

PLAYS FOR
New Audiences

A Division of Children's Theatre Company

Recipe for Disaster

by Barry Kornhauser

Originally co-commissioned and produced by
La Jolla Playhouse & Childsplay Theatre Company
both productions under the direction of David Saar
with incidental music by Deborah Wicks La Puma

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SYNOPSIS

Madcap mayhem is on the menu as an apprentice cook in a culinary school meets two master chefs more intent on feeding their egos than their guests. ***Recipe For Disaster*** humorously explores the calamitous costs of incivility, as kitchen chaos ensues! In the end, all of its characters are served their “just desserts.”

Ingredients: Comedy, Music, Puppetry, Pots & Pans, and a Cast of 4, gender flexible. (NOTE: No real food is harmed in the making of this production.)

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INTRODUCTION

The play is set in the test kitchen of a culinary school. At center stands a large workstation with a single stovetop burner. The kitchen also features a small wall oven and refrigerator/freezer, as well as a sink. [None of these appliances need to actually work. They need only “act” the part.] There is an open window. Some cupboards and shelving, a kitchen fire extinguisher, pots, pans, utensils, fake food stuff, etc. complete the mise-en-scene. I have tried to annotate means of accomplishing much of the kitchen “stage magic” that is suggested.

There are four characters in the play, with casting considerations based more on clowning skills than gender identity. [For the purposes of simplicity, I have referred to them all in the masculine in this draft, but textual changes reflecting gender can readily be made once casting is completed.] Our protagonist is the APPRENTICE, an eager novice in the school who we meet on a very important day in his academic career. This is our sympathetic “child” character with a gentle and innocent persona. Ostensibly powerless and without status, he is picked on and put upon, truly oppressed, trying hopelessly to please both MASTER CHEFS who are mentoring him, and failing to please either. He manages nevertheless to remain the play’s true paragon of civility. Then there are those two CHEFS. CHEF 1 is gruff, earthy, and somewhat loutish - an instinctual cook, not an intellectual one. He is rather physical, throwing himself into his work and onto his students – that too-hard backslapping sort of a guy. [In the premiere production, this CHEF was portrayed with a Southern accent.] In contrast, CHEF 2 is more refined and erudite, but also snobbish, pretentious, and effete. [This CHEF was given a French accent in the first production.] Their distinctive personalities affect the way each displays - and abuses - power. Both of these CHEFS are impossibly (and metaphorically) fat. They have an insatiable hunger for preeminence and control, but no appetite for kindness, consideration, amity, or anything that might impede their self-centered objectives. The last character is the HEAD OF SCHOOL, an old – very old - man on the cusp of senility.

A white dove also plays a role. Her name is JULIA, in honor of the legendary chef Julia Childs. A puppet creation, she can often be operated unseen by the actor who plays the HEAD OF SCHOOL, but another actor or a crew/puppeteer will need to be enlisted now and again. At the very least, JULIA’s wings and head should move, and her beak open and close. When not taking

part in the dramatic action of the play, she habitually roosts quietly on the windowsill. The puppetry is mostly done from backstage, but once or twice onstage, at moments in the play when the puppeteer is obscured by the workstation. [There needs to be an entrance from the upstage wall obscured by the station. In the premiere production, this was done through a “cabinet” beneath the upstage sink.] It would be lovely to have the puppet animated on the windowsill every now and again throughout the show. This would suggest that the bird is engaged in the action on stage and, of course, help to create the illusion that she is a living creature. JULIA does fly, but the audience need only see a quick flutter of wings as the bird appears or disappears from behind the window. [The premiere production featured three different, though identical appearing incarnations of this bird. Two featured different sorts of movements and the third was a simple stuffed toy version which was used during the on-stage attack found on page 38 of this manuscript.]

Music is a most welcomed element in the play and could take many forms. Certainly, the piece should be richly underscored – whether by real recorded instruments or a combination of recorded music with kitchen utensil percussion, some perhaps live. There are suggestions in the following pages for spots in the script where underscoring would greatly enhance the play, and composer Deborah Wicks La Puma has cooked up a delicious score that is available for use.

What follows are the ingredients of a play about the importance of civility in our daily interactions. The structure is loosely built upon a five-course meal. The “Appetizer” segment establishes our situation and characters. We meet the arrogant, ego-driven CHEFS, and the eager and idealistic APPRENTICE whose talents they are tasked to help nurture. The first act of incivility is more or less unintentional. One CHEF, convinced of his own superiority is unable to resist interfering with the other, albeit with the intention of helping the APPRENTICE, and in doing so contributes to the demise of this first course. Next, we throw everybody in the “Soup” when, in retaliation, the second CHEF engages in an indirect act of incivility - spreading a malicious rumor about his rival to deliberately undermine his efforts. As this course moves inexorably to failure, the CHEFS’ mutual disrespect and malice toward one another and their underling begins to build, with the APPRENTICE fast becoming their innocent pawn, as well as convenient scapegoat and ancillary victim. We toss things up in “Salad,” the incivility intensifying, with the CHEFS beginning to deliberately and aggressively sabotage one another’s efforts and actively abuse the chef-in-training. The “Entrée” is the main course, of course, and our climax – a veritable food fight in which all hell breaks loose. Instead of helping the APPRENTICE create a nutritious and delicious dinner, the CHEFS have concocted a surefire recipe for disaster with near murderous intent toward one another, very nearly destroying the young man’s dreams and the kitchen along with it. Ultimately, the two Master CHEFS’ attitudes and behaviors become their undoing, and that of the APPRENTICE his salvation, and in the end everyone gets their just “Dessert.”

- Barry

RECIPE FOR DISASTER

(As the audience enters, music begins. The APPRENTICE - our hero – is sound asleep on the workstation of a culinary school test kitchen, his head resting on a distinctive pillow. When everyone is seated, a white dove appears behind him and whistles a wake-up call to no avail. She tugs at the APPRENTICE’s blanket with her beak, pulling it off and onto the floor behind the workstation, but still no luck. Finally, she gives the sleeper a few gentle pecks, with sound effects, finally rousing the APPRENTICE, who bolts up with nervous excitement.)

APPRENTICE

Why, good morning, Julia! And thank you for the wake-up “caw.” I wouldn’t want to have missed a single minute of this day, this special day! *(And as he gently carries her to the windowsill)* What would I ever do without you? *(Perching her there, she tweets an affirmation, and he begins his morning ritual. He starts by first putting his remaining bedding away – the pillow. Before doing so, he makes a point of showing that favorite pillow to JULIA and commenting)* My pillow. *(Having removed the pillow from the countertop, a picture he keeps beneath it is revealed, a black and white image of his somber-faced grandfather, uniformed as a cook. He lifts it lovingly, and also shows it to the bird.)* Grandpa’s picture. *(She nods. The music changes to “Grandpa’s Theme.”)* Well, this is it, Grandpa. I’ve been waiting a long time for this day. *(He places a half-filled jar marked “MOLASSES” on the station countertop and identifies it to JULIA.)* Molasses. *(She chirps.)* Yes, sticky stuff. Exactly! *(He then takes the basting brush sitting in the jar and dabs the back of Grandpa’s picture, which he then adheres to the refrigerator. Pleased, he turns again to JULIA.)* Now, let’s quickly finish getting ready. *(Preparation music begins. The APPRENTICE goes to the sink, pours baking soda on a bottle brush and brushes his teeth, then gargles. He then slaps a bit of molasses on a hand, rubs both hands together, pulls them apart as they are now sticky, and then rubs them in his hair. Using a wooden fork as a comb and a frying pan as a mirror, he grooms his hair. Now he opens the refrigerator where we find his jacket and apron hanging. He shivers putting them on followed by a tool belt stored in the freezer compartment, which contains oven mitts, a dishtowel, and other kitchen accessories. Next, he dons his toque and puts a similar but miniature one on JULIA. Finally, he ceremoniously reveals an eggbeater, looks at his grandpa’s picture as he gives the utensil a little spin, then clips it to his belt, before standing ready to begin the big day. This he does by smartly preparing a little breakfast for JULIA, mixing the several ingredients with the eggbeater, and then serving it to her with a flourish.)* Here you are, Julia - Salted sunflower seeds in a savory molasses mélange. Nothing too good for my very best friend. *(JULIA begins pecking vigorously at the dish. The APPRENTICE is a bit surprised and more than a little pleased at her enthusiasm for his cooking.)* My, what a big appetite for such a little dove! *(She chirrups.)* Why, thank you. I’m glad you like it. *(But she’s already back at her feast. After a few final pecks, she whistles and draws the APPRENTICE’s attention to the audience, which he has yet to notice. He does a double*

take, shares a look with the bird, and then addresses the audience.) Oh my gosh; you're here already! Just a moment. (The APPRENTICE carries JULIA over to the windowsill where she perches as he quickly cleans up the kitchen. He then proudly stands, facing the audience, his eggbeater prominently featured in his pose, not unlike the sword in the hand of a great general's statue.) Thank you; thank you all for coming. It means a lot to me.

(Just then the tottering very elderly HEAD OF SCHOOL enters, polishing an apple on his shirt. He notices the eggbeater and puts his apple down in a prominent spot so that he has both hands free to give the gadget a spin of his own.)

HEAD OF SCHOOL

Haven't seen one of these in quite a while. Good old fashioned...uh...uh...uh...

(He is struggling to remember the word. The APPRENTICE comes to his rescue.)

APPRENTICE

Eggbeater, sir. It belonged to my grandfather. *(He shows the HEAD OF SCHOOL the photograph. A few measures of the "Grandpa Theme" plays.)* He was a short-order cook in the old country.

HEAD OF SCHOOL

That so?

APPRENTICE

Yes, sir. Said he used it every day. And it never let him down.

HEAD OF SCHOOL

*(trying to give the egg-beater back,
but momentarily getting a finger caught in the blades)*

And he gave it to you?

APPRENTICE

(helping the old man extract his finger)

Left it to me. In his will. You see, sir, the very reason I enrolled in your cooking school is because, well, ever since I was a little boy, all I ever hoped for and dreamed of was being a cook just like him.

HEAD OF SCHOOL

Well, today's your big chance, isn't it? Your final and most important test, that of preparing a full five-course meal - all for me! *(He mumbles a "yum-yum;" then the APPRENTICE gets his attention and gestures towards the audience)* Oh, yes, and of course, for all these good people you asked me to invite.

(He waves "Hello" to them.)

APPRENTICE

Yes, sir. And I hope to fix one that would make my grandpa proud.

HEAD OF SCHOOL

Under the tutelage and supervision of *one* of my finest Master Chefs; the very cream of the crop – or my name's not... *(He can't quite remember.)* But never mind. You'll be getting some pretty good advice. So listen well and do as instructed.

APPRENTICE

I'll try my best, sir.

HEAD OF SCHOOL

(opening the refrigerator and checking its contents)

You had better, young fellow, because for you, the...the...the... *(He removes a raw steak from the frig)* Ah yes, the "steaks" are *(as he lifts the steak over his head)* - high!

APPRENTICE

(catching the steak which is dropped by the old man)

I know, sir.

HEAD OF SCHOOL

(feeling around in his pockets)

But, oh, dear; I seem to have forgotten my welcoming speech!

(He totters off. The APPRENTICE then notices for the first time the apple absentmindedly left behind. He picks it up. Then he looks at the audience. Then again at the apple. Then back the audience. He has an idea.)

APPRENTICE

(to the audience as he concocts something with the apple using various garnishes)

You know what's so wonderful about preparing meals? It gives you a chance to help nurture. And provide comfort. And even bring everyone together. *(He looks at his creation and seems a bit stymied. Just then JULIA tweets, flies off briefly, and returns with a contribution in her beak.)* Thank you, Julia. That's just what it needed. *(He then crosses down to the audience, speaking as he does so.)* But I guess what I like best is that making people food is a way of making people smile!

(He reveals his creation – the apple with an "edible" funny face [all just prop fare], and hands it to an adult in the audience – a smiling adult! Just then, the HEAD OF SCHOOL re-enters, and addresses the audience, attempting to read from a speech.)

HEAD OF SCHOOL

"Ladles and Jelly Spoons...?" *(That doesn't sound right, but the old man can't find his*

glasses. The APPRENTICE approaches him and lowers the glasses the old man is wearing on his forehead to their proper place in front of his eyes.) Ah! (He begins again) "Ladies and gentlemen (- he gestures a thank you to the APPRENTICE -), it is with great pride that I present to you a most singular cook, one of the very biggest in our business. Please join me in welcoming that enormous talent, the one and only (- finishing extemporaneously, with an accompanying musical fanfare) - Master Chef!

(With that, two Master Chefs make their grand entrance – “grand” as in “big;” they are both impossibly fat. And they are wearing spotless toques and aprons.)

BOTH CHEFS

Thank you! *(They stop and look at each other.)* Excuse me? *(A pause.)* What are you -? *(Another pause, then to the HEAD OF SCHOOL in an overly friendly way)* What is he doing here?

HEAD OF SCHOOL

Oh dear, I must have asked you *both* by mistake. ...Still, it's all for the best, isn't it? Think what your *shared* wisdom and experience can bring to the table. What do you say, Chefs?

CHEF 1

(ingenuously)

A privilege.

CHEF 2

(the same)

A pleasure.

(The two CHEFS eye one another up and down as they cross down center of the workstation for a perfunctory greeting. But their big bellies get in the way of successful cheek kissing.)

HEAD OF SCHOOL

(to audience, indicating CHEF 2)

This chef's been awarded a record six –

CHEF 2

Seven!

HEAD OF SCHOOL

- seven Silver Spoon Citations! *(CHEF reveals these awards – shiny silver spoons worn as medals on his chest.)* And this Chef *(indicating CHEF 1)* is a recipient of the...uh...

CHEF 1

Congressional Kettle of Honor!

(He reveals that award, a small golden kettle worn on a ribbon around his neck. The APPRENTICE runs over and very enthusiastically shakes their hands, too.)

APPRENTICE

Oh, my gosh! You've both been my idols since about forever! I'll be grateful for any advice you can give.

CHEF 2

(to APPRENTICE)

Good. And let *me* be the first to congratulate you on having reached this critical juncture in your epicurean education.

(A perplexed APPRENTICE mouths "epicurean?" to the audience.)

CHEF 1

(slapping the APPRENTICE – hard – on the back, practically knocking him down)

Yeah. It's your big day, Sugar Pie. But don't you worry. It's gonna be a piece of cake with me here to help you –

CHEF 2

(indicating the audience)

- help feed this multitude.

HEAD OF SCHOOL

See, boy, you're in good hands -

APPRENTICE

(hands in the oven mitts from his tool belt, a feeble joke)

or mitts. *(A rim-shot sounds. However, the APPRENTICE sees that the CHEFS don't find this particularly amusing. To HEAD OF SCHOOL) I don't mind telling you I'm a little nervous cooking in the presence of these two giants, sir.*

HEAD OF SCHOOL

No need to be if you simply remember to follow the Cooks' Code of Conduct.

(He points to a chart on the wall. [Each of the rules on the chart can be easily removed and just as easily broken in half.] Music.)

OTHERS

(removing their toques and holding them over their hearts)

The Cooks' Code of Conduct!

APPRENTICE

(reciting by memory, with Code Theme underscoring)

Keep Your Nose Out Of Other Chefs' Pots.

Spread Jam, Not Rumors.

Don't Dish Out Disrespect.

Never Feed An Ego. *(And adding the clarifying postscript)* Especially your own!

HEAD OF SCHOOL

Well done!

APPRENTICE

Thank you, sir. I just hope you all approve of what I do.

HEAD OF SCHOOL

Only one way to find out. We'll start with the first course – the ...uh...

ALL OTHERS

Appetizer!

HEAD OF SCHOOL

Precisely. And we'll begin your exam by having... *(-he is having difficulty deciding which chef to begin with, a problem resolved by CHEF 1's lifting the old man by the collar and pulling him close-)* ... this Master Chef *(indicating CHEF 1)* take charge.

CHEF 1

Appetizers being a specialty of mine.

HEAD OF SCHOOL

Very good. *(To APPRENTICE, revealing an egg-timer)* Now, of course, you have to complete the meal in the allotted time. I'm as hungry as a...as a...a... *(JULIA tries to help him out by "whinnying." The old man looks at her, gratefully)* ...a bird! And besides, these guests *(- he looks for the audience again; the APPRENTICE points them out -)* don't have all day, you know. *(He sets the egg timer.)* The clock is ticking!

(We hear the "tick-tock" as he heads off, although not in the right direction, the APPRENTICE steering him off the right way. The sound of the timer fades with the resumption of the dialog.)

CHEF 1

So what have you got in mind, Lamb Chop?

APPRENTICE

(picking up several utensils and/or ingredients)

Well, I've been working on this new idea for a simple little starter dish.

CHEF 2

“Hors d’oeuvre.”

(CHEF 1 gives him a look; CHEF 2 politely backs off.)

CHEF 1

*(slapping him hard on the back,
causing his utensils and/or ingredients to fly out of his hands)*

Go for it, Honey Bun!

(Music begins, underscoring the preparation of the appetizer as the APPRENTICE gets to work, perhaps humming along as he does so, maybe even every now and again providing a bit of kitchen utensil percussion. The dove joins in with birdsong, but also in the creation of the appetizer itself. Different things can happen. For example, along the way, the APPRENTICE might begin to sprinkle on some ingredient, but the bird whistles “not a good idea.” So the APPRENTICE stops, finds an alternative, and checks for and receives the bird’s approval. At one point the APPRENTICE shows an ingredient to the audience.)

APPRENTICE

Walnut. *(He carries it over to the windowsill, where, with a sound-effect, JULIA chops it with her beak. He shows the result to the audience.)* Chopped walnut. *(He sprinkles the bits onto the appetizer in progress. Near its completion, the APPRENTICE sniffs his creation, and indicates that it’s not quite there yet. The dove flutters away and returns with a sprig of something that the APPRENTICE removes from her beak.)* Basil? *(He adds it to the appetizer, and discovers that it does the trick, and indicates so appreciatively to the dove. Along with the music, there is a real harmony in the way the two work together to create this offering on a small plate that ultimately looks lovely and smells delicious. The Apprentice proudly takes a step back from the workstation and both he and the bird admire their creation before he signals its completion to CHEF 1. He looks at it. Looks at the APPRENTICE. The APPRENTICE and bird look at each other. The CHEF looks back at the appetizer, and then once again at the APPRENTICE, who then nervously addresses the audience.)* Would someone care to taste-test this sample?

(Hands are raised. The APPRENTICE begins to take the appetizer into the audience but is physically restrained by CHEF 1.)

CHEF 1

Sweet Pea, that’s a very...*interesting* attempt.

CHEF 2
(to self and/or audience)

Indescribably so.

CHEF 1
(carrying the plate back to the station)

But remember, the appetizer's got to be an...invitation.

(As the music resumes – although perhaps with a slightly different flavor - the APPRENTICE acknowledges this and adds something to the appetizer. The APPRENTICE lifts the plate and starts to bring it again to the audience to sample, but is stopped almost immediately by CHEF 2, who can't help but offer his invaluable input.)

CHEF 2
Not to mention a sensory stimulation.

CHEF 1
(giving 2 a nasty look and pointing to the Code of Conduct)
Ahem! (Reading) **“Keep Your Nose Out Of Other Chefs’ Pots”!**

CHEF 2
(backing off)
Just trying to be helpful.

CHEF 1
Thank you, I'm sure. *(Then to the APPRENTICE)* You see, you need to tease those tiny taste buds. *(The APPRENTICE adds another item, but it clearly falls short of meeting the CHEF's approval.)* Now, what you're trying to do here is awaken the appetite - and please the eye. *(The APPRENTICE adds another layer and thinks he's now ready to serve the appetizer, but CHEF 1 is still not satisfied.)*

[It should be noted here that each of these additions to follow should become more and more outlandish. The premiere production featured everything from a plastic lobster to a rubber chicken, as the appetizer grew more ludicrous and unwieldy. And throughout, CHEF 2 struggles to suppress his urge to insert himself into the process.]

And, of course, provide Color. *(The APPRENTICE applies another layer, starts again to serve, but is stopped yet again.)* Texture. *(Another layer.)* Character. *(Another.)* Contour. *(Another.)* Contrast. *(Another.)* Proportion. *(Another.)* Symmetry; it's all catawampus. *(Another.)* And Balance! *(Still another layer, but by now, towering high, the appetizer has become rather unbalanced, precariously so.)*

PURCHASE PERUSAL FOR FULL SCRIPT