Russ Hunt's Reviews

***The Kitchen***

By Arnold Wesker

**Theatre St. Thomas**

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*The Kitchen* is unlike anything I've ever seen on a stage. Knowing a bit about the script beforehand, I thought it was pretty much impossible to stage: a cast of 27, most of whom are on stage most of the time -- and not just standing around, either -- and a million props. A whole large-restaurant kitchen, in fact, with all the counters and work spaces and pots and pans and utensils and stoves and ovens. All crammed into the Black Box acting space, with a couple of restaurant-style swinging doors at the back. And, as the evening swings into gear, a dozen waitresses bursting through with their orders, picking up the plates and steaming back out again, another dozen or so cooks and chefs plying their various trades with increasing speed and urgency, bus boys hustling back and forth, and the owner occasionally drifting ethereally through the whole chaos. Think *Look Back in Anger* crossed with *Riverdance*.

For the production, the funding TST received last year from "scholars.com" let them hire, to work with the students on the production, three professionals -- Patrick Clarke, who supervised the incredible set, Tim Gorman, who supervised the professional and unobtrusive lighting, and, maybe most important, a choreographer, Georgia Rondos, who acted as assistant director and, I assume, worked on keeping all those folks moving without bumping into one another.

I've thought for years that the really strong suit at Theatre Saint Thomas has been ensemble -- Ilkay's produced some wonderfully coherent ensemble productions ([*Dancing at Lughnasa*](http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/www/reviews/lughnasa.htm) was one of them), but this is over the top. It's almost as though there were nothing here *but* ensemble. In that sense it's a lot like *Riverdance* without the Michael Flatley figure: you never know where to look exactly, but wherever you *do* look the person you look at is totally focused on the immediate task -- slicing (invisible) cake, butchering an (invisible) pig, scooping (invisible) sauces out of pots onto plates. You have the feeling -- I did, anyway -- that I wasn't actually choosing where to look, that the production was finely tuned enough that it was controlling where I actually put my eyes most of the time. It's rather like the Stephen Bochco-style TV show (*Hill Street Blues* was the first one, but lots of them do it now), where the action is immersed in a fully-realized context, with hundreds of extras doing their thing in the background, and the foreground, and the camera telling you who to follow and the microphone picking up the voices. Only here there is no camera, and no microphone; it's the direction, the blocking, the choreography, and the actors who have to make sure you know where the focus is.

If there's a weakness in the production, that's it: there were times, lots of them, when I missed dialogue because the actors seemed to be relying on the fact that they were pretty close to us -- the Box isn't all that big, after all -- rather than projecting out to the back walls. So, particularly in the extremely hectic first act, I think I missed a good deal of what I might have focused on. Still, I always knew where the center of the action was: I think I'd have known had I been watching with earplugs, because the visual movement worked so clearly to tell me what I was to attend to.

And it's not quite accurate to say this is *Riverdance* without Flatley: there is, in fact, a central figure in the play, and although he's one of the crowd at the beginning, by the end of the first act we know that Peter, the German fish cook whose workspace is down front, is the linchpin on whom it's all going to turn. He's played extremely powerfully by Jef Bate Boerop, an actor I've admired in other productions here -- most notably, [*Krapp's Last Tape*](http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/www/reviews/krapp.htm). Here, he's playing a hair-trigger explosion about to occur, a tense, vibrant, aggressive, figure way too full of life for his own good. It's clear that the center of the play is Peter's relationship with the waitress Monique (Amy Chedore, whom I haven't seen on stage before, and who is perfect as a sexy, flirtatious and unattainable love interest), and with other central characters like his countryman Hans, a cutlet cook (Sean Myles, playing a wonderfully innocent, ebullient ruddy-faced German who plays and sings a great, plaintive "Lily Marlene" during the "lull" at the beginning of the second act), the pastry chef, Paula (Katie MacLaurin, who was one of the narrators in [*Lovers*](http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/www/reviews/lovers.htm), and who has an extremely solid, strong stage presence), and the new cook, an Irishman named Kevin (Jeff Richardson, who makes his character much more than the expository device he might have been).

As the play comes more and more to focus on Peter, and his bursts of joy and rage become more excessive, we come to see the main movement in the play as a kind of two-part crescendo, like a wonderful piece of music: Act I ends in full flight, with the kitchen flat out and everybody moving full tilt. Act II comes to almost the same climax, only this time it's focused on the inevitable explosion around Peter, who's alienated Monique and has finally reached the end of his rope.

What's amazing is that the play also turns out to be chock full of ideas -- for instance, a powerfully satiric take on a Britain which has an extremely difficult time making room for the "foreigners" who make up most of the staff in the kitchen -- German, Italian, Spanish, Greek, French, Irish, a virtual European Common Market, with Max the butcher screaming that they're all in England now so they should all speak English (if the play had been written in 1997 instead of 1957 they'd mostly be Middle Eastern and Asian, I'd think, but Max would be the same). Or a similarly satiric take on the traditional roles of men and women (almost all the cooks are men, and all the, um, waitpeople except, of course, the headwaiter, are women).

But finally the point is that amazing, tightly choreographed experience of a kitchen at full tilt. The closest thing I've seen to it wasn't on a stage, it's *ER* in crisis, or maybe *\*MASH\** with the casualties incoming. An experience I'm sorry anybody has to miss.

*Second thoughts, on seeing the production again*

What is perhaps most remarkable about the production is the focus of individual actors on the world behind the action: the miming of various kinds of food preparation, wherever I looked on stage, was thoughtful and solid. People weren't just moving around, they were performing tasks, and they were conveying to us just what those tasks were. They were also inhabiting the space -- waitresses knew what their orders were, and they knew which cooks were keeping up and which weren't (I never had any trouble imagining, out there beyond those double doors, a dining room full of impatient patrons, unobtrusively rushing waitresses, and that hovering owner in his space beyond the realities of the daily tasks of the kitchen). Characters not directly involved were also aware of the focal action; I particularly noticed Paula's (Katie MacLaurin) amused toleration of the horseplay among the guys, and Anne's (Anna Silk) bright, interested engagement in what was going on below her dessert table.

Another important component of the success of the production is the consistency with which, when characters came to the forefront of the action, they did it with conviction and authority -- Paula's convincingly desperate speech about needing friends, Dimitri's (Matthew Maguire) wonderul mediation on nationality, and others. As the life of the kitchen flowed on around those moments, we began to see that this play adds up to a great deal more than a slice of the life behind the swinging doors into the dining room. Nor is it just about Peter's inability to cope with his own intensity: it's about how people build lives for themselves in the flux and distraction of daily life, and how that daily coping with existence can overwhelm our ability to dream, and leave us asking, like Marango, the owner, at the end: "What is there more?"