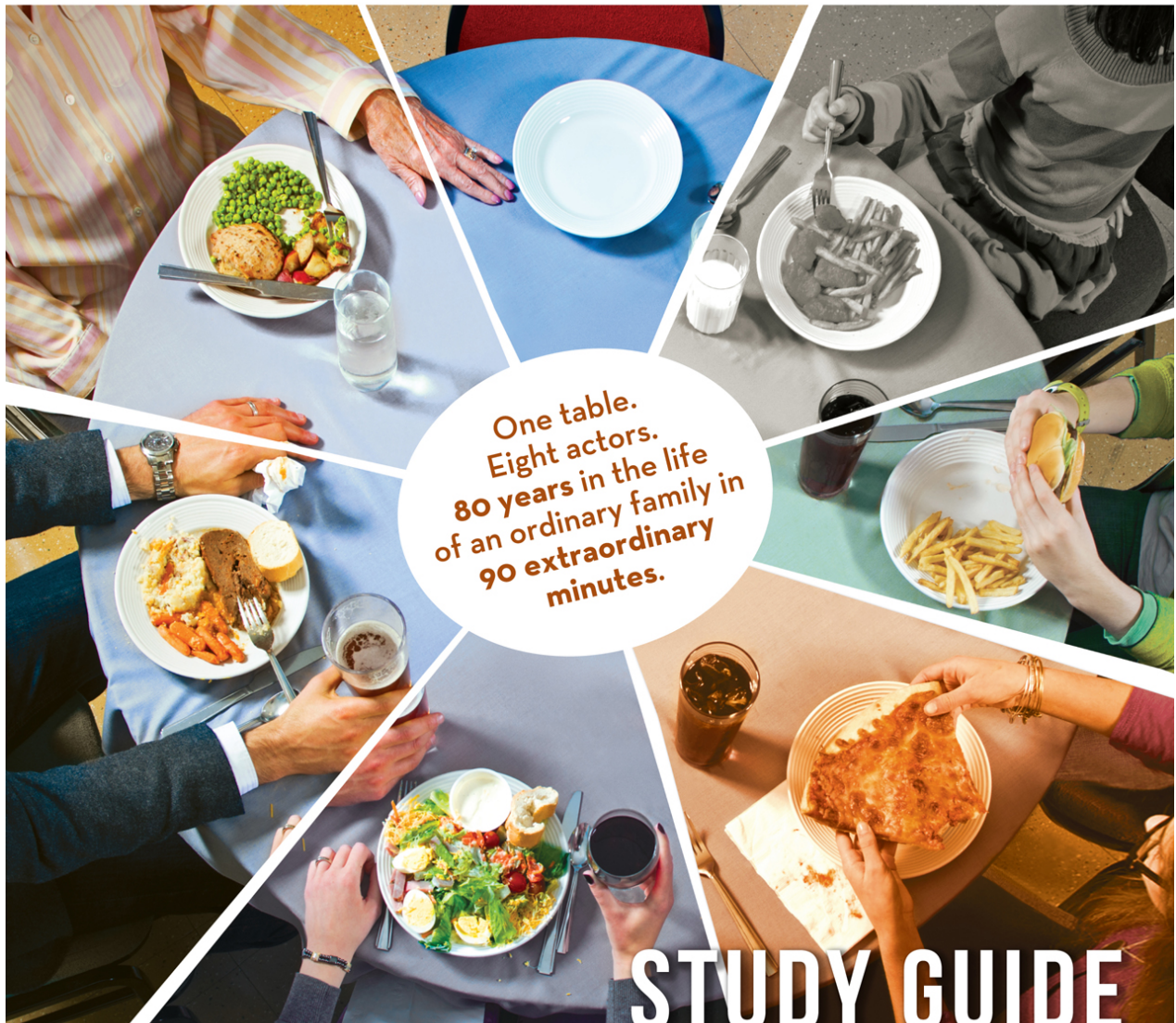


THE SANDRA FEINSTEIN-GAMM THEATRE

# THE BIG MEAL

BY  
**DAN LeFRANC**

DIRECTED BY  
**TYLER DOBROWSKY**



## STUDY GUIDE

**GAMM**  
EDUCATION

sandra feinstein-  
**GAM**  
theatre

SEASON  
**29**  
2013  
2014

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PAWTUCKET, RI

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*This study guide was prepared by  
Tracy Morreo, Susie Schutt and Steve Kidd*

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*We thank the following individuals and organizations for their support of PLAY in  
our 29<sup>th</sup> Season:*

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Trust and an anonymous family (as of December 16, 2013).*

## Prologue

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Dear Educator,

The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre is pleased to offer you this study guide to share with your students designed to prepare them for our production of *The Big Meal* by Dan LeFranc.

This Study Guide is broken into four acts. In the first act, you will find a few more reminders for you and your students about the nature of performance and what is expected of all audience members attending the theatre. In the second act, you will find a biography of Dan LeFranc, the history of the play, and a breakdown of the characters. In act three, Director Tyler Dobrowsky articulates his ideas behind our production and Resident Scholar Jennifer Madden looks in depth at Dan LeFranc's vision and inspiration. Finally, we will close our Study Guide with act four, which examines the dominant themes in the play and offers questions for discussion or personal writing. At the end of our study guide, you will be able to find information on how to learn more about The Gamm's Educational offerings.

As part of our Core Prep program, I would like to offer a workshop with your classroom/school before your visit and help prepare your students for the play. In these workshops, I will not only discuss the play and our production concept(s), but we will also get students out of their seats and up on their feet engaging in the themes, motifs and the language of the play. This type of kinesthetic engagement with language and literature ensures students deep comprehension and the sort of text-to-self connection that encourages students to invest in reading and literacy-learning.

Much of this work was discovered, developed and inspired by the ArtsLiteracy Project at Brown University. I had the good fortune to work with "ArtsLit" and the strategies and models for learning developed by the organization continue to serve as a foundational pedagogical tool for all Gamm Education programming.

Some benefits of ArtsLiteracy learning include:

- **Community Building in Your Classroom** (Applied Learning New Standards: A1; A2; A5)
- **Inspiration and Background on the Artist** (English Language Arts New Standards: E1; E2; E3; E5; E6; Applied Learning New Standards: A2; A3; A5)
- **Entering and Comprehending Text** (English Language Arts Standards: E1; E2; E3; E5)

- **Creating Text for Performance** (English Language Arts Standards: E1; E2; E3; E5)
- **Performing in Your Class** (Applied Learning Standards: A1; A2; A3; A4; A5)
- **Reflecting on Your Performance** (E2; E3; A1; A2; A5)

Moreover, the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) has developed GSE's (Grade Span Expectations) and GLE's (Grade Level Expectations) to help "capture the "big ideas" of reading that can be assessed."

We believe that all of our Literacy through Performance work helps to develop the following literacy skills.

## **WRITING**

- W-2: Writing in Response to Literary Text (showing understanding of ideas in a text). A "text" covers not only books and plays, but film and other kinds of media.
- W-3: Making Analytical judgments about text (how good was it? What stuck out?)
- W-4: Creating a Storyline
- W-5: Applying Narrative Strategies (how did they tell the story?)
- W-14: Reflective Essay

## **ORAL COMMUNICATION**

- OC-1: Interactive Listening (how well students listen; how much information they pick up hearing something once – asking a student to write a comprehensive account of a play certainly works)
- OC-2: Making Presentations (each senior in Rhode Island will be asked to put on a senior exhibition, capstone project or portfolio that includes a public demonstration on a particular subject. Learning about public performance is an obvious tie-in).

## **READING**

- R-4: Initial Understanding of Literary Texts (where is the climax in a story? How would you set this play in contemporary society?)
- R-5: Analysis and Interpretation of Literary Text/Citing Evidence
- R-11: Reading Fluency and Accuracy (part of the benefits of reading a script out over and over in rehearsal is an increase in reading fluency and accuracy)

Furthermore, attending a production addresses several Common Core Standards in Reading: Literature Standards, Speaking and Listening

Standards, and, of course, Theatre Arts Standards in Aesthetic Judgment, Cultural Contexts, and Communication.

Please see more exercise and strategies for ArtsLiteracy learning at [www.artslit.org](http://www.artslit.org). We would love to hear from you about your experiences using this study guide. It is a great help to us as we build on our education program from year to year.

Steve Kidd  
Resident Actor/Education Director  
The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre

### A Look at the Gamm's 29<sup>th</sup> Season:

"Past, present and future collide in our 2013-14 season," says Artistic Director Tony Estrella. "Taking our cue from our centerpiece Shakespeare production, *Macbeth*, we offer five plays that examine time as defined by the Scottish king himself: "all our yesterdays" to "this petty pace from day to day," then looking forward to "tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow." I am incredibly excited to return to Shakespeare after the hiatus that followed season 27's hit production of *Hamlet*, and also to present the Rhode Island premiere of four varied and powerful contemporary works that have already excited audiences the world over."

The pairing of Caryl Churchill one-acts, *A NUMBER* and *FAR AWAY*, ushered in the new season and put a provocative science-fiction slant on a not-so-distant future. South Boston native David Lindsay-Abaire's Tony Award-nominated play *GOOD PEOPLE* illuminated the gap between rich and poor in today's America. **Season 29 now continues with Dan LeFranc's innovative 2012 off-Broadway hit *THE BIG MEAL*, tracing five generations of a typical American family as they live their lives-from first kiss to final goodbye-without ever leaving the dinner table!** Next, The Gamm reunites with its signature playwright for what promises to be a gripping production of William Shakespeare's timeless *MACBETH*. The season concludes with David Harrower's controversial *BLACKBIRD*, a darling of the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival, as well as a West End and Off-Broadway hit, about the fallout from an illicit affair between a girl and a much older man.



# ACT I: Theatre Audience Etiquette

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What is so exciting about attending the theatre - especially in a smaller space such as the Gamm - is that it is live! Live theatre is different from other forms of entertainment; unlike film and television you are encouraged to pay close attention and actively engage your imagination.

You are mere feet (and sometimes inches!) away from the actors. Thus, you the audience, play an active role in the experience. The actors can see and hear you and any distracting behavior (talking, text messaging, unwrapping candy, the ringing of cell phones, etc) can affect the actor's concentration, disrupt the performance, and ruin the experience for other audience members. So we ask that you refrain from talking or making any noise during a performance. Thank you!

## **The Nature of Performance**

Controversial British playwright Sarah Kane once observed: "There's always going to be a relationship between the material and that audience that you don't really get with a film... People can walk out or change channels or whatever; it doesn't make any difference to the performance... It's a completely reciprocal relationship between the play and the audience."

The performance you see will never be precisely the same, for it will never have the same audience; every performance is unique. Theatre scholar Robert Cohen observed the essential paradox of live performance:

- It is unique to the moment, yet it is repeatable.
- It is spontaneous, yet it is rehearsed.
- It is participatory, yet it is presented.
- It is real, yet it is simulated.
- The actors are themselves, yet they are characters.
- The audience is involved, yet it remains apart.

"Theatre is not just another genre, one among many. It is the only genre in which, today and every day, now and always, living human beings address and speak to other human beings... It is a place for human encounter, a space for authentic human existence..."

-Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic and Playwright  
(From Robert Cohen's *Theatre: Brief Version*)

Discuss with your students the particular demands and benefits of attending a live performance. Perhaps have them brainstorm how theatre is different from film, television and sporting events.

## ACT II: Dan LeFranc and *The Big Meal*

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### About Dan LeFranc:

Dan LeFranc was born and raised in Southern California. He received his BA from The University of California at Santa Barbara. He is a graduate of the MFA playwriting program at Brown University and served as visiting faculty in Literary Arts at Brown as well as head playwriting instructor of the Brown/Trinity Rep Consortium.

In 2010, he received the New York Times Outstanding Playwright Award for his play *Sixty Miles to Silver Lake*. He has been recognized with the Helen Merrill Award and the Whitfield Cook Award, plus a Djerassi Resident Artists Program Fellowship, a John C. Russell Fellowship, and two MacDowell Colony/Alpert Foundation Residencies. He is a member of the MCC Playwrights Coalition and New Dramatists, and a former member of the Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab.

His most recent play, *Troublemaker or The Freakin Kick-A Adventures of Bradley Boatright* premiered at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Dan's other plays include *Backyard*, *Bruise Easy*, *Catgut*, *The Fishbone Fables*, *In the Labyrinth*, *Kill the Keepers*, *Night Surf*, and *Origin Story*.

## **About *The Big Meal*:**

*The Big Meal* world premiered at the American Theatre Company in Chicago, where it was declared the “#1 Play of 2011” by Time Out Chicago. It garnered five Joseph Jefferson Award nominations. *The Big Meal* received its off-Broadway premiere at Playwrights Horizons, where it picked up a Drama Desk nomination and four Lucille Lortel nominations, including for Outstanding Play. *The Big Meal* was published by Samuel French and appeared in *TheatreForum*, McSweeney's quarterly food journal *Lucky Peach*, and the *Methuen Drama Book of New American Plays*.

Synopsis: Somewhere in America in a suburban chain restaurant on an average night, young people Sam and Nicole meet for a drink. Sparks fly, setting in motion the extraordinary tale of five generations of an ordinary family with the moments, both mundane and milestone, that make a life. Just eight actors at one table morph into multiple characters over nearly 80 years, displaying their shared DNA, humanity and humor. In the spirit of Thornton Wilder's plays (*Our Town*, *The Long Christmas Dinner*), *The Big Meal* is stunningly ambitious, big-hearted and richly satisfying.

### Characters and Setting

*The Big Meal* takes place now in a popular chain restaurant.

8 Actors play 17 different characters spanning 80 years.

**Woman #1 (Older Woman):** Nicole, Alice

**Man #1 (Older Man):** Sam, Robert, Jack

**Woman #2 (Woman):** Nicole, Maddie, Jackie

**Man #2 (Man):** Sam, Robbie

**Woman #3 (Young Woman):** Nicole, Jessica, Maddie, Stephanie, Jackie

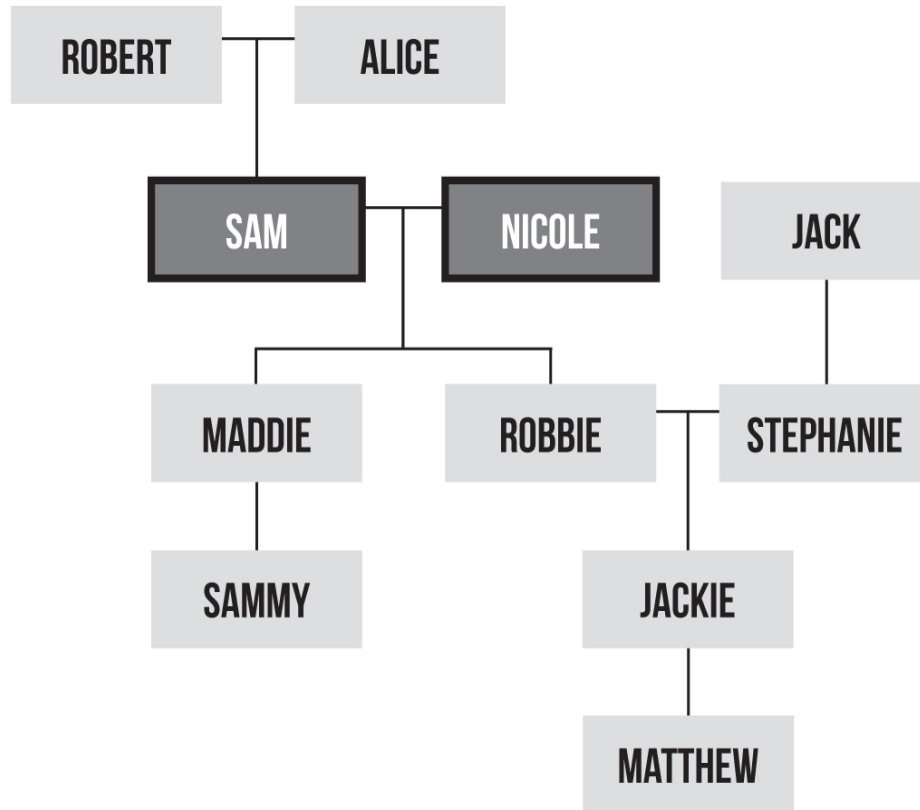
**Man #3 (Young Man):** Sam, Robbie, Sammy, Maddie's adolescent boyfriends (Steven, Marcus, Jeremy, Patrick, Michael)

**Girl:** Pesky little girl, Maddie, Jackie

**Boy:** Pesky little boy, Robbie, Sammy, Matthew



# THE BIG MEAL | FAMILY TREE



## ACT III: Our Production

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Who Made It Happen:

### On Stage:

Woman #1 (Older Woman)	Wendy Overly
Man #1 (Older Man)	Richard Donnelly
Woman #2 (Woman)	Karen Carpenter
Man #2 (Man)	Steve Kidd
Woman #3 (Young Woman)	Amanda Ruggiero
Man #3 (Young Man)	Joe Short
Girl	Emeline Easton
Boy	Elliot Peters

## **Behind The Scenes:**

Directed by Tyler Dobrowsky

Set Design by Michael McGarty

Costume Design by David T. Howard

Lighting Design by David Roy

Stage Management by Jessica Hill

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Assistant Director: Susie Schutt

Production Manager: Jessica Hill

Assistant Stage Manager: JonPaul Rainville

Production Assistant: Siobhan Reddy-Best

Lead Carpenter: Joe Short

Construction Crew: Alex Eisenberg, Max Ramirez

Assistant Lighting Designer: Marc Tiberiis

Master Electrician: Justin Carroll

## Production Notes:

## **Directors' Notes:**

By Tyler Dobrowsky, Director of *The Big Meal*

*The stage is a fundamental pretense and it thrives on the acceptance of that fact...Out of the lie, the pretense...proceeds a truth more compelling than the novel can attain, for the novel is constrained to tell of an action that 'once happened' whereas the action on the stage takes place in the perpetual present time...A play visibly represents pure existing."* – Thornton Wilder, in his essay "Some Thoughts on Playwriting", 1941

If Thornton Wilder's face sits atop the Mount Rushmore of 20th-century American playwrights, alongside Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neil and Arthur Miller, *The Long Christmas Dinner*, a one-act he wrote in the early 1930's, was one of the first indications that true greatness lay in store for him. Wilder's brilliant one-act traces 90 years of an American family through a series of short scenes that are presented fluidly and without interruption, all taking place at the family dinner table during Christmas. We see children grow old; years pass in mere minutes. Contained in this spare play (it's less than 30 pages) are themes that Wilder would later examine and explore in his two masterpieces *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Specifically, the passage of time and how it can be reflected on stage; a rejection of realism in favor of theatricality (just think of the character of the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, to give one example); and perhaps Wilder's greatest trick, raising up the ordinary and

quotidian aspects of human existence to show their enduring, ultimately precious value.

Dan LeFranc's *The Big Meal* repurposes and expands on Wilder's play while keeping the structure and emotional pay-off of *Long Christmas Dinner*. In LeFranc's 90 minute tour-de-force, we meet Sam and Nicole, two young twenty-somethings who meet, fall in love, break up, get back together, get married, have kids, watch their parents pass away, become grandparents, and grow old. They fight and make up. They make mistakes and they celebrate triumphs. They live their lives as best they can, and they eventually die. It is a simple story.

And yet and yet and yet! The play – like *The Long Christmas Dinner* before it – manages to show us the totality of a relationship between two people, from their first meeting until the perils of advanced age. It is in essence a play about life. And what could be more interesting, more cherished, more perilous than that?

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the structure of the play — different actors play the same character as the character gets older — as well as the piece's break-neck speed. The play's unique casting specifies that the actors play many different roles as the family ages, and in this sense LeFranc (channeling Wilder) departs from realism and embraces a heightened sense of theatricality. In a realistic play, the audience are merely spectators observing the action, whereas in *The Long Christmas Dinner* or *Our Town* the audience is actively engaged in the creation of the story. On a very basic level, the audience has to use their imagination in order for the world of the play to be fully realized — the audience is more engaged in the piece, as well as more emotionally invested, than they would be just watching a "realistic" play. Further, by embracing theatricality, the artifice inherent in live theater serves to heighten the story rather than detract from it. For instance, the speed of the play itself becomes a metaphor for how we experience our lives: fleeting and fast, leaving us wondering, "Where did the time go?" At the same time, it underscores the precious moments that happen every day that often go by unnoticed.

I'm positive Wilder would be pleased with what LeFranc has created with *The Big Meal*. Wilder, who often wrote about the universal continuity of human existence (a main theme in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Skin of Our Teeth*), would be delighted to discover his play born again in the 21st Century. Out of respect for that genius, I'll conclude with some of his words which also describe LeFranc's new play:

"Well, people a thousand years from now, this is the way we were — in our growing up, in our marrying, in our doctoring, in our living, and in our dying." – (Thornton Wilder, early draft of *Our Town*)

## Dramaturgical Notes:

### Enjoy Every Sandwich

By Jennifer Madden, Gamm Theatre Resident Scholar

*But I tell you life is short/Be thankful because before you know/It will be over/Cause life is sweet/And life is also very short/Your life is sweet -*  
Natalie Merchant

*Enjoy every sandwich. - Warren Zevon*

In *The Big Meal* Dan LeFranc depicts the relationship of Nicole and Sam from first lustful glance to mortal farewell with lightening speed. In 90 minutes we meet parents, children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren and watch as Nicole and Sam together engage the whole of human experience: love, marriage, birth, disaffection, betrayal, and death. In a blink, fervent lust settles into mature love, hardens into contempt, before finally mellowing into steady companionship. In minutes, characters move from the arrogant certainty of youth with self-perceptions of their identities rock solid ("I will NEVER have kids") to resigned middle-age, coming to understand that nothing in life is assured. Some characters soften with age, losing their brittle edges, their defenses falling away, while others harden, acquiring attributes they once loathed in their parents.

LeFranc's virtuoso compression of time offers an entertaining challenge for the audience. Time can leap years forward mid-conversation. Roles are routinely swapped and "as the characters age, their 'essences' pass from younger to older actors," according to the playwright's stage directions. While almost universally praised for its inventive stagecraft, a minority called LeFranc's speedy structure "gimmicky," complaining that his characters lacked depth – ignorant that LeFranc's seeming broad strokes are by careful design. Nicole and Sam are indeed a very ordinary couple. They speak in the banal vernacular of the everyday ("awesome, rad, cool, like... um"). They achieve nothing extraordinary nor make significant, lasting contributions to society save perhaps one. (A running joke is that Sam's mother "invented" the Cadillac margarita). Just as the pivotal moments of our lives tend not to be deftly orchestrated or stage managed, the events of *The Big Meal* appear incidental and utterly ordinary. As in life, seemingly inconsequential actions or decisions can reverberate like an echo through generations; recognition and awareness only arrive long after the fact, if at all. Nicole and Sam could be anyone, they could be anywhere. They could be everyone, everywhere. To put it simply, they are us.

LeFranc describes the setting as “a very popular chain restaurant in the Midwestern United States, or rather, every popular chain restaurant in the Midwestern United States.” LeFranc was inspired in part by Thornton Wilder’s *The Long Christmas Dinner* (one family ages 90 years over the course of several Christmas dinners) and his own history of loud family disputes in restaurants. LeFranc originally wrote *The Big Meal* for a creative writing assignment at Brown University where he received his MFA and served as head playwriting instructor. LeFranc’s parents, like Nicole and Sam, met in a restaurant and restaurant work is the family business. “The service industry is in my blood” he remarks. In *The Big Meal*, the restaurant has replaced the dining room as the ritual gathering place of the modern family.

LeFranc like Wilder, marries experimental formal structure with naturalism, and because of this his thoroughly modern play (with its references to nachos and corn dogs) surprisingly recalls the medieval morality play. These plays were instruments of religious instruction using allegory as a dramatic device, often with “Everyman” as protagonist symbolizing all humankind and “Time” as the antagonist. In *The Big Meal*, time is both protagonist *and* antagonist. It is the main character and the play’s major theme. *The Big Meal* a slice-of-life play celebrating the banquet of existence with mortality hovering as the ever-present specter at the feast. To borrow a phrase from author Ian McEwan, “We are the very privileged owners of a brief spark of consciousness.” Life whizzes by with blistering, dismaying rapidity; blink and you miss it. The speed of *The Big Meal* is its point. So, while you still can, enjoy every sandwich.

## ACT IV: Themes and Questions for Discussion

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1. What is the meaning of the title *The Big Meal*?
2. How did the set design aid in the telling of the story? How would you have changed it?
3. What sort of atmosphere was created with the lighting and sound design?
4. What does the Gamm poster (also the cover of this study guide) tell you about the play? What sort of poster would you design for this play and why?

## Time

In his introduction to Thornton Wilder's work *The Two Worlds of Thornton Wilder*, John Gassner writes, "we feel as though we are floating in the flux of life and time itself this". Like Wilder, Dan LeFranc creates a play that has us floating in time, speeding it up and slowing it down depending on who is on stage and what is happening in their life. There are also props that indicate a focus on time such as Robbie's gift watch from his Grandfather or the menus that have the characters continually waiting.

## Questions for Discussion

- How does LeFranc indicate the passing of time in the text? How did the actors show the passing of time?
- At what moments did time seem to slow and why?
- What effect did the speeding of time have on you?

## Inspiration

*The Long Christmas Dinner* is a one-act play written by American Playwright Thornton Wilder in 1931, which follows a family through their Christmas dinners over 90 years. Each family member is played by one actor and they age quickly through the course of the play, exiting through a portal that represents death. Dan LeFranc credits this play, and the other work of Thornton Wilder for inspiring *The Big Meal*. In an interview with Tim Sanford, LeFranc stated,

"So I eventually got around to reading it and I was like, "Oh my god this play is incredible. This is like my new favorite play." And I think I'd just seen a production of *Our Town* somewhere, and I was like, "Thornton Wilder is the greatest...I had always wanted to write a play in a restaurant because my parents had met in a restaurant... The service industry is in my blood. So I was like, "There's a play in me about restaurants somewhere." So when I read *The Long Christmas Dinner* I felt like it might be my "in" into that restaurant play."

Wilder's plays, including *Our Town*, illustrate the importance of appreciating life by showing simple universal moments in the lives of ordinary people. Wilder's plays, like *The Big Meal*, do not rely on elaborate sets or props, but focus on the lives of their characters.



**Questions for discussion**

- *How did the bareness of the stage help or hurt with the story telling?*
- *What universal experiences were represented in The Big Meal?  
What was missing?*
- *What stories or plays have inspired you?*

**Overlapping**

*The Big Meal* is unique not only for speeding up time but also for the overlapping dialogue. Dan LeFranc's script is like none other. Rather than writing the name of the character to the left, followed by their line of dialogue, he writes all the characters names across the top and the dialogue underneath, in chart format.

**Questions for discussion**

- *Which conversations were you able to follow? Did you find yourself missing anything?*
- *What effect did the overlapping dialogue have on you while watching The Big Meal?*

**Activity for the Classroom: The Long Christmas Dinner**

Have your students read *The Long Christmas Dinner* by Thornton Wilder. Assign roles to your students and have them discuss how they would set up the stage, what props and costumes they would use, and how they picture the action taking place. Read through or stage the play in your classroom before coming to *The Big Meal*.

**Questions for Discussion:**

- *How did it feel to play the entire life of one person in 30 minutes or less?*
- *Which characters were you drawn to?*
- *How would you modernize this text?*
- *What was similar in The Big Meal to The Long Christmas Dinner?  
What was different?*

## Epilogue

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Thank you for joining us for *The Big Meal* and for working with this Study Guide to ensure the best, most comprehensive theatrical and educational experience. Please be in touch if you would like us to visit your classroom before or after you attend *The Big Meal*.

Our education program also provides classes for students in elementary, junior high and high school. We hope you will join us for more student matinees at The Gamm!

Still to come:

MACBETH

by William Shakespeare

- March 7th
- April 9th, 15th, 17th

To learn more, find us on the web at [www.gammtheatre.org](http://www.gammtheatre.org) or reach Steve Kidd at 401 723 4266 ext. 17.