

# PROSCENIUM

## **Dinner**

By Moira Buffini

Dinner

Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> to Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> June 2014  
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

# Dinner

**Moira Buffini**

## **Cast:**

Paige .....Shirley Wootten  
Lars .....David Pearson  
Wynne .....Hannah Lester  
Hal.....Charles Anthony  
Sian.....Koral Neil  
Mike .....Duncan Sykes  
The Waiter .....Mark Sutherland

Director.....Lynette Alston  
Stage Manager .....Arnold Glickman  
Assisted by.....Caroline Bronne-Shanbury  
Props .....Anne Gerrard/Susi Thornton  
Sound/Light Operation.....Paul Davis

There will be a interval of 15 minutes  
between Act 2 and Act 3

Thanks to Richard Kessel and Roger Turner for  
set support, David Duffy for lighting advice and to  
Radlett Light Opera Society (RLOS)  
for their help with this production

## From the Director

When choosing a play to direct the most important thing is that it makes you laugh – because you're going to be watching it many times over in rehearsal. I've been privileged to be highly amused by this wonderful cast of characters during our preparations for this play. I chose the play not only for its humour, but for its surprising depth and the incredibly skilful dialogue. Coming across a contemporary play by a real quality writer that is available for amateur production is an exciting thing, and I'm just glad I found it before any other of Proscenium's directors.

## The Author

Moira Buffini was born in 1965 in Cheshire to Irish parents. In 2007 she gave an interview to Maddy Costa of *The Guardian* in which she spoke of her childhood and her parents:

One of the weirdest conversations playwright Moira Buffini ever had was with a young male director who assured her that 'the world works on father-and-son relationships.' I said, 'Does it? Does it?' Her father died in a road accident when she was four; her mother, pregnant at the time, never remarried and raised Buffini and her two sisters alone. 'It really disturbed me' she says, 'I know absolutely nothing about father-and-son relationships, so what does that make my world?'

Buffini dedicated her play, *Silence*, to her mother, an Irish nurse whom she describes as "a very strong woman" adding, "her adamant refusal to accept being treated like the weeping widow, her determination, her complete assumption that we would do all right, even though there was only one parent, was amazing." It's something she's come to appreciate with hindsight; she admits that

when she was a child, she was “probably quite scared” of her mum.

As children Buffini and her sister, Fiona became obsessed with theatre (Fiona is a director and collaborated with Moira on *Dinner and Gabriel*). One of their mother’s patients was Michael Elliot, then the Artistic Director at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester. He gave free tickets to the ward where Buffini’s mother worked – and she took her daughters to every show. “We saw Shakespeare, Beckett, British, European, World theatre, Greek tragedy, Moliere. It was unbelievable.”

She studied English and Drama at Goldsmiths College (1983-6) and subsequently trained as an actor at the Welsh College of Music and Drama. She met her partner, Martin, at drama school and together they moved to South London as struggling actors (he now teaches drama). Writing filled the gaps between jobs: “You can’t act in your front room, but you can write.”

Her first play to be performed, *Jordan* (1992) was co-written with Anna Reynolds and won the Writers’ Guild Award for Best Fringe Play. In 1996 she did a writer’s attachment at the Royal National Theatre and this inspired *Blavatsky’s Tower* (1997) at the Machine Room (Time Out Critics Choice) and in the same year *Gabriel* at the Soho Theatre, winner of the LWT Plays on Stage Award; *Silence* followed at the Birmingham Rep and won the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize; *Love Play* (2001) was commissioned by the RSC.

During the 1990s Buffini helped found the Monsterist movement, a collective of playwrights determined to see more new writing and advocating big imaginative plays rather than small-scale naturalistic plays. But since then she feels the tide has changed. “People’s ideas of what new writing should be have really expanded, and I find myself less infuriated by the narrowness of theatre’s programming.”

In 2003 *Dinner* opened at the Loft, RNT, was an immediate success and transferred to Wyndhams Theatre:

Forthright and sharp-minded, Buffini has packed her plays with powerful women. In her most famous work, *Dinner*, there's Paige, whose acid tongue sears the guests at her table before she and her silent butler start spilling blood. Then there's Jeanne, in *Gabriel*, who will stop at nothing to protect her daughters. Most intriguing of all is Ymma, in *Silence*, who outwits a male-dominated mediaeval society when she is inadvertently married to another woman.

In 2007 *Dying For It*, an adaption of Nicolai Erdman's play, *The Suicide*, opened at the Almeida Theatre to be followed in the same year by *Marianne Dreams*:

Speaking of her father's death Buffini says: "It's funny how a thing like that affects you. Nothing is sure in this world, and the future isn't rosy. That's what I explore in my work; that uncertainty." It is partly that which drew her to the 1950s novel, *Marianne Dreams*, which she transformed into the Almeida Theatre's first Christmas show. The book centres on two ill children facing down their fears on getting well; the eponymous Marianne is just the kind of resourceful, complex girl that fascinates Buffini.

In 2010 *Welcome to Thebes* opened at the Royal National Theatre directed by Richard Eyre and *Handbagged* made its first appearance at the Tricycle to enthusiastic reviews and was revived in 2013 and then transferred to the Vaudeville. In an interview in *The Guardian* on the 8<sup>th</sup> April 2014, Buffini talks about her changing views on Margaret Thatcher:

Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979 when I was a schoolgirl of 13. When she was ousted by her own party

in 1990 I was working as a drama teacher in Holloway prison. My life had changed completely during her years in office, so had the country I lived in. As a teenager I thought she was an evil person, implacable and deadly. She dealt in certainties, and I was certain she was wrong. When she died last year my children couldn't believe that people were partying in the street. They were confounded by those who would celebrate her death. I tried to explain what it had been like; why people were still so angry. I told my children how we'd celebrated when she got booted out. Her downfall gave us joy. They were puzzled.

I was due to start a writing residency at the Tricycle and Indhu Rubasingham and I had long planned to turn my half hour play about Thatcher and the Queen (which I had written for her Women, Power and Politics season in 2010) into a full length drama. As I started to write *Handbagged* I kept hold of the notion I was writing for a younger generation. As I researched, my understanding of her grew. In the end her unyielding nature brought her down. If you've ever studied tragedy, she is the classic tragic protagonist. Her inflexibility was both the secret of her success and her greatest flaw. And although it kills me to say it, I have come to respect certain things about her.

## The Play

She wrote *Dinner* when her first child, Bridie, was six months old. 'I've never had an experience like it: it literally fell out of me onto the paper.' By the time the National programmed it, she was heavily pregnant with her son, Joe, and ended up bringing her six month old baby into rehearsals. She says of the play: 'It's my creation – like Frankenstein's monster'. An artist, a scientist and a sexpot are coming to dinner. Paige, hostess extraordinaire, is

celebrating the publication of her husband's bestseller. The arrival of Mike, marooned in the foggy lane after crashing his van, provides an unexpected addition to the evening's entertainment. A silent waiter, sourced from an obscure website, completes the picture. Primordial Soup is first on the menu. Let the dinner from Hell begin.

Reviews were enthusiastic. From Alan Bird's review of 10 Dec 2003:

Moira Buffini has written a deliciously black satirical comedy on that ever-recurring theme, the dinner party from hell. At Buffini's dinner party caustic comments fly like poisoned darts across the dinner table, penetrating false personas and leaving a trail of emotional carnage.

The meal is planned to both humiliate her husband and offend the guests, and so it does, in spades. One does not feel pity for the guests who are served this repulsive meal, as you quickly realise, with the exception of Mike, that they are self-serving, self-satisfied prigs. Along with the meal, Paige has prepared conversation topics to help break the ice. The subjects she has chosen for her guests include such delightful dinner conversation topics as 'Murder', 'Truth' and 'Suicide'.

Though the premise of the play is simple and the characters one-dimensional, the sharpness of the satire make this play a tasty morsel of light relief. Moira Buffini reminds us that revenge is a dish best served cold, and at this dinner party it is served frozen.

# Relatively Speaking, by Alan Ayckbourn

Greg wants to marry Ginny, even though they've only known each other a month. He follows her on a visit to what he assumes is her parental home, in order to ask her father's permission. In fact, the house belongs to Ginny's middle-aged lover, Philip, and his wife Sheila. Confusion reigns in this early Ayckbourn classic.

Directed by David Pearson

15th to 18th October 2014

7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 0208 954 4110

## About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week at the Harrow Arts Centre for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Clare Wooster

Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at [www.proscenium.org.uk](http://www.proscenium.org.uk)