

## **Making Sense of Food in Performance: The Table and the Stage<sup>1</sup>**

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What would theater history look like were it written backwards from the Futurist banquets and Dali dinners and performance art? Canonical histories of theater take as their point of departure that which counts as theater in the modern period—namely, theater as an autonomous art form—and search for its "origins" in fused art forms. Central to the notion of theater as an independent art are plays, and as an indication of the maturing of this form, a dedicated architecture or theater (literally a place of seeing). Canonical theater histories are written with the aim of understanding how modern theater came to be. The search is, understandably, for corollaries in the past. Thus, Oscar G. Brockett's *History of Theatre* is a history of drama and its performance: it does not view courtly banquets, tournaments, royal entries, and street pageants as performance genres in their own right but as occasions for plays and playlets. Such histories attend not to the fusion, but to the seeds of what would become an independent art form called theater.

It has taken considerable cultural work to isolate the senses, create genres of art specific to each, insist on their autonomy, and cultivate modes of attentiveness that give some senses priority over others. To produce the separate and independent arts that we know today, it was necessary to break fused forms like the banquet apart and to disarticulate the sensory modalities associated with them. Not until the various components of such events (music, dance, drama, food, sculpture, painting) were separated and specialized did they become sense-specific art forms in dedicated spaces (theater, auditorium, museum, gallery), with distinct protocols for structuring attention and perception. It was at this point that food disappeared from musical and theatrical performances. No food or drink is allowed in the theater, concert hall, museum, or library. In the process, new kinds of sociality supported sensory discernment specific to gustation, the literary practice of gastronomy, and increasing culinary refinement. Food became a sense-specific art form in its own right, as Marinetti's *Futurist Cookbook* so vividly demonstrates (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989).

### ***Opera Gastronomica***

Though food was removed from the theater as the theater became an autonomous art, the table and the stage continued to have a shared history. Indeed, the musical banquet, or *opera gastronomica*, may well have preceded the theatrical *opera in musica* by more than a century. According to Jenny Nevile, the musical banquet "had already reached a state of complete or 'operatic' composition by the late 15th century. The dining hall, it seems, was one of the first scenes of modern musical theatre" (Nevile 1990: page #).<sup>2</sup>

A legacy of such courtly banquets, the *tish*, literally "table" in Yiddish, is a distinctive Hasidic event during which the *rebe* (charismatic leader) holds court in the community's house of study. The *tish* is a musical banquet of sorts, during which the *rebe* will bless food, deliver a discourse, lead song, and dance with his followers. It is as part

of the *tish* that musical plays are performed in fulfillment of the religious obligation to gladden the heart of the *rebe* on the holiday of Purim. In what is essentially a command performance before a regal figure, the actors play to the *rebe*, who is seated directly in front of them on a throne-like chair. For those in attendance, the *rebe* and his reactions are the center of attention, not the play, and the best seats in the house are those that afford an unobstructed view of him (and secondarily of the play). The stage is literally a physical extension of the table such that the performance could be said to take place on the table itself.

The food the *rebe* blesses, while it includes the basic components of a festive meal, is present not to satisfy physical hunger but rather in the interest of commensality. People eat beforehand. The hunger they bring to the event is spiritual. Once the *rebe* has blessed the food and eaten a little of it, his leavings (*shirayim*) are eagerly grabbed by his followers, who may well number in the thousands. The *rebe's* leavings have been transvalued by his touch.<sup>3</sup> While the quantities presented to him are grand and the vessels are lavish, neither he nor his followers eat out of physical hunger. Nor is the food itself spectacular, though the large braided hallah, a festive braided bread made with white flour and eggs, is beautiful. Like the courtly banquets to which it is related, the *tish* is a multi-sensory event and food is an essential component of it, even in the absence of appetite.

The European banquet is one of four types of *festa*, the others being the entry, the tournament, and the popular carnival, according to Nevile. Historians of modern operatic traditions have "detected a long series of pre-operatic experiments in musical theater, going back mainly to the dining hall, but also the ballroom, the riding school, the courtyard, the city square, the garden and other spaces temporarily adapted as theatre before there were any such regular structures available" (Nevile 1990:117). These experiments, which were based on "the model of the sacred banquet, and its musical elaboration in the sung mass," resulted in "artistically planned and fully composed musical banquets, particularly those with music performed throughout the dining" (117).

As Nevile notes, "the official banquet had always functioned as an elaborate meal and social occasion. By combining "the skills of cooking, decoration, music, dancing, poetry, architecture (for scene construction), costume design and painting," the banquet made tangible and sensuous the power of the host and those being honored (128). It was not, however, until the latter part of the 15th century that all the different elements that had been part of the banquet for several centuries (that is, music and dance, as well as food), were united to produce a coherent performance with a single theme—in other words, a 'gastronomic opera'" (128). It had become "a unified theatrical event," as can be seen in Italian examples between 1450 and 1475 (130). Such events might last as long as seven hours—the Hasidic *tish*, it should be noted, can last all night and well into the morning.

The banquet was the most "total" of Renaissance festive events, particularly in the way that it engaged the senses and the various media associated with them: "The drama of the musical banquet was finally presented as a fusion of all the arts of music, dancing, poetry, food, painting, sculpture, costume, and set design, to present a feast for all the senses, as well as the intellect, in a range of moods encompassing the tragic, the comic, and the pastoral" (134). (It could be said that the orgy is even more complete in so far as included not only eating, singing, dancing, eating, and drinking, but also sexual activity.<sup>4</sup>) If the 15<sup>th</sup>-century French banquet was marked by abundance, the 16<sup>th</sup> century

banquet was characterized by rarity and refinement (Wheaton 1983:52). Moreover, what had been a fused form became separate specialized entities, as can be seen from the transformation of the *entremets*, the between-courses divertissements. According to Barbara Santich, the *entremets*:

were visually and theatrically spectacular, incorporating elements of surprise and trickery to amaze and impress the guests. Almost invariable, music was an integral part of the *entremets*, which were the product of the kitchen [though they were designed by professional artists], elaborated under the charge of the head cook...For the banquets of the 16th century, however, the *entremets* had undergone a transformation. The culinary and the theatrical elements separated. The *entremets* as spectacle became almost purely theatrical (music, mime, dance, and acrobatics can all be subsumed under the heading of theatre), leaving the cooks free to devote all their skills to the culinary art, the visual display. (Santich 1990:110)

One reason for this development in France, she suggests, is the development of greater technical proficiency in the culinary arts and the movement north of Italian banquet traditions. In Santich's view, "[a]s a total art-form, the banquet probably reached its apogee in the 17th century, when Louis XIV entertained at Versailles" and with Inigo Jones's Banqueting House in Whitehall, which "was more important as a theatrical setting for court masques than for feasts" (111). *Les plaisirs de l'isle enchantée*, in the spring of 1664, was the first and perhaps best remembered of Louis the XIV's *grand fêtes*, thanks to the engravings by Israël Silvestre.

According to Barbara Wheaton, the record is generally "silent on the details of banquet menus" in France, though these events were lavishly documented in engravings and accompanying text, which listed many of the foods on the table (Wheaton 1983:42). Perhaps food was so fused with spectacle that the images and accounts that remain of the edible allegorical tableaux are the playbill and menu in one. Consistent with evidence from the Middle Ages, these commemorative documents say more about what food looked like than how it tasted. Visual effects, rarity of ingredients, opulence, and the sequence of events, Wheaton suggests, were more important than the dishes, their ingredients, preparation, or flavors. Indeed, flavor might even be compromised for the sake of appearance (15,49). And, for good reason.

These were monumental events, viewed from a distance by crowds of people over many hours. Flavor cannot be witnessed. Appearance can. Flavor is momentary. Appearance endures. The operating principle, "for show," required that appearance dominate, as did the emphasis on a legible (edible) visual language of emblems and signs. This was, one might say, a cuisine of signs, a world made edible. It was discursive food addressed to the senses. It was food to be seen, touched, inhaled, ingested, absorbed, and embodied—not only as substance, but also as meaning.<sup>5</sup> It was made to disappear, if not down the hatch, then pillaged at the end of the meal. Wanton destruction was the height of luxury, a dramatic gesture of conspicuous consumption. A surfeit of labor, skill, and material, expressed clearly in visual excess, surpassed the limits of appetite, which is otherwise relatively quick to be satiated. The fugitive nature of food is perfectly suited to such stagings.

### *Repas en Ambigus*

Banquets were important to court life and continued into the Baroque period, a feature of which is the transferability of devices from the stage to the dining room. The *repas en ambigu* (an elaborate formal composition of dishes laid out in a room), which was fashionable in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century could, "in instances of particular luxury...transform the whole dining room into culinary theater"(el-Khoury 1997:58). As Rodolphe el-Khoury explains:

In the "ambigu", the temporal succession of multiple courses is thus eliminated in favor of the visual effect of a unified tableau. Such meals are composed as a spectacle for the eyes and do not necessarily involve an oral consumption of food: "the pleasure of seeing them is greater than that of touching them" states L.S.R.... The "surtout de table," the central element of the "ambigu", is often directly transposed from the stage set of the theater and is obviously not meant for oral consumption. (el-Khoury 1997:58)<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the *repas en ambigu* is a one-act play: "it seeks the utmost impact in the first glance; it attempts to embrace the entire range of possibilities in a single scene" (quoted by el-Khoury 1997:60, from Stewart 1985). Not surprising, then, that the *repas en ambigu* was not only theatrical in its own right, but also lent "its name to a series of plays and in 1769, to a theater specializing in the genre," according to Philip Stewart (quoted by el-Khoury 1997:62, from Stewart 1985:89).

A startling contemporary example of the convergence of table and stage—with an uncanny affinity with the *tables volantes* or *tables machinées* in 17<sup>th</sup> century France—occurs in *Arbeit macht frei vom Toitland Europa*, which I saw the Acco Theatre Centre perform in Haifa in 1996.<sup>7</sup> In this environmental performance, there is a point where the audience is ushered into a low-ceilinged room and seated on benches around its perimeter. Suddenly, an enormous table drops down from the ceiling, as if from nowhere, and we are pressed to eat delicious food, which we do, as the actors barrage us with violent language and painful "topics of conversation." Suddenly, the table is hoisted up and disappears. Compare this scene with a 17<sup>th</sup>-century proposal for a flying table, which could be:

lifted all at once by a machine in such a way that the surface of the table, the frame as well as its attachments, is composed by a section of the raised floor...When the guests enter the dining room, there is not the least sign of a table; all that can be seen is a uniform floor that is adorned by a rose at its center. At the slightest nod, the leaves are retracted under the floor, and a table laden with food makes its sudden ascent, flanked by four servants emerging through the four openings.(el-Khoury 1997:62, citing Bonnet in Grimod de La Reynière, Alexandre-Balthazar-Laurent, and Bonnet 1978:64-65)

In another instance, the table disappeared into the basement and a new one descended with the next course (el-Khoury 1997:60). The spectacle was not however solely for the pleasure of the diners, for their delight was a spectacle in its own right and royal banquets might include places for spectators. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we can find the elaboration of an explicitly theatrical gastronomy: "The dining-room is a theatre wherein the kitchen serves as the wings and the table as the stage. This theater requires equipment, this stage needs a décor, this kitchen needs a plot" (Aron 1975:214, citing Chantillon-Plessis 1894).

### *Culinary Theater*

With the French Revolution, but already before it, such courtly practices as the banquet were supplanted by new forms of festivity, as Mona Ozouf (1988) has shown, and new forms of sociability, for which Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1971, first published in 1825) provides a manual. With the weakening of guilds, proliferation of free-lance cooks, the professionalizing of chefs, and the emergence of restaurants, food becomes part of a different mode of sociality, one that is more intimate and better suited to focused attention on the nuances of taste.<sup>8</sup> The restaurant emerges as the dedicated space of food theater—"Traditionally, the menu has been a kind of playbill, varying with the theme of the drama" (Patton 1998). About his recent design for a Houston nightclub on the theme of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Jordan Mozer said, "What better metaphor for a restaurateur than the magician—or the playwright—who uses his art to transform other people's lives in the span of three hours?" (quoted in Henderson 1992:70) Mozer's circular radial plan "suggests the island upon which the play takes place" (Henderson 1992:70). The circular dance floor and skylight and the architectural twists and tilts evoke a windswept island, eye of a storm, and magic circle. Of his design for Kachina, in Los Angeles, David Kellen said, "I didn't want it to be just a specialty restaurant, but more like an abstract stage for a play set in the southwest"(quoted in Richards 1992:76). These restaurants are overtly theatrical in their staging of another time and place. They provide a setting, an ambience, and a script for social encounters that can involve food, drink, conversation, music, and dance.

Self-consciously theatrical restaurants heighten the already staged nature of public eating places. Some clearly demarcate the front and back regions, with serene dining rooms out front and industrial kitchens in back (see Goffman 1959 and MacCannell 1976). Others bring the back region of the performing kitchen forward and restage it as a back region. Artisanal techniques are specially suited to staging and are frequently visible from the street or dining room of even ordinary restaurants. The pizza maker rolls and twirls the dough in a window facing the street. The brick pizza oven may be visible from the dining room. The Indian chef slaps *naan* against the hot interior walls of a tandoori oven within a glass room looking out onto the dining room of an upscale restaurant. At Honmura An, an upscale Japanese restaurant in Manhattan, diners can watch a chef making their soba noodles in a glass cube within an elegant dining room lined with teak. Chinese cooks wield their choppers on glazed ducks and whole roasted pigs next to the cash register. Working at a long counter, the deli man slices hot pastrami and piles it high between slices of fresh rye bread, offering tidbits to customers in hope of a tip. Sushi chefs trim the glistening fish, pat the rice into neat ovals, and artfully arrange a platter before the diners seated at the bar before him. Diners walk past their dinner swimming in fish tanks lining the entrance to seafood restaurants, in which case it is the food itself that might be said to perform.

*Maitre d's* understand their dining rooms and chefs their kitchens as performances. Roger Fessaguet, former chef-owner of La Caravelle Restaurant in Manhattan, which closed in 2004, after 43 years in business, describes himself as a conductor and his kitchen as an orchestra, with sections paralleling the strings, wind instruments, and drums.<sup>9</sup> He is describing the experience of working in a particular type of kitchen, one that was developed by Georges Auguste Escoffier (1847-1935) to organize what were then the new large hotel restaurants. They had to produce many different meals quickly, while maintaining high quality. Escoffier was inspired, not by

the orchestra, but by the rational techniques of mass production and the divisions of labor associated with the factory. Rather than have one person make one dish from start to finish, in the manner of a traditional craftsman, Escoffier segmented the various tasks and organized a division of labor in the kitchen and interdependence among workers grouped according to type of operation, rather than type of dish. Stephen Mennell compares the two approaches with respect to one dish, *oeufs à la plat Meyerbeer*: "Under the old system, it would have taken a single cook about fifteen minutes to prepare in its entirety; under the new, the eggs were cooked by the *entremettier* [department responsible for soups, vegetables, and desserts], kidney grilled by the *rôtisseur*, and truffle sauce prepared by the *saucier*, and the whole assembled in a only a few minutes" (Mennell 1985:159). While the arrangement is efficient, it makes for a particular kind of cooking experience.

Fessaguet's characterization is meant to capture the intensity, focus, split-second timing, and extraordinary coordination required to complete innumerable dishes, each of them made of up of many components, in ever changing combinations and sequences, so that each table in a room of many tables may be served what it has ordered for a particular course all at the same time, at the right temperature. Not only stringent quality standards but also grace under pressure must be maintained under these demanding conditions. Indeed, this consummate performance must appear effortless. Or rather, effort must be carefully staged and performed as a marker of the value of the meal and the experience. Fessaguet's orchestra metaphor—he literally "conducts" the kitchen—clearly envisions cooking process as a performance. When everything is working, the kitchen is an ensemble performance improvising on a scenario. The diners get a three or four act play, each table its own performance, complete with program notes or menu. For the staff, the whole evening has a rhythm and a dramatic structure.

Timing is critical to the sensory character of food and more specifically to the interaction of the thermal, haptic, and alchemic. More than a tuning of the instruments or warming up of the performers, the kitchen runs on multiple clocks. Those clocks are set to the conditions of light, heat, cold, air, and agitation that produce wine, vinegar, pickles, olives, cheese, bread, sauces, roasts, over years, months, days, minutes, and split seconds. Freshly picked corn must rich boiled water so quickly that should one trip on the way from the field to the pot, the corn will arrive too late, so it is said.

Timing becomes performative in a distinctive way the closer the food comes to the diner, the more precipitous the moment twixt the cup and the lip, the smaller the temporal window. It is reported that Escoffier was preparing individual dessert soufflés for 100 guests at a state dinner. The after dinner speeches went on longer than expected and there was no clear indication of when they would end. So that the soufflés would be ready at the exact time the speeches were finished, Escoffier began baking off 100 of them every three minutes until the speakers were done (Lang 1980:93-94).<sup>10</sup> Only the last 100 were taken to the table. So important is timing, that "[a]s Madame de Sévigné recounted in a celebrated letter, Vatel [the *officier de bouche* of the Prince de Condé during the 18<sup>th</sup> century] killed himself because provisions on which he was counting did not arrive in time"(Revel 1982:191). He had been counting on fresh fish from Boulogne for a dinner planned for the king and "if he had not committed suicide, he would have been put to death by either the *officier de cuisine* or the master of the household" (191).

Restaurant kitchens are fascinating to watch and some restaurants put them on display. Display kitchens, according to Lee Simon, create the perception that the cuisine

is of higher quality, the preparation more careful, and the food safer, but above all provide “an element of theater” (Simon 2004, part 1) However, not all kitchen functions are “appetizing” and washing and garbage areas are not likely to be included in the display. Simon explains that designing a display kitchen should take into account the visual impact of “layers of activity,” whether in the form of equipment that is always going (rotisseries, ovens, broilers) or strategically located stations, the kinds of view afforded from the dining room, and flow (smooth rather than chaotic interaction of kitchen staff and servers) (Simon 2004, part 2).

A “display kitchen” is the centerpiece of Brentwood Bar and Grill in Los Angeles. According to an industry magazine, “culinary theater at Brentwood is packing the house”(*Foodservice Equipment and Supplies Specialist*, 1990:57). What kind of theater it is it? It is a classic example of what happens when performance, in the sense of doing, is a show. The key to this form of culinary theater is the exhibition value of labor that has been staged in a transparent workspace. Brentwood Bar and Grill does not just have a kitchen. It has “[a] truly dazzling display kitchen with a Waldorf-style cooking line [that] showcases culinary talent as entertainment”(57). One kitchen consultant explicitly likens this kitchen to theater and ballet. While this kitchen offers a work environment that is at once functional, social, and comfortable, an industry magazine says of the Waldorf-type line: “Primary, of course, is its display value”(58). Indeed, true to the etymology of theater, from Greek terms for watching and viewing, this kind of culinary theater converts performance, in the sense of doing, into theater, that is, into an exhibition of itself. This restaurant, which caters to movie industry crowds, has become a place for the “beautiful people...to see and be seen, to watch and eat” (57). Thanks to the design, they can look through glass partitions from the bar and see into the dining room as well as into the open kitchen. That kitchen has been created in line with the principle of “full-exhibition design”(58). It has, in a word, been staged for viewing. As reviewers have noted, “Cooking-themed theater productions are all the rage, but nothing compares to the drama of a bustling open kitchen at a real restaurant. Plus, you get to eat the props” (Rausfeld and Patronite 2004). A prized table is the one within the restaurant kitchen itself, whether in the open or in its own glass room, with food preparation visible on all sides.

While table-side cooking has long been a feature of classic French restaurants—the waiter finishes the dish in the dining room—chefs are also moving out of the kitchen to cook in the dining room. What they call “exhibition cooking” expands the dining experience to include the sensory pleasures associated with cooking by exhibiting it. Emil Cerno Jr., the chef at Richardson-Vicks in Connecticut, prepared stir fry in the dining room in a wok on a gas flambé range. Patrons chose their ingredients, which he prepared with aromatic “walnut or sesame oil so it smells good, and you hear the sizzle when the meat hits the oil. It looks good, smells good, sounds good and tastes good” (*Restaurants and Institutions*, 1990:A-232).

This is however cooking in the dining room not eating in the kitchen: the meat that will go into the wok is presented in decorative cups of kale leaves, “so the presentation is nice” (A-232). Chefs become “exhibitionists,” according to an industry magazine: “Customers are treated to a show in dining rooms as chefs cook a variety of food in front of them” (A-230). Note the terminology of *showing*, which suggests that doing has become demonstrating, and *exhibitionism*, which suggests a certain excess in displaying what would normally just get done. While “exhibition cooking” does produce food that patrons will eat, preparing food in the dining room before their very eyes also

"gives chefs a chance to get out of the kitchen and meet their customers while giving customers opportunities to see their food freshly made" and to order (A-230). "Freshly made" is both an issue and an illusion: the omelets, for example, are made in advance and filled to order. In other words, even the idea of "freshly made" must be signified. It is not simply performed, in the sense of carrying out an action. It is show business, literally.

Exhibition cooking differs from the display kitchen. Not only does it occur outside the kitchen, but also it is staged differently—from the aesthetic *mise-en-place* on a steam table to such specialized equipment as the butane gas burner or the enormous griddle in Mongolian barbecue restaurants. Moreover, some dishes are considered showier than others or better suited for exhibition, including the sushi bar, raw oyster bar, crepes, large roasts, and, of course, stir fry. Anything that can be completed from start to finish in a relatively short period of time is a candidate, particularly if the process involves a visible transformation. The process itself provides the dramatic structure. As one chef observed: "Tossing salads and cooking to order are show times for us, and it's good customer contact" (*Restaurants and Institutions* 1990:A-234).<sup>11</sup>

Entire scenes form around a particular food (pizzeria, steakhouse, pancake house, creperie, bagelry, crab house, lobster palace, and clam bar) or beverage (coffee shop, tea house, soda fountain, juice bar, milk bar, gin palace, tap room, wine bar, cocktail lounge, and beer garden). These scenes are distinguished by their architecture, décor, ambience, social style, equipage, schedule, music, fashion, and cuisine, and by the close attention paid to the details of the provisioning, preparation, presentation, and consumption of the defining food or drink.

Describing his career as a bartender since the early 1970s, Dale DeGroff had to learn finesse and showmanship. "The bar is a stage," he said. "The curtain goes up, the spotlight is on you and you perform" [Grimes 1991:C1]. What does the patron see? "When shaking a cocktail, [DeGroff] counts a slow 10 times and works his silver shaker hard, alternating between a graceful over-the-shoulder flourish and a front-of-the-body maraca-style move" (Grimes 1991:C1). His sense of vocation is expressed in a strong sense of pride in the history and tradition of the cocktail. The bar may be a stage, but it is also a kind of museum: DeGroff characterizes the saloons of New York as "a natural resource, like the redwoods in California...I like to think of myself as a forest ranger" (Grimes 1991:C1). Wherever there are mixtures (cocktails, chili, bouillabaisse) or fermentation (wine, beer, cheese, olives) or varieties, whether by virtue of species or processing (coffee, tea), there is a wide berth for connoisseurship. Small variations form a kind of foodprint or signature by which a particular bartender or chili maker can be identified, and devotees will gather themselves around their favorite provisioner.

The cocktail, more than the other examples cited here, lends itself to fantastic elaborations. To be found at Asia de Cuba in the East Village of Manhattan, in 1998, is the Tiki Puka Puka, "a two-fisted, three-person \$18 libation served in what Trader Vic's used to call a volcano bowl. Ringed with dancing hula girls, a miniature Krakatoa rising from the middle, this ceramic vessel could double as a South Seas tureen" (DeCaro 1998). The drink itself is made with rum, Cointreau, lime and tropical fruit juices, and "garnished with two umbrellas, three 16-inch straws, four cherries, six chunks of pineapple and a crushed-ice snowball doused in grenadine and 151-proof rum" (DeCaro 1998). The event—the performance, if you will—is the cocktail, fully staged in its own volcano bowl. It is a performing object and reminder, on a small scale, of the sotelties, *surtouts*, and conceits that surprised and amazed guests at the Renaissance banquets

discussed above. Frank DeCaro relates the scene represented by this drink to the loungecore movement—"it is the latest craze among the post-neo-Rat-Pack hipsters"—and a resurgence of interest in Tiki culture. Just ten years earlier, Donald Trump closed the motherlode of Tiki culture, Trader Vic's, which had been at the Plaza in Manhattan for about twenty-five years. It had "gotten tacky" and Trump considered a health club and restaurant featuring Chinese and Japanese cuisine more in keeping with the image of the hotel (n.a. 1989).

Under the banner of the Cocktail Nation, the cocktail has also become a rallying point for a stylishly oppositional subculture of the swank and fabulous that is part retro, part Queer, and part mystique.<sup>12</sup> According to Joseph Lanza, "The cult of the cocktail is a successful religious ceremony transformed into a secular rite. The bartender is the high priest, the drink is the sacramental cup, and the cocktail lounge is akin to a temple or cathedral that uses lights, music, and even ceiling fixtures to reinforce moods of comfort and inspiration" (Lanza 1995:74). While DeGroff offers showmanship in the execution of his duties as a barman, Lanza is characterizing the social performance of the lounge and its intense ritualization. The language of cult and sacrament suggests not so much the Mass as the Dionysian orgy, a theme expressed more explicitly in drinks that fall under the heading "Blush on the Rocks" (Hess 1998).<sup>13</sup>

Both are attuned to the role of these sites as third places, which Ray Oldenburg (1989) defines as places of sociability that are neither home nor work. The founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, recognized that "The tap-room in many cases is the poor man's only parlor. Many a man takes to beer not for the love of beer, but for the natural craving for the light, warmth, company, and comfort which is thrown in along with the beer, and which he cannot get excepting by buying beer" (Booth 1890: part 1, chapter 6). Until reformers could compete with the social attractions of the tap-room, he explained, they would not succeed in getting rid of the place and the drinking associated with it. So defining is the conviviality of the café that cybercafés have proliferated online and offline.

Even the word cybercafé has entered the dictionary, the 1997 *Microsoft®Bookshelf®Computer and Internet Dictionary*© to be precise. This dictionary defines cybercafé first, as a coffee shop or restaurant that provides both Internet access and food and drink, and second, as "[a] virtual café on the Internet, generally used for social purposes," using a chat program, newsgroup, or Web site (see Schumacher 1998). While the Internet allows one to enlarge the social world to which one has access from the phenomenal café, the virtual café, which is entirely online, is strictly about conviviality. And, though it borrows many of the conventions of the café, the online cybercafé cannot supply coffee. What it can supply is the kind of conversation one might expect over coffee. Not surprisingly, cafés have Web sites and a cybercafé may will operate both on and offline. In a related development, the café is both the name and the model for web sites and listservs associated with scenes (Café Los Negroes, NYC, is "New York's black and latino virtual hangout") and zines (Café Blue) and magazines (*Atomic Café*, now a webzine).<sup>14</sup>

### ***Food in the Theater***<sup>15</sup>

Commenting on the preponderance of food on the stage during the 1989 theater season in New York, Mel Gussow remarked:

The obsession reflects the interests of a public that is captivated by the theatricality of the dining experience, by designer restaurants where presentation is as important as the food. People demand sizzle in their fajitas—show business for the money. In the theater, it may be an attempt to win back an audience that prefers to spend its entertainment dollar (of \$100) eating rather than watching. Both "Tamara" and "Tony 'n Tina's Wedding" capture two segments of the population by serving dinner along with drama. In the other examples of theater of food, the theatergoer becomes a voyeur, Only the aroma passes his way [if that]. (1989:5)<sup>16</sup>

Gussow cites the grouper tortellini in Richard Greenberg's *Eastern Standard* and the swordfish without butter in Wendy Wasserstein's *Heidi Chronicles*. Scenes are set in trendy cafés, dingy coffee shops, Chinese restaurants, and bars. Characters are waiters, diners, *maitre d's* and chefs. While cocktails are prevalent in plays about WASP society, "[a]lmost every play at the Pan Asian Repertory Theater has an obligatory eating scene, and on every opening night there is a Pan Asian banquet in the lobby"(9). Gussow even posits a "Hall of Fame for Food on Stage," to include cornflakes from Harold Pinter's "The Birthday Party"(9). He might have added the carcass from André Antoine's 1888 production of Fernand Icre's *The Butchers*. In what was a radical practice at the time, Antoine's Théâtre Libre, in Paris, was famous for using real properties, when possible, for the most realistic effect (Brockett and Findlay 1973:91).

But what exactly are the actors on stage eating? And, under what conditions? For George Furth's "Precious Sons," Anthony Rapp had to down a mound of scrambled eggs that were really "a cold, gooey mixture of gelatin, pineapple juice and yogurt. What's more, he has to look as if he is enjoying a nice warm breakfast" (Bennetts 1986). In other words, this brand of verisimilitude demands that he really eat, but not that he really eat scrambled eggs, and that he fake the indicators of sensory response (only he knows whether the eggs are hot or cold). The act of eating—not the substance and not its sensory qualities (except for appearance)—must be convincing. The theatrical sign is indeed arbitrary. All that is required is that the food look like what it is supposed to be and that the actor be able to swallow it, a challenge in itself. Actors are asked to endure fake shrimp ("stale Wonder Bread cut to look like shrimp and painted with food coloring") and cold meat with cold, canned gravy (Bennetts 1986). They often consume what they are served under demanding conditions—under high speed, in large volume, or while doing something else. They must eat on cue whether or not they are hungry and no matter what the food is or tastes like. Is such food, which is surely more unpleasant than necessary, a test of their professional mettle?

In the case of expensive foods like shrimp and caviar, the need for substitutions are understandable, particularly when vast quantities are called for—150 gallons of caviar for *Saturday Night Live*—and very little if any of it may be eaten. Moreover, some skits call for foods that would challenge the most intrepid of actors—eyeballs on baked potatoes or a neon-blue fish—for these are first and foremost props. Tony Ciolini, a professional restaurant chef who created food props for *Saturday Night Live* in the 1980s, made the "caviar" from 40 pounds of tapioca colored with burnt caramel (22 pounds of sugar) and the eyeballs (for a Halloween skit) from mozzarella and black olives (Collins 1990:6). Food may also fill in for other substances: in response to "the request for something to accessorize the show's Flab-o-Suction machine, a liposuction device for movie stars," Ciolini and the crew thought of "using 10 pounds of custard for the suctioned flab" (6). The qualities valued here are not only the look, but also the

consistency of the food, for these props have to perform in their own right. Pork chops were blackened and frozen so they would respond like hockey pucks in a sketch featuring Wayne Gretzky, the hockey star: "he was playing a busboy who like to clear tables with a hockey stick" (6).

Whereas these props operate outside the body, the circus, sideshow, and magic show provide a rich repertoire of stunts that challenge the body to incorporate and eject such foreign things and substances as light bulbs, swords, live animals, and fire. In juggler Penn Jillette's apple routine "he eats 100 needles stuck into an apple; then he eats a length of thread; then he eats the apple, swallowing ostentatiously—and then pulls out of his mouth several yards of meticulously threaded needles" (Bennetts 1986). In contrast with the faux foods made as props for the stage, Jillette uses actual apples and stages the sleight of hand itself. Functions of the hand—threading a needle—are displaced to the body's interior. The body's portal, normally a barrier to "foreign" objects is violated, with impunity. There is easy, if magical, movement in and out of the mouth. Reversing the normal process of eating, what comes out of the mouth is not only intact, but in better condition (the needle is threaded) than when it went in. The body's interior has the quality of chamber, the limbs retracted, where needles can be threaded, swords enter and leave, fire disappear.

Inspired by vaudeville and performance art, Blue Man Group does a send-up of art making and the art world by making a mess that becomes a painting. Their performances have been described as "an opportunity to regress," an "all-out sensory assault," and as bringing "an element of untrammelled infantile sensuality" into the theater (Frank Rich quoted by Hubbard 1992; Leonard 1997; Goldberg 1991). Blue Man (actually three men, heads shaved and painted cobalt blue, act in concert) is a humanoid from "inner space" that his creators picture as "having been born off a painting, being this moist gooey thing" (Leonard 1997; Hubbard 1992). Matt Goldman, Phil Stanton, and Chris Wink, who invented and often perform Blue Man, yearn for the community and communication that they identify with the salon and try to *blesh* (a science fiction term for blend and mesh) with their audience. If you sit in the first few rows, it will be under a sheet of plastic to protect you from the mess that flies in all directions. Blue Man "wades into the audience more than once, and in the ecstatic finale dances on the armrests of the spectators' seats," while the entire space of the theater is filled with pulsating sound, throbbing strobe lights, and paper streaming down on the audience (Goldberg 1991). Blue Man also invites audience members to come up onto the stage, share the "feast," become painting tools or musical instruments, and subject themselves to the food assault.

With backgrounds in business, catering, art, and theater, the creators of Blue Man group draw on everything they have learned, and then some. *Tubes*, which opened at Astor Theatre in Manhattan in 1991, is appropriately named, for they use tubes from industrial food processing, gardening hoses and their fittings, and insecticide spray cans to fling, splatter, splash, spritz, and extrude food and paint with the force and trajectory of projectile vomit. Using sixty pounds of bananas, enough jello for a seventy-pound mold, and many marshmallows and Twinkies in each performance (Goldberg 1991; Hubbard 1992), they "perform a symphony for teeth and Captain Crunch cereal, squirt snakes of banana from their chests and catch paint-filled gum balls in their mouths, among other stunts" (Hubbard 1992). This is extravenous performance. Substances are propelled through tubes that exit from the body to land where they will.

Such acts confound the boundaries of the body and the limits on what can go into and come out of it. This body's mouth is directly connected to the anus, with neither stomach nor guts in between. Indeed, the two orifices are interchangeable, for the anus is displaced to the mouth, which both ingests and excretes, as well as to other parts of the body and clothing, which exude surprising substances. This is visceral performance without viscera. This is dirt as defined by Mary Douglas as "matter out of place," in her appropriately titled essay "Secular Defilement" (Douglas 1966:36).

In contrast with food as substance, as a plastic material equivalent to paint, food becomes a character in its own right in musical revues of the 1920s that featured anthropomorphized fruits, vegetables, chickens, pastries, and every drink from Coca Cola and sarsaparilla, to Chianti and a Manhattan cocktail (for a number entitled "I'm a Great Little Mixer")(Hirsch 1987: 298).<sup>17</sup> Showgirls in food costumes were the dishes at lavish feasts and the ingredients for a "Follies Salad"—"Oil was slinky, draped in a very glossy one-shouldered satin gown, which fell in rivers onto the stage" (294). Erté designed the vegetable costumes for a ballet number in "Scandals" (1926)—"Potato had only small potatoes covering her breasts" (295). The "Music Box Revue" (1921) animated all the elements of the "Dining Out" scene, including the oysters, chicken, various vegetables, salt and pepper, pastry, demi-tasses, and "at the end of this costumed meal, a showgirl portrayed A Cigar and another The Check, and eight chorus girls were dressed as The Tip" (296). Chorus girls dressed as chocolates and peppermint sticks popped out of a big candy box in the number "Winter Garden Sweets" in "Doing Our Bit" (1917), while "Showgirls dressed as candles topped a cake formed by a single satin skirt in 'Just Sweet Sixteen' in the *Greenwich Village Follies* (1920)" (297). These edible women—the play on food and sex is fundamental to the enterprise—reverse the direction of food as a performing object. Here it is the showgirl (and the occasional male performer) that is made into an object for eating, but in the absence of actual food.<sup>18</sup>

Some theater ensembles have made food an integral part of all their performances. Bread and Puppet distribute bread at their performances, while Great Small Works hold a monthly spaghetti dinner, followed by performances (see Chang 1998). They neither script the meal or bread, as the case may be, into the play, nor do they offer a show to go with dinner. Rather, food is kept simple and elemental, abundant and cheap. The staples —homemade bread, pasta—are the basis for transforming an audience into a community, by breaking bread and eating together. As these groups establish a regular audience, a sense of community develops through shared experience over the course of many years. It is through commensality, more than cuisine, that these artists are redefining the nature and meaning of theater.

*Bread*, a 1984 Bread and Puppet manifesto in the form of a recipe, opens with a long dictionary definition of "bread" from Funk & Wagnall's *New Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (1937, 1976). Bread is not only "an article of food," but also "food in general; also, the necessities of life; as, he cannot earn *bread* for his family"(Schumann 1984: unpaginated). The meanings and usages ramify to include—"to break bread," as in taking a meal or enjoying hospitality, and "to partake of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper." Peter Schumann draws on his childhood memories in Silesia for images of coarse rye bread baked in a communal oven. "Why bread?" he asks rhetorically—"In 1963 in a loft on Delancey Street in New York, as a normal frustrated city-artist and esoteric puppet show-maker, I decided to connect the bread with the puppets" (Schumann 1984: unpaginated). This connection made the actual puppet shows more "purposeful" and less about "painterly and sculptural ambitions." It "seemed like a

correct first step in the fight for the immediate elimination of all evil" (Schumann 1984: unpaginated). Both "feed the hungry." *Bread* concludes with a list of aphorisms about bread and a "tentative recipe" for sourdough rye bread (Schumann 1984: unpaginated).

### *Contemporary Opera Gastronomica*

In *Feeding Frenzy*, cooking is an integral part of the musical score.<sup>19</sup> In precisely 90 minutes, each of four cooks prepares ten portions of ten courses. The amplified sounds of chopping, sizzling, steaming, and grinding are part of "an instructional, time delineated score," performed by four musicians on strings, reeds, pipa, and keyboard. Mr. Fast Forward's "sculptural approach to creating sound" ties the sound of the objects, substances, and processes of cooking to "the physical gesture that creates the sound" (Forward 1999). We not only see the cooks. We also hear them.

The entire room is projected onto a large screen from two video cameras that roam the space, settling for a moment on the stir-frying, the plucking of pipa strings, guests eating, waiters rushing about. Washing over us are the slow, low resolution, and sometimes overlapping, video images, together with waves of music, noise, and chatter. I feel like a large ocean mammal, drifting in a vast dark sea of ambient sound, smells, and images. All of a sudden, a cook whacks a bell with a knife. A course is ready. Five waiters collect the servings and randomly serve them to us. We are seated at about twenty-five round tables for four. My senses are on the alert as a new course comes into view. Will the waiter choose our table for the margarita rolls (frozen cylinders of margarita wrapped in Vietnamese rice sheets)? Will the mushroom matzo balls or tea-smoked bean curd skin "duck" come our way? Who will get the *crème brûlée* in individual Chinese soup spoons (the sugary surface is torched on the spot) or the Berber *seitán*, rice ball geology lesson, or poached pear in kaffir broth? Time is running out. The cooks are frantic. A large digital display at the back of the room, sometimes projected on the screen, counts down the minutes. Zero. Everything stops.

Following Escoffier, Fessaguet's kitchen must complete innumerable dishes, each of them made of up of many components, in ever changing combinations and sequences, so that each table in a room of many tables may be served what it has ordered for a particular course all at the same time, at the right temperature. Forward departs from the principles of Escoffier's kitchen in two ways. First, Forward reverses the division of labor typical of the Escoffier kitchen. Each of Forward's cooks prepares each dish from start to finish and in an average of nine minutes. Second, Forward shifts the choice of what will be eaten from the diner to the waiter. What you are served is arbitrary.

*Feeding Frenzy* is a work that is conceived from the outset in such a way that food—its preparation, presentation, and consumption and its full range of sensory pleasures—is an integral part of the work. While very different in character, the same can be said of the edible installations of Alicia Rios, who is based in Madrid.<sup>20</sup>

While food in everyday life is very much about doing and behaving, the reciprocity of table and stage has a long history. One of the ways that food is made to perform is through the dissociation of food from eating and eating from nutrition, and the disarticulation of the various sensory experiences associated with food. Artists work not only with these possibilities, but also the processes associated with food as substance and food as event. And they do so all points along the alimentary canal, from the mouth to the anus, and at all points in the food system, from foraging and cultivating to cooking,

eating, and disposal. Because of the way it engages the senses, food offers particular challenges and opportunities for artists, both those interested in spectacular theatrical effects, and those working on the line between art and life.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a companion piece to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999, which deals more fully with food in everyday life and in relation to performance art. The focus here is on the staging of food in restaurants and theaters.

<sup>2</sup> According to Graham Pont (1990:123-124), the term *opera gastronomica* "was first used in the title of the musical banquet, *Les goûts réunis* or *Apollo in the Antipodes: opera gastronomica in tre atti*. This was the celebration which concluded the Fourth David Nichol Smith Memorial Seminar in 18<sup>th</sup>- Century Studies and the First National Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia, held at University House, Canberra, 31<sup>st</sup> August, 1976."

<sup>3</sup> See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1990 for a more detailed discussion of this event. I have been attending the Purim festivities in the Bobover Hasidic community in Boro Park, Brooklyn, since 1973. See also Epstein 1979.

<sup>4</sup> See Toepfer 1991.

<sup>5</sup> See the chapter "Feasting, Fasting, and Timely Atonement," in Schama 1988, for a discussion of the role of food in festivity in Holland. Food iconography in Dutch art reveals a richly iconographic language of moral discourse and visual conventions for conveying the sensory experiences of eating.

<sup>6</sup> A particularly famous example is the *surtout* that displayed scenes from the *Opéra de Bardes*, described in 1808 by Grimod de La Reynière in *Almanach des gourmands* (el-Khoury 1997:58).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of this play see Rokem 2000:56-76.

<sup>8</sup> On the history of the restaurant in France, see Spang 2000. On the professionalizing of French chefs, see Trubek 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Fessaguet, personal communication, 1989. See also the documentary film of La Caravelle Restaurant (Cox 1969). This fifteen-minute film focuses on the motion and tempo of the kitchen when it is in full swing.

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Mitchell Davis for alerting me to this anecdote and to Robin Leach for the citation.

<sup>11</sup> This of course is in a long tradition of street food vendors and food stalls in markets, which predates the relatively recent advent of restaurants. For an excellent example of spectacular cooking performance in an open market, see Skip Blumberg's 1985 documentary short *Flying Morning Glory (on fire)*, which celebrates the "flaming 'cuisine art' performance of a virtuoso sidewalk chef in Phitsanulok, Thailand." (Electronic Arts Intermix, <http://www.eai.org/eai/tape.jsp?itemID=3079>. Last accessed February 7, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> This discussion is inspired by McKewan 1998. See also Hess 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Judging by the names of some drinks, the cult of the cocktail includes a libertine (if not adolescent) element. Hess (1998), under the heading "Blush on the Rocks," lists Orgasm, Slippery Nipple, and Blow Job. Under "Shooters," which are appreciated "for the visual effect that they impart," he includes Brain Hemorrhage, Cement Mixer, Cum in a Hot Tub, and Embryo.

<sup>14</sup> Café Los Negroes <http://www.losnegroes.com/> began in 1994 and closed in 2000; *Atomic Café* <http://www.sfn.saskatoon.sk.ca/current/atomic/about.html> (last accessed 7 February 2005).

<sup>15</sup> While food in films has attracted considerable attention, much less has been written about food in theater. On food in film, see Bower 2004, Ferry 2003, and [Handman] 1996. Poole 1999, who is a scholar and actor, deals food in film and theater.

<sup>16</sup> Since Gussow's article, many more theatrical works have made food—cooking, eating, restaurants—their focus, to mention only *Fully Committed*, *Cookin'*, which was developed in Korea in 1997 and playing in New York City as of this writing (<http://www.cookinnewyork.com/> Last accessed 7 February 2005), and *Esn: Songs from the Kitchen*, a klezmer music performance that includes cooking, which features Frank London, Adrienne Cooper and Lorin Sklamberg (see Pfferman 2001).

<sup>17</sup> This account is based on Hirsch 1987.

<sup>18</sup> In contrast with food on the stage, dinner theatre captures two market segments, diners and theatre goers, by combining dinner and theatre in various ways. Eating can occur before, after, during, or as part of the performance. The two activities may be in separate spaces or both may

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occur in a theatre or in a restaurant. Obvious examples include dinner theatre, recreations of historic feasts, character dining, murder mystery dinners, and such theatrical restaurants as Lucky Cheng's and such environmental performances as *Tim and Tina's Wedding*. In addition, restaurants play an important role in the occupational culture of the entertainment district, not only as place to network and do business, but also to celebrate. Sardi's and Elaine's in New York are but two examples. These topics are beyond the scope of the present essay.

<sup>19</sup> I saw this performance at The Kitchen, a Manhattan performance space and laboratory for artistic experimentation, in February 2000 and first wrote about it in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2000.

<sup>20</sup> On Rios, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1997. For other examples, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Warm thanks to Anurima Banerji, Sally Banes, Mitchell Davis, and Chava Weissler.