

# Arden

T H E A T R E C O .

SUPPLEMENTARY STUDY GUIDE  
for

## **An Empty Plate in the Café du Grand Boeuf**

By MICHAEL HOLLINGER  
Directed by WHIT MacLAUGHLIN  
On the Arcadia Stage  
**October 11 - December 9, 2007**

*Additional copies of this study guide are available online at [www.ardentheatre.org](http://www.ardentheatre.org).*

# *An Empty Plate in the Café du Grand Boeuf*

By Michael Hollinger  
Directed by Whit MacLaughlin

## *Cast:*

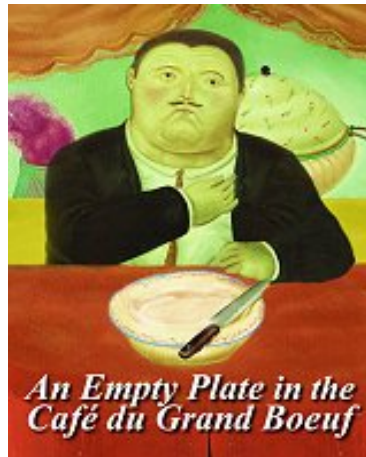
ANTOINE.....JAMES WILLIAM IJAMES  
CLAUDE.....IAN MERRILL PEAKES  
GASTON.....RICHARD RUIZ  
MIMI.....MARY MCCOOL  
VICTOR.....DOUGLAS REES  
MISS BERGER.....MIKAELA KAFKA

## *Direction:*

DIRECTOR.....WHIT MACLAUGHLIN  
STAGE MANAGERS.....PATRICIA G. SABATO  
ELANA WOLFF  
ASST. DIRECTOR.....REBECCA WRIGHT  
ASST to the STAGE MANAGERS.....SCOTT SHEPPARD

## *Designers:*

SCENIC DESIGNER.....DONALD EASTMAN  
COSTUME DESIGNER.....ROSEMARIE E. MCKELVEY  
LIGHTING DESIGNER.....JEROLD R. FORSYTH  
SOUND DESIGNER.....JORGE COUSINEAU



## Summary

The Café du Grand Boeuf (French for “Restaurant of the Big Ox”) doesn’t have a menu... it simply has everything. The staff prepares for the arrival of the Café’s proprietor and sole patron, Monsieur as they train their newest employee. Claude is the fastidious head waiter; Mimi is his lovely wife who longs for a life (and wardrobe) like Jackie Kennedy; Gaston is the



A typical French salad course.

chef of the establishment who does not cook a thing unless Monsieur is around; and Antoine is the newly hired nervous young waiter, daunted by the many details of working in such an exclusive restaurant. They explain their countless unusual customs, such as Monsieur arriving day or night at his whim ready to be prepared a feast and armed with a brilliant story of his fantastic travels with his “Mademoiselle.”

Monsieur arrives weary and without Mademoiselle. He has been gone some time, apparently in Madrid instead of Milan as he had told the staff. The mood quickly becomes different than usual as he refuses his usual absinthe and is reluctant to share his experiences at the bullfight in the Plaza del Toros. Mimi expresses her discontent with Claude for forgetting their anniversary and makes cheerful banter. Antoine is introduced to Monsieur as the new waiter hired to replace Pierre, who tragically became ill and passed away. Pierre’s talents included prized musicianship, and Monsieur is informed that Antoine-while not as musically gifted-is eager to learn and being trained on the saxophone. After several interactions with the whole staff (his mood seemingly more and more somber) Monsieur announces his intention to starve to death at his own table.

Gaston, Claude, and Mimi attempt to dissuade him of this notion, but he remains stubborn. He then asks to be called Victor and as the staff continues to fuss over his fate, he threatens to leave and die at Chez Bruno, a restaurant close to the Café du Grand Boeuf that does not compare to their standards. Antoine pleads with him to stay. He does and Claude then conjures a proposal in order to attempt to satisfy Victor’s request as well as the sole purpose of the café and its employees. He proposes that Gaston prepare a

sumptuous feast in the kitchen while the waitstaff brings out empty platters and vividly describe each of the dishes to him. Victor agrees and begins his own personal tale, starting with his birth. As he speaks of writing the obituaries at his father's newspaper, Gaston presents him with an empty bowl and a mouthwatering description of the soup waiting in the kitchen; however Victor maintains his resolve and continues his story, now jumping ahead to his young adulthood. Despite being a talented reporter sought after by other papers his father assigns him to baby-sit for a little girl from whom Victor contracts mumps, which eventually renders him sterile. He pauses in the story to pantomime eating the next course.

In an attempt to console him Victor's mother gave him a book by Ernest Hemmingway, who became Victor's hero. Gaston insists on serving the sorbet himself sending the rest of the staff into the kitchen. Instead of another empty serving dish he presents a revolver as a more merciful option to suicide by starvation. He confesses that he has been tempted to kill himself with it, as he is in love with Mimi and feels that Claude doesn't appreciate her. Victor pockets the weapon when Claude, Mimi and Antoine return from the kitchen. Mimi has thrown a dish at Claude and storms off. Claude begins to open up to Victor confessing that their marriage is in such a state because he is possibly gay and having "longing" feelings for Antoine. Shortly after, Mimi enters dressed in her best Mrs. Kennedy outfit suitcase in hand, threatening to leave Claude. Claude calls her bluff and then storms into the kitchen to bring out the next course, which Gaston has announced is ready. Gaston sees Mimi dressed up ready to leave and blurts out how beautiful he thinks she is. Victor tells her Gaston is in love with her and Mimi tells him she knows that already and also knows that Claude has feelings for Antoine. Claude reenters to describe the main course and Victor seems slightly tempted. Victor then excuses himself to use the restroom and the staff begins to wonder whether or not he will eventually be swayed by their brilliantly tempting descriptions. Mimi concludes that Victor has killed Mademoiselle and that is why he is in such a terrible place. They begin to argue about this when Victor returns to the table. Things get tense as the staff begins to believe he did kill Mademoiselle. They also begin to feel he is being selfish by not considering how this situation is going to affect their lives, given that their only purpose for so many years has been to serve Victor's wishes. Finally, Claude

threatens to call Mademoiselle to tell her of Victor's plan to kill himself in a desperate attempt to have him change his mind. Victor responds by pointing Gaston's gun at him.

Now absolutely determined to tell his story regardless of the staff's wishes, Victor tells them that after his father died he inherited forty-six million dollars and, as he would never have any heirs to leave the money to, decided to build the world's best restaurant for himself and become an expatriate. He met Mademoiselle when she was in Paris, vacationing after nursing her mother through a long and painful illness. He recounts their final date at the bullfights, pulling the tablecloth off the table and lavishly recreating the spectacles he witnessed by pretending to be a matador. Upon hearing of Mademoiselle's refusal to marry him, the staff presents Victor with the final course, a crème brûlée, which being his favorite dessert, he slowly begins to eat.

At that moment Mademoiselle-or Louise-enters. When she tries to apologize he accuses her of not wanting him because of what he calls his "tragic flaw", his impotency. She denies this, finally confessing that she has the same disease her mother died of and that she couldn't bear for him to watch her die of it. He forgives her, and they dance to



Crème brûlée.

Antoine's ineptly performed music before she must leave for her flight back to America. After she leaves, Victor declares that he is feeling "hopeful" and that he will honor Louise's wishes and live for both of them. This horrifies the staff, as they had poisoned the crème brûlée to prevent the slow and painful death they were sure he was going to have. In response to Victor's outrage, Claude can only say that they were trying to do their job of giving him whatever he wanted. When this sinks

in, he makes a final request to have the meal Gaston prepared for him. As the staff serves it to him, Victor tells them to open the café to the public after he dies, so that they will still have a purpose. They thank him and the play closes to Antoine's dutifully played music.

## *Michael Hollinger*



Michael Hollinger, born on January 13, 1962 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is an American playwright whose distinctions include a Harold and Mimi Steinberg New Play Citation from the American Theatre Critics Association, the Roger L. Stevens Award from the Fund for New American Plays, two Barrymores Award for Outstanding New Play, the F. Otto Haas Award for an Emerging Theatre Artist, a Mid-Atlantic Emmy Award, the Frederick Loewe Award for Musical Theatre, a commission from The Ensemble Studio Theatre/Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Science and Technology Project, and fellowships from the Independence Foundation, Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation, and Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. He is currently an assistant professor of Theatre at Villanova University and a resident playwright at New Dramatists. He received a Bachelor of Music in viola performance from Oberlin Conservatory in 1984 and a Master of Arts in theatre from Villanova in 1989. His plays include *An Empty Plate in the Café du Grand Boeuf* (1994), *Incorruptible* (1996), *Tiny Island* (1997), *Hot Air* (1997), *Clean Getaway* (1998), *Eureka! A techno-mystery* (1999), *Red Herring* (2000), *Naked Lunch* (2003), *Trepidation Nation* (co-writer) (2003), *Tooth and Claw* (2004), and *Opus* (2006). These plays (as well as other works) have been produced around the world including in New York City and London and have also enjoyed translations to be performed in other parts of Europe. Michael Hollinger and The Arden Theatre Company have a strong artistic partnership and proudly hosted the world premieres of *Incorruptible*, *Tiny Island*, *Red Herring*, *An Empty Plate in the Café du Boeuf*, *Tooth and Claw* and *Opus*. Most recently, Terrence J. Nolen directed the Off-Broadway premier of *Opus* at Primary Stages this summer.

## “The Lost Generation”

During the period between the two world wars Paris became famed for its cultural and artistic communities and its vivid nightlife. The city became a gathering place of artists from around the world, ranging from Russian exiles such as composer Stravinsky to Spanish painters like Picasso and Dalí to American writers such as Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. The slew of American writers that chose to call Europe their new home as their belief in America as a nation of dreams dwindled was labeled “The Lost Generation.” Names like the aforementioned Hemmingway and Fitzgerald as well as T.S. Elliot, Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound were considered part of this Lost Generation. They were also known as the Generation of 1914 or La Génération du Feu, which means Generation of Fire. Their discontent with the United States in particular was the factor that prompted many of them to live as expatriates in other countries. “Lost Generation” then became a popular term with which to describe the entire community of young people coming of age in the post-WWI society, lamenting lost hopes and trying to relocate a sense of belonging. Gertrude Stein is often credited with coining the phrase, but it was Hemingway who gave it life and meaning with his epigraph in *The Sun Also Rises*.



Hemingway with fellow expatriates Harold Loeb, Lady Duff Twysden; Hadley, Don Stewart and Pat Guthrie.



“Femme a la resille”  
by Pablo Picasso



“Persistencia de la Memoria”  
by Salvador Dalí

## *Ernest Hemingway*



Ernest Miller Hemingway, born on July 21, 1899, was an American novelist, short-story writer, journalist, and icon of his era. He was one of the key members of the 1920's expatriate community in Paris known as "the Lost Generation" and spent the majority of his life abroad in various European countries and parts of Africa. His social life was turbulent, including four marriages and numerous extra-marital relationships as well as friendships with famous figures of the time. He achieved a cult-like popularity during his lifetime, rare for serious writers, and his numerous awards include the Pulitzer Prize for *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1953 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954. Towards the end of his life Hemingway struggled with depression, eventually committing suicide with a shotgun at his home in Ketchum, Idaho. He was judged to be not mentally responsible for his final act and thus allowed to be buried with a Roman Catholic service. Some of his most influential works include *The Torrents of Spring*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *The Old Man and the Sea* and *The Garden of Eden*, among many other works that spurred a new generation of "lost" artists well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Here are some excerpts from his various works used in *An Empty Plate in the Café du Grand Boeuf*:

"You're an expatriate. You've lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hand around cafes." *The Sun Also Rises*

"She was sorry, and she knew he would probably not be able to understand, but might someday forgive her, and be grateful to her, and she expected, absolutely unexpectedly, to be married in the spring."

"In the day time the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference." *A Clean, Well Lighted Place*

"The two waiters inside the café knew that the old man was a little drunk, and while he was a good client they knew that if he became too drunk he would leave without paying, so they kept watch on him." *A Clean, Well Lighted Place*

"It was late and every one had left the café except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light..." *A Clean, Well Lighted Place*

Here is the essay "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" in its entirety:

It was late and every one had left the cafe except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light. In the day time the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference. The two waiters inside the cafe knew that the old man was a little drunk, and while he was a good client they knew that if he became too drunk he would leave without paying, so they kept watch on him.

"Last week he tried to commit suicide," one waiter said.

"Why?"

"He was in despair."

"What about?"

"Nothing."

"How do you know it was nothing?"

"He has plenty of money."

They sat together at a table that was close against the wall near the door of the cafe and looked at the terrace where the tables were all empty except where the old man sat in the shadow of the leaves of the tree that moved slightly in the wind. A girl and a soldier went by in the street. The street light shone on the brass number on his collar. The girl wore no head covering and hurried beside him.

"The guard will pick him up," one waiter said.

"What does it matter if he gets what he's after?"

"He had better get off the street now. The guard will get him. They went by five minutes ago."

The old man sitting in the shadow rapped on his saucer with his glass. The younger waiter went over to him.

"What do you want?"

The old man looked at him. "Another brandy," he said.

"You'll be drunk," the waiter said. The old man looked at him. The waiter went away.

"He'll stay all night," he said to his colleague. "I'm sleepy now. I never get into bed before three o'clock. He should have killed himself last week."

The waiter took the brandy bottle and another saucer from the counter inside the cafe and marched out to the old man's table. He put down the saucer and poured the glass full of brandy.

"You should have killed yourself last week," he said to the deaf man. The old man motioned with his finger. "A little more," he said. The waiter poured on into the glass so that the brandy slopped over and ran down the stem into the top saucer of the pile.

"Thank you," the old man said. The waiter took the bottle back inside the cafe. He sat down at the table with his colleague again.

"He's drunk now," he said.

"He's drunk every night."

"What did he want to kill himself for?"

"How should I know."

"How did he do it?"

"He hung himself with a rope."

"Who cut him down?"

"His niece."

"Why did they do it?"

"Fear for his soul."

"How much money has he got?"

"He's got plenty."

"He must be eighty years old."

"Anyway I should say he was eighty."

"I wish he would go home. I never get to bed before three o'clock. What kind of hour is that to go to bed?"

"He stays up because he likes it."

"He's lonely. I'm not lonely. I have a wife waiting in bed for me."

"He had a wife once too."

"A wife would be no good to him now."

"You can't tell. He might be better with a wife."

"His niece looks after him. You said she cut him down."

"I know."

"I wouldn't want to be that old. An old man is a nasty thing."

"Not always. This old man is clean. He drinks without spilling. Even now, drunk. Look at him."

"I don't want to look at him. I wish he would go home. He has no regard for those who must work."

The old man looked from his glass across the square, then over at the waiters.

"Another brandy," he said, pointing to his glass. The waiter who was in a hurry came over.

"Finished," he said, speaking with that omission of syntax stupid people employ when talking to drunken people or foreigners.

"No more tonight. Close now."

"Another," said the old man.

"No. Finished." The waiter wiped the edge of the table with a towel and shook his head.

The old man stood up, slowly counted the saucers, took a leather coin purse from his pocket and paid for the drinks, leaving half a peseta tip. The waiter watched him go down the street, a very old man walking unsteadily but with dignity.

"Why didn't you let him stay and drink?" the unhurried waiter asked. They were putting up the shutters. "It is not half-past two."

"I want to go home to bed."

"What is an hour?"

"More to me than to him."

"An hour is the same."

"You talk like an old man yourself. He can buy a bottle and drink at home."

"It's not the same."

"No, it is not," agreed the waiter with a wife. He did not wish to be unjust. He was only in a hurry.

"And you? You have no fear of going home before your usual hour?"

"Are you trying to insult me?"

"No, hombre, only to make a joke."

"No," the waiter who was in a hurry said, rising from pulling down the metal shutters. "I have confidence. I am all confidence."

"You have youth, confidence, and a job," the older waiter said. "You have everything."

"And what do you lack?"

"Everything but work."

"You have everything I have."

"No. I have never had confidence and I am not young."

"Come on. Stop talking nonsense and lock up."

"I am of those who like to stay late at the cafe," the older waiter said. "With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night."

"I want to go home and into bed."

"We are of two different kinds," the older waiter said. He was now dressed to go home.

"It is not only a question of youth and confidence although those things are very beautiful. Each night I am reluctant to close up because there may be some one who needs the cafe."

"Hombre, there are bodegas open all night long."

"You do not understand. This is a clean and pleasant cafe. It is well lighted. The light is very good and also, now, there are shadows of the leaves."

"Good night," said the younger waiter.

"Good night," the other said. Turning off the electric light he continued the conversation with himself. It is the light of course but it is necessary that the place be clean and pleasant. You do not want music. Certainly you do not want music. Nor can you stand before a bar with dignity although that is all that is provided for these hours. What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada, pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee. He smiled and stood before a bar with a shining steam pressure coffee machine.

"What's yours?" asked the barman.

"Nada."

"Otro loco mas," said the barman and turned away.

"A little cup," said the waiter.

The barman poured it for him.

"The light is very bright and pleasant but the bar is unpolished," the waiter said.

The barman looked at him but did not answer. It was too late at night for conversation.

"You want another copita?" the barman asked.

"No, thank you," said the waiter and went out. He disliked bars and bodegas. A clean, well-lighted cafe was a very different thing. Now, without thinking further, he would go home to his room. He would lie in the bed and finally, with daylight, he would go to sleep. After all, he said to himself, it is probably only insomnia. Many must have it.

## *Bullfighting in Spain*

Bullfighting in Spain can trace its origins back to 711 A.D.: this was when the first bullfight took place in celebration for the crowning of King Alfonso VIII. The custom was originally intended to stay within the aristocracy and was done on horseback, but eventually was deemed to be bad-mannered. The common man then adopted bullfighting as their own sport and as they could not afford horses, they instead



took to fighting the bulls on foot, unarmed. During a bullfight, the bull is let loose from his cage and an assistant to the matador waves a bright magenta and yellow cape around as the matador watches him to ascertain the bull's skill and mood. Afterwards, the bull is weakened by a team of "picadors" whose job is to place several spears into the bull. Then the matador dedicates the death of the bull to the president, or other official present, or the crowd before beginning the "faena" which is the spectacle part of the match. The infamous crimson red cloth draped over a stick is called a "muleta" and it is used to tempt the bull and make it charge towards the cape-the killing sword, or the "espada", is being hidden underneath it. Once the bull is killed, the matador has proven his superiority over the animal and his own skill as a matador-for in any event, if the dance isn't done to perfection, the matador himself could be killed by the horns. Traditionally the ears, tail and hoof are offered as trophies for the kill to the matador, the amount of which is determined by the audience waving white handkerchiefs into the air. The crowd also traditionally will throw flowers into the ring for the matador, which his assistants then collect.

## *French Cuisine*



Seabass: a French fish course

French cuisine is considered to be one of the world's most refined and elegant styles of cooking, the product of centuries of rich history. The national cuisine known today has evolved from centuries of social and political change. The Middle Ages brought lavish banquets to the upper class with ornate, heavily seasoned food prepared by chefs such as Guillaume Tirel. The era of the French Revolution, however, saw a move toward fewer spices and more liberal usage of herbs and refined techniques, beginning with François Pierre La Varenne and further developed by the famous chef Marie-Antoine Carême, who served Napoleon Bonaparte and other dignitaries. Wine and cheese have always been a key part of French cooking and have won international recognition for France.

## *Post-Show Discussion Questions*

1. Why was Antoine the one person able to make Victor stay after he threatens to leave the restaurant at the beginning of the play?
2. In what way is the staff at The Café du Grand Boeuf like their own version of the “lost generation”?
3. What makes Paris, France the perfect setting for the telling of these stories of longing and indulgence?
4. What of the three would have been, if there ever was one, the most “merciful” option to allow Victor to commit suicide: allowing him his chosen starvation, the revolver, or the poison? Why?
5. Bullfighting in Spain is a traditional spectacle where the matador is due only the respect he earns by showcasing his skill and artistry while killing the animal. Why does Victor choose to tale his final tale by impersonating a matador?
6. What part (besides Victor’s literary hero) does Ernest Hemingway play in the script?
7. This play was debuted at the Arden Theatre Company for the 1994-1995 season. In what ways was it relevant then and in what ways is it relevant now to our social climate?
8. Victor and Claude get into an argument about whether or not the staff actually has to listen to Victor’s final story. It culminates in Victor telling him they have to listen because “there isn’t anyone else. Good god, how pathetic...I pay you to listen.” Is this entirely true? Does the staff seem to only listen because they have to?

*Glossary of Terms found in*  
**Empty Plate at the Café du Grand Beouf**

**Quai D'Orsay** - The Quai d'Orsay is a quay in the VIII<sup>e</sup> arrondissement of Paris, part of the left bank of the Seine, and the name of the street along it. (Wikipedia.com)

**(Adolf) Eichmann** - was a high-ranking Nazi and SS Obersturmbannführer (equivalent to Lieutenant Colonel). He was charged with the task of facilitating and managing the logistics of mass deportation to ghettos and extermination camps in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe. He was captured by Israeli Mossad agents in Argentina and tried in Israeli court on fifteen criminal charges, including crimes against humanity and war crimes. He was convicted and hanged.

**“Lady of Spain”** - popular song, written in 1931 by Robert Hargreaves, Tolchard Evans, Stanley J. Damerell, and Henry J. Tilsley.

**“La Morena di mi Copla”** – popular older Spanish tune describing a very alluring tan-skinned woman

**“Bon mot”** – “good word” in French

**Murphy’s Law** – “anything that can go wrong will go wrong.”

**Gelding** – castrated male horse or other equine

**Oleg Cassini** - was an American fashion designer noted for being chosen by Jacqueline Kennedy to design her state wardrobe in the 1960s. His clothing designs also appeared in numerous Hollywood films starring his second wife, the actress Gene Tierney. (wikipedia.com)

**Liberace** – famed American entertainer known for his flashiness and sparkly regalia

**Castillian** – used to distinguish a dialect and culture from a specific part of Spain comprised of three different regions: Castilla y Leon located in the northwest, Castilla-La Mancha in the center of the country and Madrid in the south.

**Ogden Nash** – American poet best known for his funny, pithy light verse

**Vichyssoise** - is a French-style soup made of puréed leeks, onions, potatoes, cream, and chicken stock. It is traditionally served cold.

## ***Bibliography***

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