

## “Comfort Food” Satisfies Appetites for Fun, Food

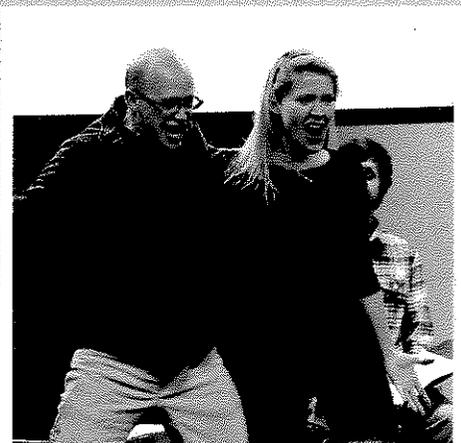
When College of Arts and Letters Dean Karin A. Wurst first learned about the play “*Comfort Food*,” back in September 2011, it was in relation to a \$4,000 grant that had just been awarded by the Arts Council of Greater Lansing. The grant was provided to create and produce the play over the summer of 2012, as part of a Big Ten Theatre Initiative highlighting the Archives and Special Collections of the various Big Ten universities’ respective libraries. The MSU Department of Theatre’s Rob Roznowski, Lansing City Market and Renegade Theatre Festival were the major players in producing “*Comfort Food*” in Lansing. Rob wrote the play, taking his inspiration for “*Comfort Food*” from the MSU Libraries Special Collection of historical American cookbooks, as well as from work with Assistant Director of MSU Libraries Special Collections Peter Berg.

### COOKBOOKS INSPIRED PLAY

“I wasn’t sure what was going to come out of our collaboration when Peter and I began,” Roznowski says. “When you think of cookbooks, you don’t immediately consider it being material for a play. But, as I was working through the MSU Special Collection of historical American cookbooks with Peter, we were drawn to the prefaces and introductions, and the engaging stories they told.

“From there, the jump to framing these stories in a series of scenes that explored human relationships via attitudes towards cooking and cookbooks seemed quite natural. Setting the scenes in reverse chronological order throughout American history allowed us to bring the play full circle.”

In August 2012, “*Comfort Food*” received its world premiere at the Renegade Theatre Festival in Lansing to wide acclaim. And when the College of Arts and Letters was seeking unit events to help celebrate the College’s 50th Anniversary, Roznowski suggested



“*Comfort Food*” be reprised, with the result being an evening of inspired theatre, comedy, drama and more on October 30, 2012.

A talented six-actor troupe of three female and three male MSU Department of Theatre MFA actors moved quickly and seamlessly from character to character and era to era with only projected images and a few props helping set each scene. The six actors: Carolyn Conover, Sarah Goeke, Andy Head, Kirill Sheynerman, Zev Steingberg and Jacqueline Wheeler.

### FUNNY, MOVING, WINNING

“*Comfort Food*,” a play of multiple vignettes, is often hilarious and occasionally moving as it traces backwards in time through organic, fast food, fusion, microwave, slow cooking, TV dinners, WWII, the



depression, WWI, 1900s, 1890s, 1880s, 1870s, the Civil War, early 1800s and the 1700s. The concluding epilogue features a man and a woman speaking about essentially the same things: trying to make healthy things for their family with what they grow in the garden; not eating much meat, improvising with what they have on hand, etc., and ending with one saying, “I am America in the 1700s,” and the other, “I am America in the 2000s.”

Held on the 4th floor of the MSU Library, the play’s performance was followed by a reception featuring food made from recipes either mentioned in the show, or from the MSU Special Collection’s cookbooks used in the play. Each audience member also received a complimentary “mini-cookbook” featuring the reception’s recipes.

The evening’s menu comprised dishes from the 1890s to the 1980s, including: Quiche Lorraine, Waldorf Salad, Cheese Fondue, Macaroni Cream with Cheese, Roosevelt Salad, Black-eyed Peas with Tomato and Onion, Tropical Salad, Escaloped Salmon, and, of course, Red Velvet Cupcakes! The consensus review of the buffet’s dishes was evident in the large numbers of attendees lining up for second and third helpings.

Rounding out the evening’s offerings was a display of some of the museum’s collection of cookbooks, and a short video of five CAL faculty members who responded to the College’s initiative to design and conduct research in the humanities related to food.

These faculty and their associated research projects included:

**Salah D. Hassan**, professor, Department of English, and **Mohammad Khabil**, professor, Department of Religious

Studies: “*American Halal: The Culture of Halal Food Products in North America.*”

**Stephen Rachman**, professor and associate chair, Graduate Studies: “*American Corn and the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s.*”

**Ann Folino White**, professor, Department of Theatre: Book: “*Sacred Commodities: Staging Citizenship and Competing Rights to Food During the New Deal.*”

**Theresa Winge**, professor, Apparel and Textile Design Department of Art, Art History, and Design: “*Local Color: Native Michigan Edible Plants as Proficient Sustainable Dyes.*”

#### POST-PLAY Q&A

Rob Roznowski and Peter Berg led a post-play discussion and audience question-and-answer session on the play, the creative process, and the museum’s Special Collections. Several of the evening’s student actors also answered audience questions, and provided insights into the characters they played as well as their enjoyment playing the various parts. While a few of the cast members had to leave for other engagements, the rest of the cast stayed, sampled the buffet, and continued to engage audience members one-on-one.

#### Rob Roznowski

A professor in the Department of Theatre, and an award-winning actor, director, educator and playwright, Rob Roznowski has appeared extensively throughout the U.S. as an actor and director. He served on the faculty of Manhattan Marymount College, the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, SUNY/Stony Brook, and Stephens College, where he received the Distinguished Teaching Award.

Roznowski was awarded the “Mid-Michigan Alumni Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching” from MSU, and is one of only four MSU professors to have been awarded the “Michigan Professor of the Year” award by the Presidents Council of State Universities of Michigan.

#### Peter Berg

MSU librarian, and head of Special Collections with the MSU Libraries since September 1988, Dr. Peter Berg assisted Roznowski with the post-event discussion. Peter is responsible for the administration and development of the MSU Libraries’ Special Collections, including direction of collection development, collection maintenance and conservation, and public service activities of the unit.

In 2005, he was appointed assistant director for Special Collections, and he also serves as a member of the executive council of the MSU Libraries. Dr. Berg received his undergraduate degree in history from Michigan State University in 1965, his library science degree from the University of Michigan in 1975, and his doctorate in history from MSU in 1994.

*Throughout “Comfort Food,” playwright Rob Roznowski ties individual vignettes to both timeframes from the 1700s to present day, and food. Upper right: Following the show, attendees enjoyed comfort foods from Waldorf Salad and Macaroni Cream with Cheese to Cheese Fondue and Red Velvet cupcakes.*