', p. 241–2; Barlow, 'Tina Howe', p. 260–1; Nancy Backes, 'Body Art: Hunger and Satiation in the Plays of Tina Howe', in Lynda Hart, ed., *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), p. 43, 50.
42. Barlow, 'Howe, Tina', p. 115.
43. Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 52.
44. Geis, *Feeding the Audience*, p. 218.
45. Barlow, 'The Art of Tina', p. 243; Bigsby, p. 57.
46. Poole, *Reel Meals*, p. 123.
47. This idea might seem more commonplace in 2016, given the exalted place of food in contemporary culture, as evidenced by high-rating cooking programmes on television, a booming book and magazine publishing niche, and the rise of the celebrity chef. Food festivals abound, and chefs like Jamie Oliver even stage the occasional theatre show. On the other hand, interest in seeing the kitchen at work has possibly not abated since the 1970s, with chefs, including Shannon Bennett at 'Vue de Monde' in Melbourne and 'Dinner by Heston Blumenthal' in London, recently designing lavish dining spaces with kitchens on prominent display.
48. Finkelstein, *Dining Out*, p. 17.
49. Ibid., p. 39.
50. Barlow, The Art of Tina Howe', p. 241, 37.
51. Ibid., p. 243.
52. Ibid., p. 245.
53. Ibid., p. 248.
54. Backes, *Body Art*, p. 49.
55. Ibid., p. 48. The menu items are listed as: Floating Island, Pears and Cointreau with Frozen Cream, Hollandaise Sauce, Sauce Veloute, Mornay Sauce, Sole Bonne Femme, Poulet Farci, Billi Bi, Belgian Oxtail Soup, Roast Duckling in Wine with Green Grapes, and Veal Prince Orloff.
56. Ibid., p. 49.
57. Ibid., p. 52–3.
58. Bigsby, *American Playwrights*, p. 59.
59. Barlow, 'The Art of Tina', p. 249–50.
60. Tina Howe, *One Shoe Off* in Howe, *Approaching Zanzibar and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), p. ix.
61. Geis, *Feeding the Audience*, p. 218.
62. Howe, *One Shoe Off*, p. x.
63. Ibid., p. 145.
64. Penny Farfan, 'From *Birth and After Birth* to *One Shoe Off*: Tina Howe and the Uses of Feminism', in Norma Jenckes, ed., *New Readings in American Drama:* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 53.
65. Howe, *One Shoe Off*, p. 151.
66. Ibid., p. 162–3.
67. Ibid., p. 191.
68. Ibid., p. 194–5.
69. Ibid., p. 207.
70. Ibid., p. 210-1.
71. Farfan, *Uses of Feminism*, p. 49.
72. Poole, *Reel Meals*, p. 58–60.
73. Visser, *Rituals of Dinner*, p. 110.
74. Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), p. 171.
75. Quoted in Alexis Greene, 'New Voices: Moira Buffini, Sarah Ruhl, and Rukhsana Ahmad', in Alexis Greene, ed., *Women Writing Plays: Three Decades of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), p. 224.
76. Moira Buffini, *Dinner* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 5.
77. Visser, *Rituals of Dinner*, p. 89.
78. Buffini, *Dinner*, p. 66.
79. Ibid., p. 96.
80. Ibid., p. 36.
81. Ibid., p. 40.
82. Ibid., p. 41.
83. Ibid., p. 51.
84. Ibid., p. 76.
85. Ibid., p. 78.
86. Ibid., p. 6.
87. Ibid., p. 13–14.
88. Ibid., p. 70–4.
89. Parasecoli, *Bite Me*, p. 83.
90. Visser, *Rituals of Dinner*, p. 4, 93.
91. Buffini, *Dinner*, p. 3.
92. Ibid., p. 5.
93. Ibid., p. 26.
94. Ibid., p. 28–9.
95. Ibid., p. 34.
96. Ibid., p. 56–7.
97. Ibid., p. 93–4.
98. Ibid., p. 95.
99. Ibid., p. 79.
100. Ibid, p. 21–3.
101. Poole, *Reel Meals*, p. 17.
102. Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls*: directed by Catherine Fitzgerald at the Dunstan Playhouse, State Theatre Company of South Australia, August–September 2012; directed by Jenny Kemp at the Southbank Theatre, Melbourne Theatre Company, August–September 2012.