

HUNGRY FOR GENERATIONS

The Big Meal at Oregon Contemporary Theatre is full of dynamic performances

Dan LeFranc's quickly dives into a chaotic script with his play, *The Big Meal*, which features an otherwise mellow plot. Two young lovebirds meet and begin the dance of a relationship, sparking a tale that unfolds over the next five generations — all at the same restaurant table.

The play had its off-Broadway world premiere at the American Theater Company in Chicago back in 2011. The character's multi-generational stories unravel around the crucible that is the American dinner table, and director Brian Haimbach brings it to life at Oregon Contemporary Theatre.

I found myself straining to connect with the character's dilemmas and milestones, so I must start with a disclaimer: If you haven't been a part of a well-off nuclear family unit, you may miss a few beats and wind up feeling less than invited to this meal.

LeFranc hastily introduces the *The Big Meal*'s main love interests in the play's opening lines. Nicole (Jerilyn Armstrong, Woman 3) is waitressing at a cozy diner and meets Sam (Joshua Cummins, Man 3). Before you can blink, the actors jump from first "Hello" to first fuck to first fight. In another blink, they have kids and their kids have kids. Don't bother attaching names to the actors' faces, because they switch into different rolls as the story unfurls — the same actors who once played a girlfriend could be playing a sister in the next round.

I do not recommend more than one glass of wine if you intend to keep up.

In its unique and hyper script, the play manages to portray the pulse of family, from life to love and from birth to death.

Eating, interestingly enough considering the setting, represents death. A silent waiter (Taylor Freeman) appears from behind the scenes with a dish. The lights dim and an uncomfortable silence ticks on, leaving the audience curious and a tad restless. First to go is Sam's grandfather, played by Robert Hirsh (Man 1). He's served a plate of mystery food by the grim waiter and the rest of the cast sits in sadness.

The plot floats from milestone to obstacle. Kari Boldon Welch's character (Woman 2) experiences the swiftness of breast cancer. The woman played by Ellen Chance steps into a caregiving role for her husband, who has Alzheimer's.

As quickly as the play picks up momentum, the cast begins to drop like flies.

If you have a dark sense of humor, try not to chuckle as you think to yourself, "I'm not eating at that fucking restaurant."

The actors' wonderful ability to continuously hop from character to character and swap personalities is a welcome mood lifter. Even the youngest performers, Noa Ablow Measelle (Girl) and Hugh Brinkley (Boy, also son of *EW* writer Rachael Carnes), seamlessly switch between roles. Considering how exhausting the script is, it is truly impressive to watch the actors deftly juggle not just one, but multiple contrasting roles.

If you're in the mood to reflect on your own dysfunctional family, giggle a healthy dose and watch some impressive local performances, take a seat at *The Big Meal*.

The Big Meal runs 7:30 pm Thursday to Saturday through Nov. 12 (with 2 pm Sunday matinees) at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; \$15-\$28. For ticket and show information, visit octheatre.org/the-big-meal.

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