

Fusion fare

9 perspectives on unexpected intersections of food and art

AS TOLD TO NICOLE ESTVANIK TAYLOR



ON SLOW FOOD INTERMISSIONS

LYNN EVE KOMAROMI Director of development, Berkeley Repertory Theatre (Berkeley, Calif.); board member, Slow Food USA (Brooklyn, N.Y.)

At Berkeley Rep, our new house manager revamped our concessions bar a few seasons ago to source local and sustainable products. It was something I personally felt strongly about, and though I think there was an initial reluctance by some staff members who were worried about increased costs, that's changed now that we've seen a big jump in concessions revenue. In Berkeley we have an audience that's highly attuned to how they eat. Previously we'd been offering your typical concessions: giant cookies in plastic wrap, soda. Now we've considered portion sizes, and we offer not just sweets but savories, such as a locally produced salumi and cheese platter. We're going even further by creating specialty cocktails that echo the themes of the productions. Recently, for Athol Fugard's *Coming Home*, we served a cocktail featuring a South African liqueur. It's just another way to enhance the theatrical experience.

What Slow Food has done is bring an awareness to the public about where their food comes from and how it's produced. When I first got involved with Slow Food I organized a fundraising event for them, and what blew me away was the number of theatre people who came. Yet it completely made sense to me, because what attracts people to Slow Food is similar to theatre's appeal—they both draw a community of people who are intellectually curious, who appreciate the human capital required to create art (whether it's food or theatre).

The general public often forgets how artisanal theatre is. As the development director, I routinely take visitors backstage or to rehearsals to see how the art is made. When people find out how long it takes to build a costume, what a props department does, how it takes a huge team to make something of quality, there's a real appreciation for it. It's the same thing when you're making a meal. Slow Food has been effective getting people to think differently about how that hamburger gets to your plate. In theatre we have to do that more: show our audiences how our theatre gets to the stage.

ON ARTISTS AND FARMERS BREAKING BREAD

MELANIE JOSEPH Founding artistic producer, Foundry Theatre (New York City)

Our Free Range Thanksgiving Performance Feast, which we've held for five years now, arose out of a Foundry Dialogue series called "Food/Water/Shelter NYC" that we designed to unpack how NYC works and how it might work better—lensed through the basic necessities. "Shelter" focused on real estate and gentrification, which became quite depressing, so moving to the subject of food was like heaven! It was amazing to discover all the food activism going on in the city and the successes people are having—and the significant consciousness-raising focus in grassroots sectors around healthful food and access to it. The incredible proliferation of Community Supported Agriculture co-ops and neighborhood greenmarkets has had a huge impact—the purveyors of food are now more in our lives.

It was at that time that Bonnie Metzgar and Suzan-Lori Parks invited us to do an event for *365 Days/365 Plays*; so we decided to gather a community of artists and farmers and food activists to perform SLP's plays over a meal of food supplied by CSA farmers. It was such a glorious event that we now do it every year. There are 10 tables of 10 people—half are artists and the other half are farmers and food activists. Together each table performs one of the 10 short plays we commissioned for the event. Admission is a bottle of New York State wine. An amazing chef named Eric Hunter prepares a four-course meal—we never know what the farmers will have until a few days before the event, and then Eric designs the menu, which is a performance in itself. Everybody rehearses and eats, and after two courses we perform five plays, then after two more courses we perform the others. It's a genuine exchange of what we make—genuine community theatre. Farmers and food activists and artists seldom, if ever, have the occasion to hang out with one another, let alone make theatre together.

I do think there's something sacred in the deep sharing of what people bring to a table, the communal engagement around food and artmaking. Though I don't know if anyone would walk around saying our Free Range is "sacred"—they'd just say it's crazy fun.

ON TEACHING ART STUDENTS HOW TO FARM

HUGH POCOCK Sculptor; professor, Maryland Institute College of Art (Baltimore, Md.)

My work deals with sources of energy and finding places where the sublime and the practical meet. Food is both sublime and completely necessary. A garden is a good example of functional art. When we go to work in a community garden, we're *making* something, not just *doing* something.

The course I teach on "Urban Farming" at MICA looks at how artists are engaged in contemporary urban issues: We discuss Joseph Beuys's term "social sculpture," meaning that engaging with society is a sculptural act. We also discuss the history of private property, such as the enclosure of the commons in England, and talk about how artists can be instrumental in rebuilding social networks and social capital in cities. We cook the food we grow in class, and we talk about the socialization that occurs with food, the conviviality, how the food people eat together affects their discussions.

So far I haven't had anyone photograph or paint or draw the food—the course is separate from those formal artistic considerations. What my students really seem to like is learning how to do something that's been forgotten, re-establishing a connection to their own sustenance. As art students, they have chosen to allow themselves a period of time where they can think abstractly and contemplatively about what things mean, without the pressures of non-academic life. That's what being in art school is, and it's a luxury we often don't have in day-to-day life.

ON LIGHTING THE TABLE

SCOTT PINKNEY Theatrical and commercial lighting designer; professor, Emerson College (North Falmouth, Mass.)

When I first moved to New York after I graduated college and was trying to get going in theatre, I would go to high-end restaurants and propose to re-light part of their space. They would keep track of how much food they sold from the area I lit versus the area I didn't, and if they saw an increase in sales, they agreed to feed me. It had a lot to do with just adding color to existing light, and changing the way people looked as they sat across the table from each other. The other big thing is making the food look appetizing, to make sure not to change it in any unappealing way with color or shadow. I never missed—I always managed to get them to give me food!

I also did a lot of theatre work in Vegas in the late '70s and early '80s, and as a side job I would do restaurants in casinos. There's a very particular kind of lighting you need to do in casinos: It has to look the same at 3 a.m. as 3 p.m. Dining out is an occasion—if someone looks across the table at their date and they look attractive, the person who's doing the looking is going to feel attractive too—and casinos in particular are all about everyone feeling good about themselves. As a restaurant lighting designer, you're essentially creating a stage set within which people will interact. What the owners want, the world they want to create, becomes the text, if you will. You design an environment around that concept and then put the diners in it, and they feel for that two-hour period that they have been transported out of their workaday world and into this magical place, where they're the stars.

I tell my students not to close their minds to opportunities outside of theatre. Theatrical lighting design training is the best entrée into lighting anything. You learn about color, texture, style, angle and how to interpret the text—or, in the case of restaurants, the theme.

ON SERVING

CHRISTOPHER RUSSELL General manager, Union Square Café; member, Actors' Equity Association (New York City)

I've worked in restaurants since I was 14. Of course, it's a natural fit for an actor. I read a book in the 1980s called *How to Be a Working Actor*, by Mari Lyn Henry and Lynne Rogers, which discussed ways to generate income between gigs. I remember it said that if you decide to work as a waiter, "Don't just wait, serve!" Meaning: Treat it as a higher calling. And that made sense to me—whatever I'm doing, I want to be a pro. So I joined up with Danny Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group.

Danny Meyer's wife, Audrey Meyer, is an actress—they met when she was working in a restaurant, too. Working for him there are dancers, opera singers, playwrights.... A few years ago the unofficial holiday card from Union Square Café was a video we posted on YouTube, choreographed and performed by our employees. I'd say probably 70 percent of our front-of-house staff have an artistic background.

The connection between the two worlds is certainly mutually beneficial. From the actor's point of view, it's shift work, which allows you to schedule classes and auditions, and it's lucrative. In terms of hiring artistic people: Well, gosh, why wouldn't you? When I was first hired by USHG they said to me, "Your job tableside is to be the embodiment of the food and of Danny." In terms of embodying other people's intent, the theatre/restaurant connection is pretty straightforward!

It's emotional labor to wait tables, just as it is to be a performing artist. And both waiters and actors have incredible amounts of physical stamina. I worked for a few years at New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, and I remember how it was to play a soldier in *Julius Caesar*. You're standing there and all of a sudden you've got to sneeze, but you have to suppress it. That incredible control happens tableside all the time; actors are severely disciplined people, and good waiters are as well. Danny uses the terms "on stage" and "off stage" to refer to our behavior: Off stage you can do whatever you want, but when you step on the floor, you're in a role.

ON "PROPS AND EXPENDABLES"

RADIOHOLE Experimental theatre ensemble (Brooklyn, N.Y.)

From the technical rider for *Radiohole is Still My Name*:

There are several expendable food props used in *Name*. Presenter must provide Radiohole with the following:

- (1) whole roasted chicken per performance.
- (24) pieces of fried chicken per performance. This is sold to audience before and during each performance.
Of the (24) pieces, at least (6) must be drumsticks (legs).
- (1) bunch of fresh parsley per performance.

These items are consumed during the performance and must be fresh as of the day of the performance.

It is Radiohole's custom to give away beer before and during show.

- 3 cases (at 24 cans per case) inexpensive canned beer per performance (this may be reduced to two if audience is 50 persons or less).
- 8 kg. ice



SCOTT HALVORSEN GILLETTE

This page, Erin Douglass, Joseph Silovsky and Maggie Hoffman in *Radiohole Is Still My Name*; opposite, from top, Gus Lynch in a Thirst Theater playlet by Joseph Scrimshaw, audiences enjoying popcorn and drinks at a Trustus Theatre performance of *Crowns*.



SCOTT PAKUDATIS

ON BARSTOOL AUDIENCES

CHRIS CARLSON Co-founder, Thirst Theater (Minneapolis)

We ended up staging our shows at Joe's Garage because Joe Kaplan, the owner and operator, got what we were trying to do. He's a wonderful chef who is always trying new stuff: mashed potatoes with portobello mushrooms, a breakfast sandwich on a glazed doughnut. We like the venue because it has a lot of energy. That was one of the driving forces behind our mission—to go to a place in our culture where people are playing out their own real-life drama. Bars were a natural draw to us, and food follows drink.

In six years, we've produced about 100 playlets. We only let our scenes rehearse twice for two hours; we like to say they're "served hot and fresh." We ask the writers to set their scenes in a bar, anytime, anyplace.

You'd think the novelty would wear off, but we still get some amazingly

fresh approaches. When I'm working in traditional theatre, I miss the closeness we have with the audience at Thirst shows—we're literally inches away. If a waitress drops a fork, we have to incorporate that. It is a very distracting environment, but we've been surprised at how deferential people are to theatre: When one of our scenes is going, sometimes we have to urge the waitstaff to keep doing their jobs!

We've been a bit more aggressive in reaching out to the press, and we recently attracted a restaurant critic, who wrote, "A couple of the pieces became too esoteric for my taste. In these cases, I simply washed down the artsy-fartsyness with a Surly [beer]." I embrace that. I think it's such a shame when someone goes to the theatre and finds out the play is not a good match for them, but at Thirst you've got a beer and a burger and the show is only 10 minutes long and there's another one coming right after.



JASON STELMAN

ON SNACKING MID-SCENE

KAY THIGPEN Co-founder/managing director, Trustus Theatre (Columbia, S.C.)

Our audiences don't complain about a \$25 ticket as much here, because they're getting free popcorn and they can refill their baskets during intermission. We have a company here in town called Cromer's—their motto is "Guaranteed Worst in Town," though obviously that's a joke! They serve all the sports events in town; everyone knows Cromer's. We buy 25 bags of popcorn at one time from them. It can be a mess, especially with a show like *Rocky Horror Show* or *Rent*, where people get very excited and spill popcorn all over the floor, but it's an easy thing to clean up. It's a nice perk, we think, and people have come to expect it. Even if they've already had dinner—who can resist a little popcorn?

We try to make seeing a show at Trustus as close to sitting at home in front of your television as possible. In addition to popcorn and comfortable seats, we have a bar, which is an added source of income for us, and it makes us very different from all the theatres around here. It's pleasurable for people to come to the theatre and have a drink at their table. When we opened Trustus, we thought about all the things we hated about theatregoing, and decided to make the comfort of the audience a priority.

ON HEADLINING A CHINESE BUFFET

LISA GEDULDIG Comedian and producer, *Kung Pao Kosher Comedy* (San Francisco)

The New Asia Restaurant in San Francisco is a banquet hall typically used for Chinese weddings, karaoke, and—once a year, for four days over Christmas—a Jewish comedy show. The idea for *Kung Pao Kosher Comedy* came to me by accident: In October 1993, I thought I was going to be performing in a Massachusetts comedy club called Peking Garden Club, but instead, ironically, I found myself telling Jewish jokes in a Chinese restaurant. Now we're coming up on our 18th year of *Kung Pao*; I've also produced it in L.A., and I've got a restaurant picked out in Chinatown in New York for this year. *Kung Pao* gives people (i.e., Jews) who feel it's not their time of year something to do for Christmas, and gives them a sense of belonging. It's kind of a like a big bar mitzvah with someone else's family.

We do an hourlong meal followed by a 90-minute comedy show (as I say on stage, "375 Jews can't eat and listen at the same time"). There's always Kung Pao Chicken on the menu, because that's our signature dish. There's one shrimp dish, no MSG and no pork. I put Yiddish proverbs in the fortune cookies—I bring them over to this fortune cookie factory in San Francisco's Chinatown where they make customized orders. They do a lot of X-rated stuff...and then my Yiddish proverbs. I'm always hoping they don't get them mixed up!

I'm picky about who I hire for the show—the performers have to be Jewish, funny, have a fair amount of Jewish content, and not be racist, sexist or homophobic. Henny Youngman's last performance was at *Kung Pao* in 1997. That really put us on the map! Our audience is not entirely Jewish anymore. Now it's maybe 75 or 80 percent. But everyone's got the same mother—same guilt, different dumplings. 🍴