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Dinner at Eight: From Play to Film to Opera

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During the 1930s, Broadway and Hollywood produced numerous hits requiring the crackling precision of a true ensemble of charismatic, technically accomplished actors. Only a few of those works, however, have found new life on the operatic stage. One of them, *Dinner at Eight*, arrived on Broadway in 1932 and was filmed the following year. Now, more than eight decades later, it has been dazzlingly adapted by composer William Bolcom and librettist Mark Campbell, whose career achievements include significant successes in opera.

Dinner at Eight began life as the second of six plays by a remarkable duo. Edna Ferber had already gained fame for grand-scale novels celebrating America in all its diversity. She was one of numerous co-writers her *Dinner at Eight* collaborator, George S. Kaufman would work with during a stupendous, four-decade theatrical career including forty-five plays and musicals.

Initially, Kaufman doubted that the multiple strands of the *Dinner at Eight* plot could be satisfactorily integrated into a unified whole, but Ferber's enthusiasm conquered his objections. Despite their arguments, Ferber relished writing with the notoriously prickly Kaufman. In addition to a rigorous work ethic, they shared an opinion pointedly described by a lifelong Kaufman admirer, Woody Allen: the actor-director has written of his idol that 'he, more than anyone, seemed to grasp how phony the world and its pompous inhabitants were.'

Created at the height of the Depression, *Dinner at Eight* takes place in New York and was written for a New York audience. In portraying the city's upper classes, it provided a biting, gutsy look at their romantic, social and financial travails, with utter desperation lurking just beneath the façade exhibited by many of the principal characters. Millicent and Oliver Jordan's dinner party is a ritual of sorts; we can assume that these two have gone through that ritual countless times, fully aware of its importance in maintaining one's social status. Consequently, when the dinner party's guests of honour, Lord and Lady Ferncliffe, cancel their attendance, this is, in Millicent's view, a catastrophe of epic proportions.

Although frequently listed among the best 1930s comedies, the play is very much a comedy-drama. Except for some quips from Oliver's former flame, Carlotta Vance, the script evinces surprisingly little of the uproarious humour characterising much of Kaufman's other work. Malcolm Goldstein, a Kaufman biographer, sums up the *dramatis personae* succinctly,

noting that 'everyone onstage has somehow been hurt.' That applies above all to the long-suffering doctor's wife Lucy Talbot, quietly devastating when confronting her weak-willed, philandering husband. Surprisingly touching are Oliver, reluctant to unburden himself to Millicent about either his shipping company's problems or his heart ailment; and the two ageing actors – Carlotta, relentlessly presenting a front of imperturbable ebullience, and Larry Renault (the much-older lover of the Jordans' daughter Paula), once a matinee idol and now vainly hoping for a comeback.

Kaufman, who was also an exceptional director, took charge of the original production, which opened successfully on 22 October 1932. Only ten months later the film version was released by M-G-M, with George Cukor directing a fabulously starry cast: John and Lionel Barrymore, Wallace Beery, Billie Burke, Marie Dressler (who received top billing), and the comparative beginner among these legends – a sleeky twenty-two-year-old platinum blonde named Jean Harlow.

Frances Marion and Herman J. Mankiewicz prepared the screenplay, with Donald Ogden Stewart credited for additional dialogue – outstanding, highly experienced screenwriters all.

Certain characters were omitted, with the Jordans' servants receiving significantly less attention. The play had included an ill-fated below-stairs love triangle, verging on melodrama: the maid Dora, pursued by chauffeur Ricci but loved by butler Gustave. A violent altercation between the two men results in injury and the lobster aspic, the dinner's intended *pièce de résistance*, falling on the floor. All of this is very briefly mentioned in the film, and its prominence is not missed.

The movie's impact is softer than the play's – for example, in the addition of a scene near the end, when Carlotta, with great sympathy, informs Paula of Larry's suicide. The writers have wisely cleaned up some of the language, deleting certain racial epithets apparently acceptable on Broadway in 1932. With the luxury of three full acts, the play could extend individual scenes well beyond what the film could accommodate. Certain contemporary references from Ferber and Kaufman that New Yorkers would relish are missing, and with the movie being marketed nationwide, the writers deemed it unnecessary to include comments like one that the sophisticated Paula addresses to her mother: 'That tea for Chanel – oh, she was an awful bust. She wore pearls with a sport suit – ropes of 'em.'



Dinner at Eight: From Play to Film to Opera (continued)



Still from the 1932 film version of *Dinner at Eight*.

Cukor could have chosen to 'open the play out' a good deal, but he sticks to interior scenes. Each set admirably brings to life the astonishingly detailed descriptions that so enhance one's enjoyment when reading the Ferber/Kaufman script.

On the other hand, the play's *character* descriptions don't quite match their embodiment onscreen. The Barrymores (Lionel as Oliver, John quite magnificent as the drunken wreck Larry has become), Burke (Millicent), and especially Dressler (Carlotta) all appear significantly older than what Ferber and Kaufman imagined. When seen today, Dressler's exaggerated facial expressions, smacking of the silent-film era, are occasionally a bit much, and Beery, portraying business tycoon Dan Packard, is rather buffoonish and insufficiently dangerous. His wife Kitty is described in the play as 'the slightly faded wild rose, Irish type,' but Harlow is hardly that. She presents an almost indecently alluring, confident, young woman, petulant and brassy by turns, brazenly standing up to her husband and grasping at the dinner invitation as a prized chance to get ahead socially.

The film was warmly received, with many critics considering it superior to the play. Ferber held the minority view, commenting caustically, 'Very good. I wonder who wrote it.'

William Bolcom came to *Dinner at Eight* having produced a large output of much-acclaimed vocal music, including three full-length operas: a story of obsessive greed, *McTeague* (1992); a domestic tragedy, *A View from the Bridge* (1999); and an ensemble comedy, *A Wedding* (2004). In assessing the *Dinner at Eight* plot's potential for opera, Bolcom asked himself, 'Is there a character so concrete that I can say, "Yes, I have someone physical in my mind that I can point this to"?' The composer found the Ferber/

Kaufman characters admirably delineated – he had 'a sense of each one being somebody palpable.'

Mark Campbell took the play rather than the film as his source since he and Bolcom found it more truthful. The great challenge came in reducing the number of characters and events to fit the exigencies of operatic performance. In addition to avoiding the Dora/Gustave/Ricci subplot, Campbell also eliminated Hattie and Ed Loomis, Millicent's drily amusing sister and her dull husband, who do nothing to advance the plot. Only very small portions of text are pulled directly from the script. Campbell skilfully condenses certain scenes of multiple pages (for example, Paula's confrontation with Larry) down to just a few lines while sacrificing nothing in terms of character.

Creating the opera's basic 'tinta' (to borrow Verdi's apt word) was, according to Bolcom, 'a tightrope. We were trying to deal with something light but very dark at the same time.' The composer's concerns extended to the very specific colours he wanted in the pit, 'that mixed sound of a real old-fashioned Broadway orchestra – Gershwin comes straight out of that sound. It's the kind of marmalade mixture that makes Broadway orchestras sound different from Tchaikovsky.'

The *Minnesota Star-Tribune* review of the opera's 2017 premiere at Minnesota Opera praised Bolcom's 'sparkling, imaginative score' with its splendid musical variety ('marches, waltzes, tangos – along with tangy harmonies and atmospheric etches'). That variety is evident in the Act I prologue, beginning with a number much in the spirit of an American operetta of the 1920s or '30s: a bustling chorus sung by eight subsidiary characters, proclaiming that 'despite your woes, the bubbly still flows, the party goes on.' This group will open Act II in the same vein, with their vigorous reappearance marked 'Tempo di Broadway' in the score.



Playwright Edna Ferber (1885–1968), co-author of the play *Dinner at Eight*.



Playwright George S. Kaufman (1889–1961), co-author of the play *Dinner at Eight*.

A four-note theme sung to the phrase 'dinner at eight' is initially heard from Millicent, voiced in buoyant waltz time. Upon realising that lobster will be just the thing to serve her guests, the waltz returns, this time with added excitement. Millicent seems meant for a warm, 'full lyric' soprano; in the final pages of Act I, however, the singer suddenly moves into intimidatingly high tessitura for her *fortissimo* outburst of dismay, upon hearing of the Ferncliffes' cancellation. The big surprise occurs late in Act II with Millicent's brief solos declaring that 'One simply must learn to adapt' and 'The party will go on, no matter what.' The character suddenly becomes rather more positive and substantial than the fluttery creature Billie Burke portrays in the film.

Oliver (character baritone) is at his most affecting at the office when visited unexpectedly by Carlotta (soprano or mezzo, but requiring a particularly full-toned, colourful instrument). Bolcom's score gives them a sweetly sentimental duet, communicating deep nostalgia for the classier, more elegant New York they had enjoyed years before.

When the action moves to Kitty's boudoir, the character (light lyric soprano) is introduced by a deliciously graceful flute obbligato, associated with her throughout the scene. Musically she often expresses herself in darting *staccati*, although Bolcom does give the pouting young wife a ravishing sustained *pianissimo* high B on the phrase 'I want to feel good.' In all his exchanges with her, Dan (dramatic baritone) brings a boisterous, heavily declamatory style to the fore. Later, as the couple quarrel, while readying themselves for the Jordans' dinner, their lines turn even more aggressively angular.

Paula, a soprano whose vocal weight seems to hover halfway between Millicent and Kitty, gets a lovely *andante grazioso* aria, sung to her lover on the phone,

beginning with the gentle reproach, 'Larry, you've been drinking.' When she eventually bursts into his hotel room, her exuberant opening line – 'Not THE Larry Renault!' – offers, vocally speaking, possibly the most thrillingly expansive moment in the entire score.

As for Larry himself, Bolcom in one respect had in mind silent-film superstar John Gilbert: 'When sound came in, he had a little squeaky tenor voice. That's why he was suddenly out of work!' Like Gilbert, Larry would no doubt have been 'a very old-fashioned histrionic actor,' and his high-strung nature splendidly suits a dramatic tenor. Highlighting the role is a pep talk he gives himself in a brief but demanding monologue, 'Back on top' (it finishes on a sustained top C). The hotel scene in Act II, which ends with Larry's carefully arranged demise, projects a notably dark aura through genuinely eerie colours from the orchestra's woodwinds.

Brilliantly paced throughout, the opera reaches its climax, fittingly, with everyone's arrival for dinner. The Jordans' guests are heard in ensemble writing of considerable complexity, involving as many as seven vocal lines. Even though, as Bolcom says, 'these are people who six months hence may be committing suicide,' the operatic *Dinner at Eight* ends on a note of genuine sweetness for the host and hostess: whatever comes their way in the uncertain future, they will face it together.



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