



Cooking with Elisa UPSTREAM THEATER

Bonnie Taylor, DIRECTION: *Cooking with Elisa* is about the dynamics of power and greed. The production of food—elaborate dishes from French cuisine—is the play’s main action, and the kitchen stands for the economic system within which the two characters, chef Nicole and apprentice Elisa, are bound. To make that system seem real, I chose to have a detailed kitchen—a stove with glowing burners, a full set of copperware, baskets brimming with oiled vegetables of lush color, and rabbits and pheasants hanging from the rafters, fresh from the hunt and dripping with blood. The play is an allegory, and it uses fairy tale conventions—impossible tasks, ridiculously excessive portions for the never-seen employers, an ingénue as vulnerable as Snow White, and other characters who bring to mind evil witches or ogres with an unstoppable desire for “fresh meat.” The design reflects this, with its slightly skewed walls and oversized arches.

Because Laragione’s play is a fable about the succession of military regimes in Argentina—specifically the Dirty War from 1976 to 1983,

during which thousands of political dissidents were “disappeared” and the babies of young women were distributed to the families of the military—the design had a Latin American flavor, with stucco walls, tile floors and rough-hewn beams. As the play goes on, the dishes gradually require the butchering of larger animals with greater violence, and the fate of the now-pregnant Elisa seems more uncertain. So the kitchen had to transform from pastoral landscape to torture chamber. The walls in certain light began to appear as palettes for stretched skins crudely sewn together; the cross-beams become prison bars; and the hooks and chains seemed ever more menacing.

Scott C. Neale, SET DESIGN: Most of our research for this design came from looking at images of estates in South America, called *estancias*. I also looked at food paintings by Goya and other masters. A great tragedy occurs in this play, but I didn’t want to give it away in the set design—the place had to feel comfortable, warm, not dirty,

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER WOCHNIAK

as though Nicole, the cook, had taken good care of it, although it’s been used generation after generation. It is very much the working kitchen of a prosperous estate. The only way to get to the rest of the estate is via the stairs on the left, so there’s a subterranean feel to the room—when Elisa comes into the situation, she feels claustrophobic and oppressed, by the room, by Nicole’s personality and by the brutality that occurs in the preparation of the food. Annie Wrightson’s wonderful lighting sculpts the room and enables it to evolve from a kitchen to a kind of gruesome-looking prison, with walls made of stretched animal hides.

Kim Wilson, PROPS DESIGN: We started with the impression that this newly translated play was about meat and more meat! So one major task was casting the bodies of animals: There was a boar’s head cast in silicone, then finished in plaster; the rabbits you see hanging are cast in urethane foam. What you can’t see is that they’re

modified puppets—since the play is an allegory, we softened the realism, so the horrific nature of the food preparation wouldn’t overwhelm the story.



The U.S. premiere of Lucía Laragione’s *Cooking with Elisa*, in an English version by Philip Boehm, ran Jan. 7–23 at Upstream Theater of St. Louis, Mo., under Bonnie Taylor’s direction. The production featured set design by Scott C. Neale, lighting design by Ann Wrightson, costume design by Michele Siler and props design by Kim Wilson. In photo, Shanara Gabrielle, left, and Jane Paradise.