

Visser creates a food fantasy

By NICHOLAS POWER

Much Depends on Dinner

The extraordinary history and mythology, allure and obsessions, perils and taboos, of an ordinary meal.

by Margaret Visser
McClelland & Stewart (1986) \$22.95

"The extent to which we take everyday objects for granted is the precise extent to which they govern and inform our lives."

It is from this point of view that Margaret Visser, whose delightful voice is often heard on CBC *Morningside*, vigorously investigates the everyday elements of dinner. By using extensive research and a willingness to question the obvious, the author has created an organic form of encyclopedia which reads like literary travel writing.

The journey begins with an "ordinary meal" consisting of chicken and rice, corn on the cob, lettuce with olive oil, and lemon juice dressing, and ice cream for dessert.

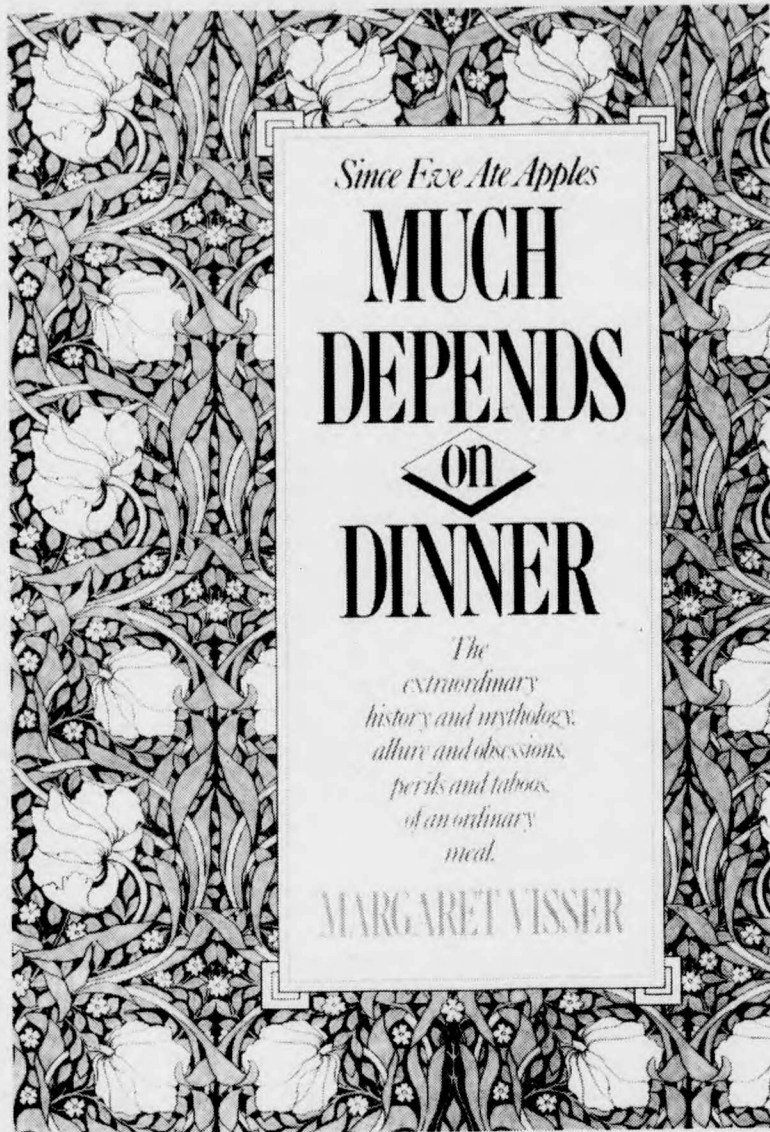
Each journey includes the current technology used to cultivate, process, transport, market and consume food in its table-top state.

There is a vast storehouse of digestible facts in this fascinating book, none are preprocessed or watered down, and a sprinkling of storytelling makes it even more palatable.

Like the native people of North America who preserved a large variety of corn strains, Visser is not a one crop theoretical technician. From her point of view, the food industry's tendency toward uniformity of taste leads to blandness. The ultimate food processor's dream is the "restructured steak" made from chicken.

Through specific examples from the food industry, Visser shows how the economics of food processing has led to larger food corporations and their genetic manipulation of corn, rice and chicken in order to streamline the transformation to store bought "food."

Much About Dinner holds your attention because it integrates elements of this huge subject. However,



there is no overwhelming conclusion. Instead it moves deductively and by association along the trail of the investigation.

The author, who also teaches at York, employs the effective understatement. In talking about the use of chicken bones for divination in the Far East, she says in a bracketed aside: "(The bones of intensively bred modern chickens . . . make a much less satisfactory medium for magic than those of birds closer to the wild.)"

The author's own bias is evident in

the skeptical tone she takes with faddish approaches to cuisine and the expensive "gourmet" products now over-flowing in the marketplace: "The name Haagen-Dazs is a complete fiction . . . The name is meant to look vaguely but arrogantly Danish. (The ice cream) has nothing to do with Scandinavia; the factory was in the Bronx and later in New Jersey . . . It costs more, however, than the difference in price between chemicals and natural whole ingredients should warrant."

In *Much Depends on Dinner*, Visser's wonderful insights and arcane facts are not just cocktail party tidbits, but a feast for the imagination.



Genuine Fakes is no synching ship

By DARREN ALEXANDER

It is not very often that a new play is both very funny and original, and still able to make a contemporary social comment. Yet it is for these very reasons that John Lazarus' *Genuine Fakes*, directed by Richard Greenblatt, is currently the talk of the Toronto theatre scene.

Actress Brenda Bazinet plays Sharon Bailey, a "20 year old bookstore clerk who plans to go to university and still lives with her mother."

Her life takes a drastic change, however, after she discovers that she is the spitting image of America's latest pop superstar, Lacey Medallion. With the addition of a spiked blonde-hair wig, glamorous make-up, and a saucy Bronx accent, Sharon enters and wins the Genuine Fakes Talent Agency's "Lip-sync and swim" contest.

From this point in the play, the audience witnesses the metamorphosis of Sharon. Drawn by her insatiable thirst for fame, she begins to actually inherit her model's personality traits, until she finally takes her quest too far, for she ultimately becomes "more like Lacey Medallion than Lacey is." Unfortunately Lacey is representative of the many talentless singers who are illegitimately boosted to fame through a lot of hype and image.

Bazinet is extraordinary in her portrayal of Sharon Bailey. We believe her when she is Sharon, and when she is Lacey, were also convinced when she's Sharon believing that she's Lacey. Sound confusing?

It can be at times, as the play deals as much with an identity crisis as it does with the marketing of pop culture. But Bazinet is remarkably able to keep the audience on top of her character's transitions, a feat which also can be accredited to a strong script by Lazarus.


Genuine Fakes is filled with social comments. A fine example is conveyed by Adrian Pelham (played by Patrick Brymer), the director of the Genuine Fakes contest, who says, "It's the old Canadian question . . . Why import our talent? Why not develop our own look-alikes?"

Besides commenting on pop culture and the Canadian talent scene, Lazarus also highlights society's obsession with fame. One character points out the ambiguity involved with fame: "People become famous by killing famous people."

Complementing the fine script and acting are the brilliant set and lighting designs by Jim Plaxton, a four time Dora Award winner for Outstanding Design. His backdrop is practical and multi-functional, as it serves as both a TV "screen" for up-to-date media info on Lacey Medallion, as well as a storage compartment for the set furniture. The props and the set add a nice flavour of reality to the overall production.

Genuine Fakes combines a lot of thought provoking issues and entertainment in one show, and there's even a shocker climax to boot.

Although *Genuine Fakes* is at the Toronto Free Theatre until December 21, it's sure to be held over.



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