



DINNER THEATRE ATLANTIC STYLE

It may not be haute culture, but regional dinner theatre is as entertaining as it is engaging—and what began as a celebration of local traditions has become a local tradition in itself

by Mike Allison



At left, Friends (Buds) at the Halifax Feast: the lives, loves, music and laughter of six inseperable friends. Top left: ? Above: More Frients (Buds). Top right: Ed Kennedy, Yarmouth Festive Dinner Theatre.



Thirty years ago on a Saturday night, Don Groom sat stewing in his empty dance club.

He had opened a discotheque in January, 1979, and faster than you could say “Boogie

Oogie Oogie,” disco in Summerside, PEI, went the way of pet rocks and poodle skirts. A tragicomic story, but a story with a happy ending: from the ashes of disco, Summerside gave rise to a form of entertainment the region had never seen.

Three years earlier Groom was at a medieval feast show in Texas with a buxom wench on his lap. Knights, jesters and horseshoes filled the arena while Groom ate with his fingers, and envisioned what the PEI version of all this might look like. He filed the idea away until he was faced with an empty room in the basement of his family restaurant, and his thoughts returned to the wenches. Through contacts at the Charlottetown Festival, Groom was introduced to Briane Nasimok, who had already amassed a list of acting, writing and directing credits longer than a Cheticamp winter, and together they invented the concept of regional dinner theatre as we know it today.

The term “dinner theatre” applies to pretty much any meal-entertainment combo, with roots probably tracing back to cave-men telling jokes over mastodon steaks. In present-day North America, the term generally refers to dinner and a show. The meal usually comes before the entertainment, and the fourth wall, the imaginary divide between audience and performers, is seldom broken.

However, Groom and Nasimok’s feast concept was different: it involved a four-course meal served around a three-act musical comedy, with audience interaction throughout. The actors sing, dance, play instruments, and serve food and drinks while remaining in character—from the moment they seat the audience until they take their final bows.

“Because the performers literally do everything, they appear to be ‘real’ people, who the audience can and want to relate with,” says Nasimok.

The feast format—which has since been adopted by theatre companies across Canada—gives the audience control over the

tone of the show. “The audience acts as another cast member,” says longtime actor/director Gwen Dawson. This is especially true during the unscripted meal breaks, when characters converse with audience members at their tables—who many times try to make the actors break character. Nasimok tells the story of an original “Feastie,” Claudette Gaudet, who played the recurring role of a gruff cook. One night an audience member called her over to complain about a fly in his soup. When she got there, she found a zipper in his chowder bowl. Unfazed, Gaudet told him he’d better eat it or he’d get no supper. He put the zipper in his mouth until she left.

This sort of contact between actors and audience is not exclusive to Atlantic Canada—interactive dinner theatre takes place across North America—but this region features such a high concentration of companies following the feast format because of how people see themselves as Atlantic Canadians. The East Coast has proud, strong ties to its past. The earliest shows on PEI, The Governor’s Feast and The Prohibition Feast, centred on real politicians and rumrunners. Spirit of Newfoundland’s inaugural show celebrated the 500th anniversary of John Cabot’s exploration of the region, while Grafton Street Dinner Theatre’s Comin’ Home saw World War II soldiers returning to Halifax, and Cuisine a Mémé’s Vive la Différence found residents of Mont Carmel, PEI, remembering the expulsion of the Acadians. When shows have a historical context, the cast needs to be well versed on the time and place in question; Nasimok gave his cast a test on local history before opening night.

More recently, shows about specific artists, groups, decades and genres of music have grown popular. The Spirit of Newfoundland had success with Viva Lost Elvis and Sinatra on the Rocks, and, strangely, Don Groom brought more people through the door with the disco-themed Stayin’ Alive than his discotheque ever did.

“Quite often dinner theatres reference some major cultural touchstone, be it a TV show or a movie,” says Charlie Rhindress, co-founder and artistic director of Live Bait Theatre in Sackville, NB. “What I have discovered in almost 20 years of



The playbill and cast of Spirit of Newfoundland Productions, far left and above, staging *Every Joan Dick & Harry*. Far right: Dave Cantwell and Lisa Gallant, in Live Bait Theatre's *A Desperate Maritime Christmas*.

producing theatre is that people love to hear their own stories." So local flavour has remained a key ingredient in Live Bait's dinner theatre shows like *Desperate Maritime Housewives* and *A Desperate Maritime Christmas*. "It takes 'our story' and puts it into the context of a much larger popular culture."

Jim Petrie at Halifax Feast has perfected the art of spoofing pop culture while adding a local twist. Titles like *Phantom of the Fishplant*, *The Cod Father* and *The Cape-prentice* elicit chuckles before the show even gets underway. Using pop culture touchstones helps to keep from alienating the tourists who make up a large percentage of ticket sales, but even when the humour stays close to home, it's never meant as an inside joke. Visitors are invited to laugh at us as we laugh at ourselves.

"When you have people over for a scoff and a few drinks, you go all out—full spread," says Craig Haley, who performed in several shows in Newfoundland before going on tour with *Celebrations Dinner Theatre* out west. *Celebrations*—which got its start thanks to Grafton Street's writer/director/manager and all 'round dinner theatre queen Cyndi Locke—follows the feast format, except that the music is pre-recorded, and while the actors do interact at tables, they do not serve food.

Productions aim not only to entertain, but also to enlighten audience members about local culture. As Kathy Hicks of *The Spirit of Newfoundland* says: "We have built a reputation for being kind, hospitable, funny, probably talented, colourful, accessible, non-threatening, musical, lovers of life. The dinner-and-show presentation gives an audience member all of that wrapped up in one."

Maybe the feast format works so well here because it lets us feel at home—even part of the entertainment—when we're out for the evening. Instead of sitting in rows of seats facing a distant stage, we face our family or friends across a table of food,

making the experience more social. "As part of the cast, we are in a room both with friends we know and friends we're getting to know," says Gwen Dawson. According to Ed Kennedy, writer, director and performer with *The Festive Dinner Theatre* in Yarmouth, NS, "if the performers are doing their job right, people should be hugging them after the show."

Traditional local cuisine also comes into play. PEI's *La Cuisine a Mémé* has featured French-style galettes blanc, and *Le Pays de la Sagouine*, in Bouctouche, NB, advertises a traditional Acadian Christmas Dinner with its seasonal show. Originally *The Feast on PEI* featured a lobster supper. Don Groom remembers sending a cast on tour to Peace River, Alta., in 1985 with a cargo of PEI lobsters, but lobster has since priced its way off dinner theatre menus. Still, patrons of *Waterstreet* in Saint John, NB, are teased by walking through *Steamers Lobster Co.* on their way to the theatre, and if you go to the *Halifax Feast* you might get to kiss a lobster as a Maritime initiation, the way Newfoundlanders "Screech in" visitors by having them kiss a cod. Seafood and dinner theatre still go hand-in-hand: many places serve mussels as an appetizer, and Grafton Street boasts the best seafood chowder in Halifax.

Dinner theatre people understand the healing power of laughter. They all have stories of audience members approaching them after the show, saying, "I just lost a loved one" or "I've got the most painful arthritis" or "I've had the worst week," and then adding, "but I forgot all about that for the past three hours." Elaine Walcott, a minister and spiritual-care practitioner at the *IWK Health Centre* in Halifax, prescribes a night at a dinner theatre to patients stressed over impending test results or overwhelmed by family gatherings. "It's soul therapy," she says. "You enter into a comforting space and have your soul healed and rested."



Above: Audience members party on. Right: Devin MacDonald, Victoria Parker and Anders Balerston, harmonizing during a performance of *I Got You Babe*, at the Yarmouth Festive Dinner Theatre.



"We deal in fun and happy endings," says Briane Nasimok. He's the first to admit that the feast format is far from haute culture. Dinner theatre is to "capital T" theatre what professional wrestling is to the world of sports. It's looked down upon by people in some camps but there's no denying its popularity, and as more and more people are discovering, it plays an important part in the region's arts scene. "Fifteen years ago this was not the case," says Cyndi Locke. "Our audiences did not cross over to the concert halls and Neptune Theatre. Now the format is known and accepted as a theatrical alternative." Matt Stewart, director for *The Feast* on PEI, calls it a gateway genre. "People who wouldn't normally go to a play might change their minds after seeing a dinner theatre show."

At Live Bait, Charlie Rhindress and Karen Valanne recognize the debt classical theatre owes its less-sophisticated cousin. Live Bait's ability to continue offering main-stage productions would be in jeopardy without the revenue created by its dinner theatre, quite literally their bread and butter.

On its website, *The Spirit of Newfoundland* displays its objective proudly: "The development of productions that celebrate and enhance the rich spirit, culture and talent of Newfoundland and Labrador." Other dinner theatres might not come right out and say it, and some don't even realize it, but they're doing the same for their respective corners of the region. *Feast Dinner Theatres*, Atlantic Canada's longest-running dinner theatre, celebrates its 30th anniversary this summer, and unlike disco and pet rocks, it's here to stay. It's clear that what began as a celebration of local traditions has since become a tradition in itself.

Mike Allison is a writer, singer, songwriter and comedian from Florenceville, NB.



HERE ARE A FEW HOTSPOTS IN WHICH TO DISCOVER YOUR INNER IMPROV—AS AN AUDIENCE "CAST MEMBER."

Bouctouche, NB

Le Pays de la Sagouine (all shows in French), Jul 11–Aug 22: *Y'a une Étoile*. Jul 19–Aug 23: *La Sagouine*. sagouine.com or (800) 561-9188

Moncton, NB

McSweeney Co. Dinner Theatre, May 23–Aug 2: *This is Your Life*. mcsweeneytheatreco.com or (506) 857-9114

Sackville, NB

Live Bait Theatre, Jul 1–12: *Uh-oh, Canada!* Jul 29–Aug 9: *Wedding on the Marsh*. livebaittheatre.com or (888) 655-2448

Saint John, NB

Phoenix Dinner Theatre, Jan 28–Aug 2: *Flower Power II*. Aug 7–Nov. 1: *Simply Irresistible*. phoenixdinnertheatre.com or (506) 693-8728.

Waterstreet Dinner Theatre, Apr–Nov: *Flight 6 Niner*. waterstreetdinnertheatre.com or (506) 648-2325.

Halifax

Grafton St. Dinner Theatre, Jun 6–Oct 5: *Mairi's Bestfriend's Wedding*. graftonstdinnertheatre.com or (902) 425-1961.

Halifax Feast Dinner Theatre, Feb–June: *Freints (buds)*. Jun–Nov: *Cape Breton Idle III*. feastdinnertheatre.com or 902) 420-1840.

Yarmouth

Festive Dinner Theatre, Jun 20–Aug 31: *Can't Buy Me Love*. (902) 742-4645

Charlottetown

Charlottetown Feast Dinner Theatres, Jun 20–Aug 30: *The Nearlyweds*. peisland.com/feast or (877) 748-1010.

Summerside, PEI

Summerside Feast Dinner Theatres, Jun 13–Aug 30: *Victoria's Secret...* peisland.com/feast or (877) 748-1010.

Ferryland, NL

Southern Shore Folk Arts Council, Jun 27–Sep 5: *Away With Ya!* ssfac.com or (888) 332-2052.

Grand Falls-Windsor, NL

Queen St. Dinner Theatre, Jul 3–Aug 28: *This Diamond Ring*. Jul 9–Aug 26: *Mudder's Kitchen Party II*. andco.nf.ca or (877) 822-7469.