

Review of “The Big Meal”
Stage Too, University of Kansas
November 15, 2014

You’ll soon realize that the “big meal” here is life itself. The cast plays four generations of a family who experience all that life has to offer, from meeting one’s future mate to marriage, birth, and death. Any attempt to describe the play’s sequence of events would only be confusing, but as the action unfolds onstage, it’s easy (and fascinating) to follow. It’s an acting *tour de force* as cast members play first one character and then another (including their own character at various ages).

One brief scene quickly leads to the next: for instance, in the opening moments a couple meet one another at a restaurant table, then rise and immediately sit down again for a second conversation. The audience has no trouble realizing that these represent a series of encounters separated by time. Later, as the family grows, the three “deuce” tables onstage are pushed together to accommodate children and grandchildren. Throughout, the characters often speak (and shout) over each other’s lines, and it’s so precisely done that the illusion of actuality is never broken.

We needn’t be told that life’s ups are often followed by downs, but these are shown, sometimes comically, sometimes painfully. The blessing of children becomes a distraction and annoyance; the happiness of marriage is followed by the hint of infidelity; the warmth of family is chilled by the inevitability of death. Scarcely any family sore spot is left unexamined: parent-child conflicts, favoritism between children, the suitability of sons’ and daughters’ mates, unwed pregnancy, the care of aging parents.

Since the Big Meal is life itself, the final meal must be death, and we soon learn that whenever the black-clad Waitress appears and serves a meal to one of the characters,

it's the Last Meal, and signals the character's death. The cast movingly explores a range of reactions to departure, whether from old age, sudden illness, or suicide.

It seems almost unfair to single out individual excellences in the nearly flawless ensemble acting displayed here, but you can't fail to admire the emotional depth of Kevin Siess as father and son, the antic eagerness of Jaclyn Nischbach as girlfriend and fiancée, and the madcap knockabout of Thomas Tong and Lindsey Roesti as the children.

Director Peter Zazzali has clearly rehearsed every inch of this production, and the resulting performance is finely polished. Leslie Bennett's deft touch as Movement Coach is evident throughout, especially in the posture and movement of the grandparents.

Dan LeFranc's "The Big Meal" is performed by a very talented cast of nine on KU's Stage Too, with the audience seated on the Crafton-Preyer stage. The performance space is a raised rectangular platform with three small tables; the audience sits in risers on each side of the platform, deliberately visible to each other. The play is performed without intermission, for 85 minutes.

Dean Bevan