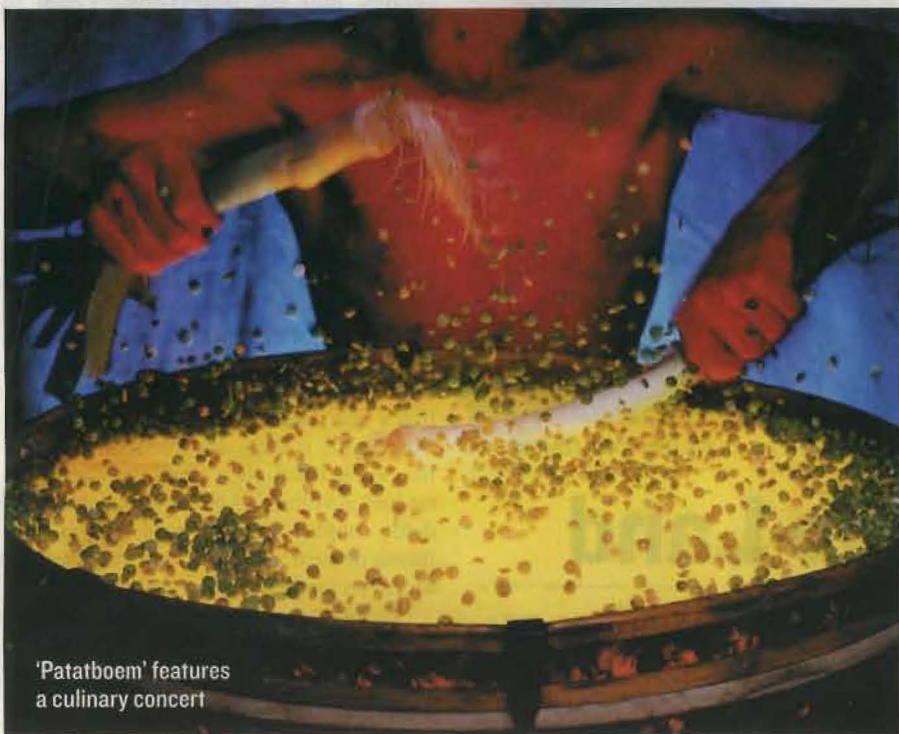


Dinner as Theater

Audiences rush to digest a spate of plays starring food



'Patatboom' features a culinary concert

BY SARAH SENNOTT

INSIDE A LARGE STORAGE SHACK IN Ghent, Belgium, ticketholders arriving to see "Rantsoen" are handed glasses of ginger beer as they pass through a chaotic kitchen. Live chickens are running around, and the smells of coconut milk, spices and plantain fill the air. The 32 audience members take their seats around a circular table to watch the drama about seven newly arrived immigrants—which includes a meal the audience eat with their hands. "Eating has everything theater has: the rules, the relationships of people, the moments of revelation, the relaxation," says British director Renny O'Shea, who created the play. "Something magical happens when we sit around the table and eat."

On stages across the world, food is increasingly being cast in a lead role. In the St. Petersburg play "Lexicon," an actor cleans, cuts, stuffs, cooks and serves fish to sellout crowds—all while reciting Serb writer Milorad Pavich's philosophical stories. In London's "Patatboom," audience members sit at tables set for eight while eight Belgian chefs and musicians perform a "culinary concert," making music from chopping vegetables, clanging pans and whisk-drumsticks. The round

stage looks like a cross between a mad scientist's laboratory and an ultramodern kitchen: beakers filled with fluorescent green liquid rest on silver carts and a large chandelier packed with green peas hangs overhead. In New York, no fewer than seven productions currently incorporate cooking into performances.

Call it the new dinner theater: a splendid recipe of drama, entertainment, exotic food and—in some cases—the chance to chow down. In a society where chefs like Jamie Oliver and Wolfgang Puck are treated like movie stars and televised cooking shows have won a huge following, creating stage drama out of cooking seems only natural. In fact, the trend is not entirely new: "kitchen-sink dramas" where meals and domestic chores are used to depict working-class life have graced the stage since the 1950s. But now food—representing comfort, fellowship, nourishment, acceptance—is increasingly being used to help audiences digest some difficult issues onstage.

Complicated family relationships are one thing being effectively explored through cooking. In "Dinner with Demons," food columnist Jonathan Reynolds regales New York audiences with familiar stories of family feuds—along with cooking tips and humorous asides—while deep-frying a turkey. Israeli actor Nessim Zohar reveals the difficult relationship he had with his mother as he cooks *molocheya*, an Egyptian national dish, in "My Mother's Soup," which is touring internationally. "The soup has become the main character, and I am the supporting cast," says Zohar. He began serving the soup after weepy audiences at the first few performances stormed the stage when he moved to throw it out at the end. But it wasn't just the aroma of coriander and cumin that drove the voracious crowds, says Zohar; they were moved by the emotional appeal of the son's redeeming himself by cooking his mother's favorite dish. "They want to try it out of compassion," he says.

Other new dramas look to food for greater insight into political conflict. Last September British playwright Robin Soans went to Gaza and the West Bank to research how people carried on in the face of brutally tense Arab-Israeli relations. Soans found his answer in the homes, restaurants and cafés he visited. In "The Arab-Israeli Cookbook," now playing in

London, 42 characters describe their daily lives—driving buses, shopping at the market, preparing meals—from the words Soans collected. "Food [in Israel] stands for permanence in an impermanent world," he says. It also highlights the differences between Israeli and Arab lifestyles. *Fattoush*, a traditional Arab dish made of bread and vegetable leftovers, takes on deeper significance when Fadi, an Arab boy, describes how it has become a staple in his



SUPPORTING ROLE: Zohar cooks his mother's soup

dict since the second *intifada*; at the same time he has come to loathe the Greek salad, considered ultratrendy among Israelis.

In many of the new plays, though, cuisine unifies more than it divides. "Food is the most basic human thing," says O'Shea. "Everybody eats in their own way, yet it unites everyone." Audiences linger for hours after "Rantsoen," chatting with the immigrants who have performed the play. Why not? They've already eaten.

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