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Arts & Culture

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With 'The Big Meal,' KU Theatre Students Bite Off A Lot

By [CJ JANOBY \(/PEOPLE/CJ-JANOBY\)](#)

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University of Kansas theater professor Peter Zazzali wanted to challenge his students. So, heading into Thanksgiving, they're putting on a play called "[The Big Meal](http://www.kutheatre.com/) (<http://www.kutheatre.com/>)."

It follows five generations of a family through a series of important dinners. Most of the actors play several different characters of varying ages; some switch characters over generations. The set is sparse — just three restaurant tables. There's little in the way of makeup and costumes. And in most of the scenes, people talk all over each other. In other words, your basic family dinner.

"I've never done a play that's felt so naturalistic in the writing where it's just been overlapping and overlapping," says Lindsey Roesti. "I love attending plays like that where everyone's talking on top of each other because that's how we talk in real life. Also, I'm playing a child. Even though I look like a child, I've never played a child before so that's been fun."

Roesti's character is listed as simply "Girl." Sometimes that's a character called Maddie. Early in the play, Maddie's grandfather gives a present to her older brother. Young Maddie feels left out. The grandfather tries to apologize, but Maddie's unmoved.

"I hope you die!" she shouts, which sets up a recurring pattern.

As the kids grow up to have kids of their own, this family struggles with resentments and disappointments that pile up over generations. Making each character come to life amid the chaos is one of the main acting challenges.

"There's little set, there's little lighting, all the main focus is on the characters and the



(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kcur/files/201411/Big_Meal_%28Custom%29_%282%29.jpg)

The cast of KU University Theatre's 'The Big Meal.'
 Credit Courtesy of Lindsey Roesti

actors who are portraying them. So you have to bring your A-game every day. If you don't, people can tell. It's very noticeable when not everybody is on top of it and bringing it together as an ensemble," says Kevin Siess, who plays "Man Two."

"In any other show, if the audience is not feeling it in a moment, a musical number can cut in and revive the audience," Roesti says. "But in this case, it's completely actor driven. If we fall off the ball, a little bit, we lose the audience."

Zazzali says he chose this play for his students because of its unique writing – with all of the voices blending together, he says, it's like a symphonic piece of music. That makes it a good teaching exercise for practical things such as listening to other actors, and working on movements and timing. And the universal themes resonate, too.

"Specifically what I'd like them to learn is the value of a cast coming together to provide an audience, a community, something larger than any one of our individual contributions," Zazzali says. "I want the audience to feel like they're having a seat at the table." (Actually, audience members won't really want to sit at the table. Because whenever real food shows up, bad things happen.)

Their fellow KU students might be thinking about heading home for Thanksgiving, but the actors in "The Big Meal" have a few intense shows to put on before the break.

"You know, I haven't even thought about that. I've been so focused on this meal, I haven't even thought about the next one yet," says Siess.

But by the time this show finishes its run, these actors will have earned a break. Hopefully their Thanksgiving will be a little less dramatic than "The Big Meal" they've just put on stage.

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LJWorld.com

KU Theatre tackles family, love and loss in 'The Big Meal'

November 12, 2014

It's been said that food brings people together. And while that's certainly the case in [Kansas University Theatre's](#) newest production, "The Big Meal," gathering to eat also provides the catalyst for tearing loved ones apart.

The play, which debuts Friday at KU's Murphy Hall, follows one American family over about 70 years and four generations, exploring their many trials and triumphs through one continuous, metaphoric meal at various restaurants and around the dinner table.

The drama unfolds as one couple, Sam and Nicole, meet as teenagers, fall in love and get married. As their family expands with children and eventually grandchildren and great-grandchildren, new characters are introduced and others, as in life itself, fade away.

Each time a character dies, the family gathers together for a meal.

"The meal is metaphoric for passing out of this existence," says director Peter Zazzali. "It's that vehicle to get at those family relationships, because oftentimes relationships are shaped in part by sitting down and sharing a meal, whether it's at home or at a restaurant."

The whole thing unfolds like a piece of music, Zazzali says, as cast members rotate on and off the production's minimal set.

A 16-by-20-foot platform acts as the meal space, with three tables and six chairs that also move throughout the play. The whole cast is present on stage at all times, seated on benches to the side of the platform and stepping onto it whenever their character enters the action.

Without "conventional" scenes written into the script, the actors must suggest subtle "shifts" in time or place, Zazzali says.

"It can come in somebody's voice or the repositioning of a chair in a theatrical way or the pounding of a glass on a table to punctuate a change in the location," he says. "And likewise, when the actors come off the benches onto the playing space, it's like imagining a full orchestra when the string section comes into play. It creates a sort of symphonic dynamic."

The play's eight actors play 15 different characters, representing Sam and Nicole at three different ages. Aside from adding a touch of gray to hair, the student actors mainly rely on "the power of imagination" to imply the passing of time, says Zazzali, who didn't want to use aging makeup or white-hued wigs on his young cast.

While touching on milestones like marriage, childbirth and death, the production doesn't reference historical events or popular culture. The costumes, likewise, "are as timeless as the play itself." After all, a "standard pair of Levi's jeans are as hip now as they were 50 years ago."

Dating the characters, or the time period they live in, would only distract from the work's universal themes, says Zazzali, who admits he was deeply moved by "The Big Meal" when he first saw it a few months ago.

Much like a character in the play, he too lost his mother to breast cancer — a heartbreaking event that happened to coincide with joy of his niece's birth.

"The issues that are addressed in the play are presumably the same sorts of issues that our ancestors dealt with," Zazzali says. "We love our children today the same way we did 80 years ago."

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'The Big Meal' set to satisfy audiences

JAMES LAMB
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This Friday night, KU Theatre will debut its latest show, "The Big Meal," on Stage Too! in Murphy Hall. University students will take on the roles of multiple characters across several generations in one family in this award-winning comedic drama from acclaimed playwright Dan LeFranc.

"The Big Meal" is [about] a five-generation family set in [Kansas]," said Jacquelyn O'Connor, a sophomore from Burlington who portrays Nicole, Maddie and Jackie at different points in the play. "It's a very heart-wrenching play, but it has a little bit of comedy in it. It's a great opportunity to see something different. The main thing is about family, so I feel like a lot of people can relate to it."

Kevin Siess, a senior from Lawrence who will be playing

both Sam and Robbie, said the play is done in such a way that he thinks everybody can take something away from it.

"The issues that it deals with are not just basic issues, but they're universal issues: life, death, new family members, conflict, avoidance, love, marriage," Siess said. "There are so many issues that are covered in this play that everybody's bound to relate to it in some sense."

Though he said he agreed the issues presented in the play are important, Director Dr. Peter Zazzali also said the distinctive way in which the play is crafted is a key draw point. In "The Big Meal," characters move from actor to actor, as the character being portrayed ages through the decades that span the play's 90-minute run time.

"What makes this play particularly unique is its form, the way it's written," Zazzali said.

He said there are nine actors, and many of them play at least one of the five different roles that are repeated.

"For example, there are a couple of actors who play the older track, so they'll play the characters as they're getting older, while conversely there are a pair of actors that play characters when they're younger," Zazzali said. "You'll be seeing the same character played by different actors as that particular character makes his or her way through life."

Though the play is a comedic drama, those involved said there are some serious and dramatic moments within the play that are heavily loaded with emotion, which is something the actors found out through the rehearsal process.

"When you deal with tragedy and death in life, a lot of people, and I'm one of those, usually put those feelings down in a place you don't want to ex-

SHOW DATES

Friday, Nov. 14 - 7:30 p.m.
Saturday, Nov. 15 - 7:30 p.m.
Sunday, Nov. 16 - 2:30 p.m.

Friday, Nov. 21 - 7:30 p.m.
Saturday, Nov. 22 - 7:30 p.m.
Sunday, Nov. 23 - 2:30 p.m.

perience that often, and through this process, some of those feelings I've had from people I've lost in my family and tragedies that have occurred, they kind of resurface," Siess said. "You don't want to let your feelings overcome your character, but it's almost impossible to explore some of those emotions without having to look at yourself and how you dealt with them in your life, and that can be scary."

The play will be presented on Stage Too!, which refers to the intimate configuration used when the audience is also on the stage. Zazzali said theater is important to preserve within the community as it is one of the last opportunities we

have for people to come together and share in a communal experience.

"It's a lot different than looking at something on Netflix alone on your computer," he said. "It's live, it's three-dimensional, it's palpable, it requires more from the audience, [for them] to really be a part of it, because without the audience, it really doesn't exist."

"The Big Meal" opens Friday at 7:30 p.m. on Stage Too! at Murphy Hall, and will play Saturday at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday at 2:30 p.m., as well as at the same times the following weekend.

— Edited by Myssa Scott