

***TableTalk*: Staging Intimacy Across Distance Through Shared Meals**

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Abstract

This article explores how commensality, or the shared meal, can be used to structure a series of scenes between two characters in different locations, using *TableTalk*, a play in development by Danielle Laurin and myself, as an example of the potential for long-distance commensality in theatre. The play focuses on a long-distance relationship and I argue that, by setting the play around a series of shared meals, believable intimacy can be achieved across distance. To begin, I offer a framework for understanding commensality in general, commensality in theatre, and finally commensality across distance. I next provide analysis of how commensality is used in our conceptualisation of *TableTalk* specifically, looking at the experience of each location and performer separately before discussing how the two performers interact with one another and achieve a believable remote dining experience. Finally, I suggest how the experimentation with multi-location shared meals done so far in *TableTalk* may provide grounding for future theatrical experimentation.

There is something inherently social about sharing a meal. A silent meal is considered to be strained; generally, new acquaintances and close-knit families alike converse over a meal, interact and share more than just broken bread. Shared meals make for good playwriting too; they are a natural setting for meaningful dialogue with built-in action. What happens however when a meal is shared across distance - say, across national borders and connected solely through a web-based portal?

In *TableTalk*, a multi-location one-act play in development, my creative partner Danielle Laurin and I explore this concept by having two characters who are in a long-distance relationship regularly eat dinner together via Skype. This is dramatized by having each performer in a separate performance location (A and B) with a separate audience. Like their characters in the narrative, the performers experience the unique challenges of a long-distance relationship by acting against a partner who is virtually rather than

physically present. Likewise, each audience group encounters one performer who is physically present and one who is virtually present.

In a workshop on December 2, 2016 held in Blacksburg, Virginia, the distance between performance spaces was limited to different rooms in the same building, but *TableTalk* has the potential to be staged across limitless distance, even across national borders. Future performers may not even have met in person, rehearsing and performing exclusively long-distance. It is the universality of sharing a meal that would allow the performers to create and maintain a believable intimacy between their characters, regardless of physical distance.

More than the specifics of the play, the development of *TableTalk* serves as a testing ground for the potential of long-distance commensality in theatre. I argue that the commensal model provides fertile ground for writing multi-location theatre that feels coherent and authentic for audiences.

Sharing More Than Just Food

To understand the potential of multi-location shared meals in theatre-making, it is important to first recognize the value of shared meals in identity formation. The act of eating together, termed commensality by sociologists, is a global social practice and useful for analysis of communities, cultures, and customs (Julier 3). Who is invited to a shared meal, who prepares said meal, and who steers the conversation during the mealtime are all factors that serve to establish and/or enforce individual and group identities that continue outside of mealtime. Much can therefore be inferred from observing a commensal meal.

As a conceptual model, commensality has three dimensions: interaction, symbolic, and normative. Sociologist Claudia Giacoman describes them as such:

First, mealtime has an interactional dimension, as members of a group gather together with their peers at a designated place and time, and these members

interact and develop shared, reciprocal actions. Second, this practice holds a symbolic dimension, as it is charged with meaning for those participating in it, benchmarking their feelings of belonging to a group. Third, eating together has a normative dimension, as it entails the staging of norms carried out by diners and the control over those norms (463).

When staging a commensal meal, all three dimensions but especially the symbolic must be taken into consideration. The interaction dimension in particular poses a challenge for long-distance commensality, however the notion of “meeting” at a designated place and time and interacting can still be played out, albeit virtually rather than physically. Additionally, the symbolic and normative dimensions can still occur relatively similarly to how they would in a traditional shared meal.

In the framework of theatre, the recurring traits of commensality can provide context both for understanding specific characters and for understanding their relationship to each other. A gathering of people eating together provides an immediately recognizable scene for audiences, needing no setup or explanation. As detailed in Dorothy Chansky and Folino White’s seminal *Food and Theatre on the World Stage*, ‘the close embrace between food and theatre...is evident across centuries and continents not only in dramatic texts, theatrical devices, and theatre architecture, but also as an audience requirement’ (2). More attention can then be given to establishing characters through the dialogue facilitated by mealtimes, their physicality while eating, and/or by their placement around a dinner table. Routines of commensality reveal the structure of social life outside of mealtimes (Sobel and Nelson 188) and can be used to effectively set up structure in theatre. If a play includes more than one shared meal, which patterns continue and which are broken can be suggestive of developments in the relationships between characters.

Beyond the social element of a shared meal, the meal itself can also be informative to an observant audience. The effect of a

family partaking in a grandiose meal is very different from that of a family sharing a pizza. The truism ‘you are what you eat’ makes for an effective theatrical tool - audiences deduce certain things about the character who chooses the tofu burger over the filet mignon. This is in line with Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, in which taste is inherently linked to class position and works at a subconscious level (170). That is, audiences can make connections between the food consumed and the consumer without conscious effort. Lorie Brau and David Jortner’s analysis of the role of food in Betsuyaku Minoru’s Japanese plays comes to mind as an example, where they argue that ‘food symbolises a particular vision [of Japan which]...celebrates certain cultural self-images and suppresses others...[reinforcing] the audience’s received ideas about their culinary culture’ (80). Perhaps this is why food has been used centrally in theatre since in early in its history.

Cooking And Dining On Stage

The relationship between food and theatre can be traced as far back as classical Greek plays and has remained steadfast ever since, despite Bertolt Brecht’s critique of culinary theatre as ‘mere indulgence or self-medication’ (Chansky and Folino White 1). As early as the nineteenth century, performers have taken on the challenge of preparing and eating actual food onstage in an effort to add realism to theatre and have successfully added moral, social, political, religious, and cultural dimensions to their work through use of food (2, 4). While there are obvious challenges presented by the inclusion of real food in productions, the immersive payoff of not just the visual and auditory but also aromatic markers for theatergoers can be substantial.

One of the benefits of including real food in a production, and particularly freshly cooked foods, is the added sensory pull on the audience into the world of the play. The live preparation of food and the subsequent preparation of the dining space is innately relatable (Hemming 15). If an audience is small enough, they will be able to smell the meal and experience it almost as if they too are at the dinner

table. In the case of works such as the collaborative *Chef's Theater: A Musical Feast* (2004), which features songs from Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty, Andrew Lippa, and Marcy Heisler and Zina Goldrich, and Gary William Friedman's *The Last Supper* (2003), the audience even gets to consume the meal that is prepared (Chansky and Folino White 7). This added interaction narrows the divide between audience and art.

Of course, that is also the challenge. Cooking and eating onstage requires attention to detail and impeccable timing, not to mention performers who are competent enough in the kitchen to avoid overcooking a meal or giving the entire cast food poisoning. When it comes to eating onstage, theatre critic Sarah Hemming warns that 'actors have to manage food, lines and expression simultaneously, and audiences are all experts at eating—miming won't convince them.' Despite the challenges, the innumerable ways food can be prepared and consumed makes it a valuable tool in any playwright's arsenal.

Factoring In Distance

Most commensal meals, in life and in art, are shared in the same physical location. Yet with increasing frequency the demands of school, work, and other life factors prevent commensal partners or groups from sharing the same physical space. The solution to this is remote dining. Commensality across distance, or remote dining, is contingent on the use of live video-based technologies to connect two or more individuals who eat their meals in separate locations while sharing in mealtime conversation. (Shaid Ferdous et al. 4) By doing this, they manage to maintain a multisensory social connection despite distance and to share in the experience of eating together. Returning to Giacomani's three commensal dimensions, the long-distance shared meal is most reliant on the symbolic dimension of belonging to a collective experience, extending the interactive dimension beyond the physical and playing out the normative in as close to a traditional shared meal experience as is possible.

Remote dining changes the shared meal in several ways.

First, more planning is required. This is exemplified in a study of connectivity via video conferencing, where ‘participants first communicated with remote users via phone, email or text message *prior* to video conferencing...to inform the other person that they were available and wanted to video conference...This even occurred when both parties had a good understanding of each other’s schedules and availability or they had preset times for calling’ (Judge and Neustaedter 656). Whereas people in the same location can spontaneously decide to share a meal, remote dining requires forethought and careful coordination. Second, there is a greater awareness of shared space as what is visible via video feed is limited and often fixed. A book on the uses of Skype aptly describes this idea as a ‘theatre of composition’ where ‘people quite consciously compose or construct space in order to appear a certain way to others’ (Longhurst 51). This can be extended to the way meals are presented, and whether or not the food itself is prominently framed in view of remote diners. Finally, there is the difference of the food not actually being the same across locations, as one diner may eat a simple ham and cheese sandwich while the other eats a rich stew, fundamentally changing their perceptions of the meal.

While remote dining is not a perfect substitute for a meal shared in the same location, it is a valid form of commensality. Honest communication can still occur over a dining experience shared across distance and therefore identities can still be built. Designating specific expectations and norms (i.e. pre-agreed food and beverage coordination and preparation) shows an effort to make the meal as ‘shared’ as is possible across distance, and to make the meal feel emotionally if not physically connected. In the context of theatre, a remote dining setting provides a unique opportunity for engaging multiple audiences in an experience that is shared yet variable depending upon location.

Multi-Location Shared Meals In *TableTalk*

In *TableTalk*, the initial impression of audiences is completely

contingent upon which location they are attending, as the two sets are completely different. In Location A, the audience sees a performer, Emory, cooking in a small kitchen and dining area. An open laptop sits on a table, the screen projected behind the set. To contrast, Location B is dressed as a bedroom with an open laptop on a desk. The performer in Location B, Joey, is lying on the bed, reading. The only similarity to Location A is the screen projected behind the set. These screens are the gateway for audiences between remote locations, open only when video conferencing is activated by both performers. Both laptops maintain their placement throughout the production, limiting what the Location A audience sees of Location B and vice versa.

Because Emory is cooking in her first scene onstage, the Location A audience (henceforth Audience A) is immersed in the shared meal aspect of the play earlier than the Location B audience (henceforth Audience B). They observe the meal making before the two locations are connected. Audience B meanwhile sees no signs of a meal until video conferencing is initiated and they first see Emory, perhaps noticing she is cooking. The true confirmation of commensality, however, is in the dialogue:

EMORY. Hey! Are you ready?

JOEY. No. But it's still kind of early here and ramen doesn't exactly take a lot of preparation. (3)

In these two lines, the characters indicate that they have previously arranged to share a meal, framing commensality as the impetus for the video call. This trope will carry into every subsequent video call scene, as food is present in both locations for every scene that follows. Because the food changes, the passing of time is implied and shows that shared meals are a key part of maintaining the long-distance relationship between the two characters.

Food in Location A: Emory. Location A is more overtly meal-oriented

than location B, in part because the set is a kitchen and dining area, but also because Emory is preparing meals in some scenes and eating in others. The kitchen includes a stove over an oven, a countertop, and storage space under the countertop. Pots, trays, plates, utensils, and drinkware are all included in the prop list for Location A, along with a detailed array of ingredients and meals. Audiences will quickly deduce that Emory is a character who enjoys cooking and takes great care in the preparation of her food, implying she is mature and detail-oriented. The types of foods she eats—cauliflower crust vegetable pizza, squash spaghetti, kale chips—further suggest that she is very aware of what she consumes.

Food is also used by Emory to express particular emotions. In one scene a kale chip is used as a prop in the expression of her frustration, as follows:

JOEY. Now, you still need to help me pick out a pair of pants, unless you want me to be the laughing stock of the office holiday party.

EMORY. (aggressively bites a kale chip) Wouldn't want that.

JOEY. (pauses by the dresser) Okay, what's wrong?

EMORY. Nothing's wrong.

JOEY. That kale chip says differently.

EMORY. (eats the rest of the chip) What's it say now? (12)

Joey, clearly used to sharing a meal with Emory, is able to read the nonverbal signal Emory is giving her by aggressively eating a kale chip. In another scene, as Emory and Joey have a fight, Emory signals her anger by dropping her fork and getting up from the dinner table. These examples stand in contrast to emotionally calmer moments, in which Emory savors in preparing or eating her meal.

Audience A is able to experience this with the added depth

of the smells of freshly cooked food. There is the potential for the aromas of Emory's meals to fill Location A in a way that only that audience can experience. Audience A also has the benefit of a direct line of sight into Emory's kitchen, while the placement of the laptop in Location A only allows Audience B a limited view of the kitchen in the background of their screen. The effect of this, I imagine, is that Audience A experiences the meals of *TableTalk* as more traditionally commensal than their counterparts in Audience B. The latter are limited by a lack of sensory touchstones, that is, the immediacy of a kitchen/dining area setting or the aromatic triggers of fresh cooked food. Yet, via the visual and auditory connection to Location A, they are still able to partake in the commensal experience to some extent.

Food in Location B: Joey. At first glance Location B is not set up for dining. In fact, there is no food present in Location B for the duration of Joey's initial scenes and the only meal props ever used in Location B are a bowl of ramen with a spoon and a beer bottle. The bowl of ramen, mentioned in some of the first lines of character dialogue and physically added to the set in Scene 3, remains present throughout the rest of the play. Joey's consistency in meal choice suggests to audiences that she is less concerned with what she eats, hinting at her more laidback personality. The kind of repeated meal she chooses—hassle-free and ready in minutes—reinforces this assumption.

Because food is not a central presence for Joey the way it is for Emory, she spends much less time interacting with her meals. The bowl of ramen is placed on her desk or, in Joey's final scene, balanced in her lap while she sits on her bed. This contrasts with Emory's traditional dining setting and further emphasizes that the eating portion of the shared meal is not the priority for Joey. Instead, her focus is more on the social aspects, as she observes Emory cooking or eating more often than she herself eats, not even tasting her ramen onstage until Scene 6.

One thing the shared meal setting does provide for Joey is an opportunity for meaningful conversation. The scene referenced

earlier, where Emory expresses her anger in a fight by stepping away from the table, is brought on by Joey confessing that she has quit her job—a serious admission. In an effort to calm Emory down, Joey first asks her to sit back down at the table and then tries to reengage her in their meal:

JOEY. Look, Can we please just go back to eating our dinner, and you can tell me about the test you're studying for?

EMORY. Joey...

JOEY. Please? You can keep yelling at me later.

EMORY. (pause) You're insufferable.

JOEY. Yep. (takes a bite of ramen, makes a face) I think my ramen froze. (21)

Even though Joey is not as immersed in the dining experience as Emory is, she is still aware of the commensal nature of their interaction and is able to engage it to her advantage.

Like Joey, Audience B is not immediately absorbed in the food aspect of the commensal experience. Joey's ramen is not a focal point for Audience B, however, because they are seeing Emory and by extension her meals on a large screen, they are able to get closer look at what she is eating than Audience A. This second-hand immersion into Emory's dining adds to the shared element of the play overall, and keeps Audience B involved in food aspect of the play. I would hazard that the effect of this is that they are more aware of the remote dining nature of *TableTalk* than their Audience A counterparts, given they are experiencing commensality more acutely at a distance.

Acknowledgement of Shared Meal. For the commensality of *TableTalk* to be effective in structuring the play and building the characters' individual and shared identities, overt acknowledgement of the shared meals is key. As previously stated, the first exchange between

Emory and Joey is in reference to their plans to share a meal. In the continuation of that scene, a pattern of teasing about what each party is eating is developed, as Emory disapproves of Joey's ramen and Joey expresses her aversion to Joey's healthier meal choices:

JOEY. I love that crap!

EMORY. You're impossible. (checks watch, places pizza tray in oven, then fully faces computer) Just a few minutes and my pizza is ready.

JOEY. Your weird cauliflower crust pizza?

EMORY. There's nothing weird about my pizza!

JOEY. Mhmm. (3-4)

This is a pattern that will be repeated in subsequent scenes as a mutual acknowledgement from the characters of their shared meal and as a marker of their familiarity with one another's dining habits. This gives not only the play but also their meals a format to follow.

Time passes quickly in between scenes of the play, adding to the importance of a consistent commensal structure. Because the significance of shared meals comes from repetition, as 'each meal carries something of the meaning of the other meals...[and] is a structured social event which structures others in its own image,' it is important to note that Emory and Joey are implied to share many meals not shown in the play, including some while in the same physical location (Douglas 69). Towards the end of the play, with the characters soon to be inhabiting the same physical space, reference is made to their different food preferences and how they will navigate the discrepancy:

EMORY. Are you sure you're ready for three whole months of me?

JOEY. Are you kidding? Three months won't be enough.

EMORY. I'm just saying, you've probably

gotten used to your bachelorette lifestyle—underwear on the floor, the cap off the toothpaste..

JOEY. Ramen. (takes a bite of ramen for emphasis)

EMORY. Exactly. Your stomach may not be able to handle real food anymore.

JOEY. We'll figure it out. (26)

Though the exchange is short and light, the implication is that Joey will acquiesce to Emory as the primary meal-preparer, despite regularly expressing reservation or disgust in response to Emory's meal choices. It is possible, though unconfirmed in the text, that Emory may also change what she cooks to better suit Joey's taste. Their willingness to find commonality in their meal choice shows their commitment to continuing to regularly share meals and, by extension, maintain the bond that commensality affords.

Commensal Intimacy. Like all character-driven art, *TableTalk's* effectiveness hinges on the chemistry between its characters. Audiences of *TableTalk* will quickly register that Emory and Joey are in a long-distance relationship, in part because of their use of shared meals. It is clear early on that their shared meals serve at least in part as a date, and given that 'in many traditional cultures, eating together, for a pair, is a highly sensitive, even suggestive, situation,' this can then serve as evidence to audiences that the two characters are dating without need for verbal confirmation (Fishler 533). Once their status as dating is established, success is measured by whether or not the audiences find the relationship to be believable and relatable.

Given the limitations of remote dining, how the characters navigate their limited shared space determines if they are able to achieve a convincing intimacy. A study of how video conferencing is used found that, not surprisingly, 'adults without children primarily used video conferencing for *conversation*. Here the webcam was used

solely to watch the other person, their gestures, and body language' (Judge and Neustaedter 656). Conversation is certainly the focus of *TableTalk*'s video conferencing, and observation of each other's movements is prevalent. Joey in particular generally stays in one placement for the duration of their video calls, and becomes agitated when Emory goes in and out of camera shot:

JOEY. —could you please sit back down?

EMORY. (stops pacing) What?

JOEY. You're making me dizzy. (EMORY drops back into her chair, glaring)
Thank you. (20)

Joey prefers being able to observe her partner, while Emory is more comfortable with movement. The only time Joey moves around more is when she is holding potential outfits to wear for Emory to see, consistent with Judge and Neustaedter's finding that video conferencing was at times used to show objects pertinent to the conversation (656). It is also crucial that both characters are comfortable with the technology, making intimacy easier to achieve given the performers are also part of the audience. This is a complexity shared with other multi-location pieces, including Paul Sermon's *Second Life*, which allows for a unique connection between performers and audience (Sermon 174). Because the audience and performer in Location A have the same view of the performer in Location B, they are similarly implicated in the narrative. Discussing the use of projection above the actors in *The Waves*, an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's book of the same name, Jefferies and Papadaki claim that 'the use of technical means...created a platform for an intimate momentum between the audience and the stage' as the production used sound and live video images to explore the themes of time and death (196). This is similar to what was experienced by those present at the staged reading of *TableTalk*, who reported feeling drawn in by the live video feed to the performer in the other location.

Another factor towards creating long-distance intimacy

is that audience must believe that remote dining is a new norm for Emory and Joey and still being navigated after having been accustomed to interacting in the same physical space. Joey expresses her frustration after their plans for a visit fall through:

JOEY. I want to see you. (EMORY steps back and gestures sarcastically to herself with her hands.) You know what I mean.

EMORY. What's it going to take? A striptease in my kitchen?

JOEY. That'd be nice. (EMORY flicks JOEY off. She laughs.) You really can't spare a weekend? (5-6)

This points to the adjustment required for those used to being physically together, and specifically dining together, to then being long-distance and again allows for added relatability for the audience, who must also adjust to this new norm.

Though video conferencing affords a multi-sensory experience, it also presents unique challenges. For example, at first it can be disorienting and it will always fail to fully provide the connection of being in the same physical place (see Longhurst 120). Even after more time has passed and Emory and Joey have grown accustomed to long distance, each shared scene includes planning for the next time they will be in the same place. Yet there is also a sense that they are grateful for the experience they do have, such as in their final scene together:

EMORY. I'd better go. Wouldn't want to miss my flight tomorrow.

JOEY. Just...one more minute.

EMORY. What is it?

JOEY. I just want to look at you.

EMORY. Don't be a sap. You get to hold me in just a few hours.

JOEY. Can't wait. I love you, Em.

EMORY. Love you too. I'll see you soon.

JOEY. See you tomorrow. (27-28)

Commensality of any kind, be it the traditional sharing of a meal at the same dining table or the remote dining exemplified in *TableTalk*, is dependent on the willingness of participants to truly share the experience. Successful social interaction leading to true intimacy is dependent upon participants' ability to adapt [their] circumstances to fit the material and social constraints of their daily lives' (Julier 84). Hopefully it is apparent in *TableTalk* that Emory and Joey are willing to do whatever it takes to make their long-distance relationship work.

Limitations And Future Research

Because *TableTalk* is still largely in development and therefore theoretical, it has not yet been previewed for full audiences. Our workshop took the form of a staged reading with minimal props and sets, and was only observed by Danielle and myself, an assisting sound engineer, and a few advisors. However, the feedback we received from our advisors and from the performers themselves, as well as Danielle's and my own impressions, suggest that commensality can work as a grounding for multi-location theatre-making.

Given this initial positive response to basing a play around a series of long-distance shared meals, there are several factors I would like to consider in further developing *TableTalk*. Depending on staging location, the first consideration would be whether or not to change the meals to suit the locations where the play is being staged, as currently both locations feature food that I would consider to be particular to young Americans. If we are able to stage a transnational version of this play, it might be worth considering changing some of our food choices. The second consideration would be the practicality of having Emory cooking with working kitchen appliances, so as to maximize the sensory experience for Audience A. This would only be worth considering if the use of real food in the production proved as

effective as research suggests.

The next step for Danielle and I is to fully stage *TableTalk* in separate locations (likely Boca Raton, Florida, U.S.A. and Montreal, Quebec, Canada). The success of several factors would need to be measured, including: what the play looks like with complete props and sets (including real food), the intimacy achieved between performers who are never in the same physical location, and the similarities and differences of experience for Audience A and Audience B. We would strive to keep our audience sizes relatively small, and would invite both audiences, separately and then together, to discuss their impressions of the production. This would all be used to inform further use of the commensal structuring in multi-location productions.

Conclusion

TableTalk was written without any formal consideration or grounding in the concept of commensality, and inspiration to include food in the piece came from a series of interviews, conducted by Danielle and myself, of individuals who had experienced long-distance relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners. In these interviews the idea of sharing a meal was brought up several times, and led to us structuring *TableTalk* around a series of shared meals. I believe this was the right decision, as remote dining proved to be a rich field for artistic exploration.

The commensal nature of *TableTalk* grounds audiences in a familiar experience that makes the multi-location aspect of the play more accessible. Audiences in both locations come to know Emory, Joey, and their relationship with each other through what and where they eat and what they talk about and while dining together (albeit virtually). The distance between the two locations is bridged by the metaphorical dinner table in order to achieve the intimacy so crucial for effective theatre-making.

Though the specific circumstances of *TableTalk*'s shared meals may not be directly relatable to all audiences, increasingly more people are engaged in long-distance relationships of some kind and

all of these people have experience with commensality. It is my hope that this discussion of *TableTalk* serves not solely as a case study of multi-location shared meals, but as a testimony of the potential to incorporate remote dining in theatre so that future playwrights may be inspired to try it themselves, to see what they can create out of a deceptively simple concept: the shared meal.

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