

American Meat

By

Shaun Rouser

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...* Get ready to hold onto your stomachs and other internal organs when you experience Shaun Rouser's *American Meat*, a morbidly entertaining and shocking play about a reality TV cooking show that takes the spirit of cooking competitions to a whole new level. Resonating with strains of *Squid Games*, *Hunger Games*, and *Cupcake Wars*, *American Meat* goes over the top so earnestly that the idea of the contestants killing and cannibalizing each other as TV entertainment doesn't seem all that far-fetched. What makes this piece work – besides the fine writing, is that it's live theatre, casting us as the studio audience and making us complicit in its zero-sum game. In addition, the theatrical form creates a screenless dynamic through which to watch this "TV show" where the contestants are literally cooking for their lives in the hopes of walking away with an obscenely large cash prize. I don't know what's more disturbing, that the participants in the show are required to kill each other to stay in the competition or that the descriptions of some of the dishes sound enticing enough to click on "jump to recipe" (that's more disturbing for sure, right?). What about "parmesan-crusteD chest muscle with roasted asparagus and fingerling potatoes"? Or "roasted broccolini with a pan-seared biceps"? Rouser's hysterical script will make you question your appetite, yet it also probes some of the serious stuff about the lure of these shows and how getting sucked up in the narrative of a scripted "reality" as recreation has the power to re-create social norms. I'd say the most chilling thing about *American Meat* is wondering how far is too far and if we're already there. So grab that sauté pan and have a barf bucket on hand as we learn from the crème de la crème about cooking, survival, and writing a savory play.

ROBYN

You learned it's worth risking everything to achieve something meaningful?

KATHRYN

Exactly. I ask myself every day, What are you willing to lose? Sir, that's how I know I'm prepared.

Five stars

(Spacing is playwright's own.) JEC

AMERICAN MEAT

CHARACTERS:

ROBYN GIVE: White male, English chef in his mid-50s

BEN GOODELOVE: Latino male, American butcher, bearded and in his mid-30s

CAREN HART: African-American female, physician in her 40s

KATHRYN: White female, former Army soldier in her 30s

ELIZABETH: Asian female, homemaker in her 50s

THOMAS: White male, businessowner in his 50s

DeMARCUS: African-American male, teacher in his late 20s-early 30s

ELIZABETH'S HUSBAND: Non-Asian male in his 50s

KATHRYN'S HUSBAND: A voice heard offstage

ELIZABETH'S SON: Non-Asian teenager

ELIZABETH'S DAUGHTER: Non-Asian teenager

SETTING:

A television studio.

Scene 1

A clock hangs above the stage. Four small cooking stations, each with a few pots, pans, dishes, and cooking utensils. ROBYN, BEN, and CAREN stand center stage. Beneath his sport coat, hidden from view, ROBYN is carrying a small handgun and a knife holstered to his sides. From left to right, KATHRYN, DEMARCUS, THOMAS, and ELIZABETH are cooking at each station.

The audience is prompted to stand and cheer. LIGHTS UP on ROBYN, BEN, and CAREN as they walk to the front of the stage.

ROBYN

This is American Meat! the most controversial and high-stakes cooking show in the history of television. I'm your host and judge Robyn Give along with my collaborators Ben Goodlove and Caren Heart, and ladies and gentlemen, you're in for a treat. We searched America for the best amateur cooks and received more than twenty-five thousand submissions.

BEN

Of those twenty-five thousand, just eleven were chosen to make their best chicken dish, the most universal-tasting meat, and the loser was liquidated and served as prize and protein for our ten contestants.

CAREN

Then, over the past six weeks, one by one those hopefuls were eliminated until only four remained in the running for our one-billion-dollar prize.

ROBYN

That's right, one billion dollars: the largest prize in the history of television. And those four cooks you will see tonight, cooking not just for myself, but they will do so live before the millions watching at home and, you, our live studio audience, for this two-night, one-of-a-kind season finale!

ROBYN, BEN, and CAREN clap, and the audience is prompted to join.

But before meeting our contestants, allow Caren, Ben, and myself to introduce ourselves to those of you watching for the first time. I'm a third-generation chef, a two-time James Beard Award winner, and owner of Michelin-starred restaurants on three continents. I've cooked and eaten every cuisine you can imagine from Persian to American from Icelandic to Igbo. I know food like no other, especially meat, and am excited to taste what our cooks have in store this evening.

BEN

I'm a third-generation butcher who's worked in this business since I was twelve years old. I've carved up, chopped up, sliced up every meat and fish known to man and now own some of the

most renown butcher shops in North America. I also led the team that won the 2019 World Butcher's Challenge. Meat is what I do, and no one, absolutely no one, knows a good cut like me. It's my life's honor to help these cooks chase their dreams.

CAREN

I'm a board-certified emergency medicine physician who has seen it all: (*counting on her fingers as she recites the list*) strangulations, gunshots, stabbings, falls, car accidents, burnings, poisonings, even small bombings. You name it, I've treated it and know firsthand when someone is beyond saving. I also know, most importantly, what kills a person the quickest and how death and trauma affect every part of the body. No one under my care suffers long or needlessly.

ROBYN

Wonderful. Now, let's talk to our finalists.

ROBYN goes to KATHRYN'S cooking station, BEN and CAREN following closely. BEN and CAREN stand behind KATHRYN, looking over her shoulders.

What are you preparing for us this evening?

KATHRYN

(continuing to cook while answering)

I am making a parmesan-crust chest muscle with roasted asparagus and fingerling potatoes.

ROBYN

Sounds delicious. But why the chest muscle rather than, say, the thigh or triceps?

KATHRYN

Well, he didn't have very much fat on his chest, so I thought it would be a very good, meaty piece to work with.

ROBYN

Indeed, he was quite a fit young man. He didn't have much fat anywhere. The chest is a finnick piece, however, thirty seconds too long in the oven and it's dry as sandpaper. Be careful, watch your cook time.

KATHRYN

Will do, sir.

ROBYN

Now, I'm going to ask you something that'll also ask Elizabeth, DeMarcus, and Thomas. You have a one in four chance of winning one billion dollars or literally losing everything. How are you handling that kind of pressure?

KATHRYN

I feel like I was built for this. I was raised by two wonderful, strong parents. They taught us nothing in life is easy. The easy way is the cheap way. You have to sacrifice. Then in the Army, I learned that lesson twice over.

ROBYN

You learned it's worth risking everything to achieve something meaningful?

KATHRYN

Exactly. I ask myself every day, What are you willing to lose? Sir, that's how I know I'm prepared.

(BEN and CAREN nod as if in deep consideration of what's being said)

We were surrounded by terrorists all the time in Iraq and Afghanistan. You, one of your friends could die anytime, so being under this kind of pressure is second nature to me. The greater the sacrifice, the greater the reward.

ROBYN

(bemused)

Okay, then, good luck to you.

ROBYN goes to DEMARCUS'S cooking station, BEN and CAREN following closely. BEN and CAREN stand behind DEMARCUS, looking over his shoulders.

DeMarcus, what can I look forward to this evening?

DEMARCUS

(continuing to cook while answering)

I'm putting a twist on something I loved as a kid, which was my mom's spaghetti. Instead of traditional pasta, I'm using zucchini noodles and ground backside meat in my sauce.

ROBYN

Interesting, and what else are you putting in the sauce?

DEMARCUS

Thyme, oregano, salt, a little garlic powder, and a few of my mom's special ingredients.

ROBYN

(tasting from one of the pots)

Remember, the backside meat can be quite fatty. You must make sure your sauce isn't greasy, like some diner, and that the ground meat has a lovely, moist texture.

DEMARCUS

Taking everything to heart, sir. I'll definitely be sure it's not greasy.

ROBYN

Marvelous. I'll ask you as I did Kathryn: Are you prepared for this kind of pressure?

DEMARCUS

My life has always been live or die, so this is just another chapter. Growing up with my mom and my sisters, we knew what it meant to have nothing. We were homeless sometimes. Overcoming all that, I feel like, in some way, I'm not risking very much if the upside is winning a billion dollars.

ROBYN

That's a life-changing amount of money, is it not?

DEMARCUS

For sure, not just my life but my family's. Generations. When you come from nothing, it's hard to even imagine having something, but I'm close. *(looking up, smiling)* It's my time to shine.

ROBYN

If you win this competition, are you done with teaching?

DEMARCUS

I never thought I'd be in a position to think about quitting, but I, yeah, I'd stop teaching and maybe start a foundation, something that provides after-school programs for kids. They need that type of thing.

(BEN and CAREN smile, nod affirmatively)

ROBYN

(excitedly)

But you'd sadden all your students by quitting!

DEMARCUS

Sir, being on this show is the best lesson I could ever teach them. Seeing me up here, they know they can accomplish their dreams. I believe I've won already.

ROBYN

All right, good man.

ROBYN goes to THOMAS'S cooking station, BEN and CAREN following closely. BEN and CAREN stand behind THOMAS, looking over his shoulders.

Thomas, what are you making?

THOMAS

(continuing to cook while answering)

I am making roasted broccolini with a pan-seared biceps and a classic mashed potatoes on the side.

ROBYN

Brilliant. How confident are you that this is your best with everything on the line?

THOMAS

One-hundred percent. I'm putting all I have into this dish. Being here, competing means too much to not give it my all.

ROBYN

Be sure that sear is perfect. The difference between underdone and overdone is seconds. I've seen great chefs botch this technique to hell.

THOMAS

(looking up, smiling)

Sir, I won't screw this up.

ROBYN

This entire competition you've been remarkably cool, and frankly, I didn't expect you to make it this far, to be the calm, cool, and collected type. How does the owner of a computer repair shop withstand this type of die-or-die pressure?

THOMAS

(using his shoulders to dab tears from his eyes)

You can't judge a book by its cover. My first business went bankrupt. My parents lost their retirements investing in it, my wife took our kids and left me. But I didn't give up. *(looking up, smiling)* I started my shop, built it into a successful business and got my wife and kids back.

(BEN and CAREN smile and nod earnestly, as if moved by the story)

ROBYN

You know resilience, what it means to lose everything and come back?

THOMAS

Yeah, it was tough, but I showed myself I could fight. I know what I'm made of. And it proved anything is possible if you never stop fighting.

ROBYN

Nothing is insurmountable then?

THOMAS

Not a thing on Earth, sir.

ROBYN

Not even losing this competition?

(BEN and CAREN pucker their faces, anticipating THOMAS'S answer)

THOMAS

I agree with DeMarcus: getting this far means I've already won. Nobody can take away what I've accomplished.

(THOMAS and DEMARCUS look at each other and smile)

ROBYN

Well, then, best of luck to you.

ROBYN goes to ELIZABETH'S cooking station, BEN and CAREN following closely. BEN and CAREN stand behind ELIZABETH, looking over her shoulders.

Smells delightful, Elizabeth. What are you making?

ELIZABETH

I'm making a pan-seared chest muscle with a rustic mac-and-cheese, topped with some oven-roasted breadcrumbs, and sweet potato puree on the side.

ROBYN

Why that meal in this type of all-or-nothing competition?

ELIZABETH

I make it for my family all the time, with chicken, of course, and they love it. So, I thought, "Put your best foot forward."

ROBYN

As I told Thomas, watch that sear. Don't let something as elementary as that be the end of you in this competition.

ELIZABETH

Okay, sir, I won't.

ROBYN

Good. Now, Elizabeth, you're up against a war veteran, someone who's been homeless, and a businessman who rebuilt himself from nothing: How does a homemaker prepare for the pressure of this competition against people who have experienced the worst of life?

ELIZABETH

Being a mom is the toughest job on Earth. You see a little of everything and have to be able to do a little bit of everything.

(BEN and CAREN look at one another, exhibiting a bit of skepticism, then return their eyes to Elizabeth)

ROBYN

It prepares you even for the stress of literally cooking for your life?

ELIZABETH

(she stops cooking momentarily to look at ROBYN)

Being a mom prepares you for everything, and I'm the only person here who knows what being a mom feels like. *(resuming to cook)* Not many people would swap places with someone who's taking care of a family.

ROBYN

You sound absolutely certain of yourself.

ELIZABETH

Sir, I wouldn't have made here if I wasn't. You have to believe in yourself and what you're doing.

ROBYN

Good then.

ROBYN, BEN, and CAREN return to their positions at center stage.

ROBYN, BEN, and CAREN

(looking at the clock, counting in unison)

Seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, stop!

ROBYN

Everyone, your time is up. Continuing is an immediate disqualification. *(he pauses, and with his hands pressed together as if in prayer, he brings his hands to his face)* Now, there is one thing you must know before I taste your dishes. *(pauses)* Tonight will be a double-elimination. *(the finalists gasp, rub their faces and hands, fidget with anxiety)* Two of you will be saying goodbye this evening. *(pauses)* Kathryn, how does this news make you feel?

KATHRYN

I'm surprised ... but ready.

ROBYN

DeMarcus?

DEMARCUS

Same here, surprised but ready.

ROBYN

You, Thomas?

THOMAS

(snickering nervously)

A broken record: surprised but ready.

ROBYN

Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH

Same here, surprised but ready for what happens.

ROBYN

Let's begin.

ROBYN goes to THOMAS'S station, BEN and CAREN following closely. BEN and CAREN stand behind THOMAS, looking over his shoulders. Before tasting the dish, ROBYN raises fork- and spoonfuls in the air to eye them in the light, sniffs them on occasion. While ROBYN tastes the dish, THOMAS faces forward and remains still, hands folded behind his back, rarely looking at ROBYN.

ROBYN (continued)

Was this your best?

THOMAS

(continuing to look forward)

I believe it was.

ROBYN goes to ELIZABETH'S station, BEN and CAREN following closely. BEN and CAREN stand behind ELIZABETH, looking over her shoulders. Before tasting the dish, ROBYN raises fork- and spoonfuls in the air to eye them in the light, sniffs them on occasion. As ROBYN tastes her dish, ELIZABETH looks at him emotionlessly.

ROBYN

(clears his throat)

Okay, then.

ROBYN goes to KATHRYN'S station, BEN and CAREN following closely. BEN and CAREN stand behind KATHRYN, looking over her shoulders. Before tasting the dish, ROBYN raises fork- and spoonfuls in the air to eye them in the light, sniffs them on occasion. She's noticeably nervous as ROBYN tastes her dish, adjusting the hems of her shirtsleeves, pushing hair behind her ears. He finishes, looks at her, exhales then moves to DEMARCUS'S station, BEN and CAREN following closely. BEN and CAREN stand behind DEMARCUS, looking over his shoulders. Before tasting the dish, ROBYN raises fork- and spoonfuls in the air to eye them in the light, sniffs them on occasion. DEMARCUS wipes sweat from his forehead once with a towel then stands calmly and watches ROBYN tastes his dish. ROBYN, CAREN, and BEN then return to center stage.

ROBYN (continued)

This was not an easy decision, but I know, without a doubt, the two who will not be continuing. Kathryn and Elizabeth, please step forward.

KATHRYN and ELIZABETH sigh, drop their heads, and come to ROBYN, BEN, and CAREN.

You are wonderful cooks and have been remarkable competitors. From start, I knew you would go far in this competition and that it would be a shock if at least one of you didn't survive to our final round. *(pauses)* Which is why I'm relieved you're moving forward and the time has come for DeMarcus and Thomas.

ELIZABETH and KATHRYN scream with excitement, hug, and hold each other's hands. DEMARCUS and THOMAS groan. DEMARCUS pounds his cooking station, and THOMAS begins to whimper.

ROBYN

Thomas, final words?

THOMAS

(crying)

Sir, I gave it everything I had ... gave it everything I had. That's all.

ROBYN

DeMarcus, anything to say before you go?

DEMARCUS

(stammering)

I—I—I'm at a loss for words, sir. I—I knew this could happen but didn't expect it.

(he starts to speak but instead throws up his hands and sighs loudly)

ROBYN

(opening his blazer to reveal the gun and knife holstered to his sides)

Ladies, since there are two victors tonight, you make this choice together.

ELIZABETH and KATHRYN

(giddily looking at each other and muttering indecipherably)

The gun! The gun! The gun! The gun! The gun!

*ROBYN hands KATHRYN the gun.
DEMARCUS and THOMAS walk offstage,
BEN and CAREN following them and
whispering to each other, LIZ and
KATHRYN following BEN and CAREN.
ROBYN walks to the front of the stage.*

ROBYN

(excitedly)

Wow, ladies and gentlemen, even I'm surprised by that finish! I remember as a young man learning Spanish and our teacher giving us this little mnemonic for remembering if "problema"

was masculine or feminine. “Remember,” she said, “Men have all the problems.” Boy, was she correct tonight—*(two gunshots are heard)*

KATHRYN hurries onto the stage with ELIZABETH behind her and holding the gun, both smiling and excited. They join ROBYN. ELIZABETH fires a celebratory shot into the air. ROBYN and KATHRYN duck.

ROBYN (continued)

(laughing)

Good god, woman, are you mad? You can't shoot that thing in here!

END SCENE

SETTING:

A television studio.

Scene 2

A clock hangs above the stage. Two small cooking stations, each with a few pots, pans, dishes, and cooking utensils. From left to right, KATHRYN and ELIZABETH are cooking at their stations. ROBYN, BEN, and CAREN stand center stage. Beneath his sport coat, hidden from view, ROBYN is carrying a small handgun and a knife holstered to his sides. Behind ROBYN, BEN, and CAREN is a box, inside of which are noisemakers, party hats, and confetti. The audience is prompted to stand and cheer. LIGHTS UP on ROBYN, BEN, and CAREN as they walk to the front of the stage.

ROBYN

Welcome to the finale of America Meat! I'm your host and judge Robyn Give along with my collaborators Ben Goodelove and Caren Hart.

BEN

From twenty-five thousand hopefuls, only two finalists remain.

CAREN

And, as we speak, they are preparing a dish that could be worth a one-billion-dollar prize.

ROBYN

In the history of television there has never been a show like American Meat. Never has the reward for success been so great or the consequences of failure been so tragic. This, ladies and gentlemen, is reality television in its purest form.

BEN

The winner of this competition will not only be able to say they won ... *(trailing off)*

CAREN

(finishing BEN'S sentence)

But that they overcame all odds in doing so.

ROBYN

(speaking conversationally with BEN and CAREN)

What a remarkable season this has been, from twenty-five thousand to two. Few would have thought a show like this was possible, and I bet, even fewer would have imagined that in the end we'd have two young women.

CAREN

Which, I think, best demonstrates how results are determined by a person's talent and hard work.

BEN

It's will—plain and simple. They're on that stage for the same reasons the three of us are here. Luck will only take you so far.

ROBYN

Precisely, it won't take you very far at all without that ... *(pausing briefly to think)* that other ingredient to success. The fight you have inside.

CAREN

As a woman of color, I definitely know the importance of fighting. What Elizabeth and Kathryn are showing is you have to go out and get what you want in life.

BEN

(reaching out as if he were snatching a gnat from the air)

You have to grab it! Grab it and knock over any obstacle in your way.

ROBYN

Not a thing in this life is a birthright—a job, a promotion, a spouse—nothing at all. Every person has the power to begin the world over again.

CAREN

Robyn, who do you feel has the advantage in the finale?

ROBYN

It's neck and neck to be honest. Two strong competitors, two wonderful cooks. Kathryn, I'd say, definitely has the advantage in terms of the pressure. She's faced death before. But Elizabeth, as she has shown, is a tremendous fighter. It can really go either way.

(Robyn looks at the clock)

BEN

If you could give some advice to either of these competitors, what would you say?

ROBYN

Brilliant question. First thing: stay within yourself. Don't overcomplicate matters at this stage, especially with your life on the line. Secondly: make sure your dish is perfect, not just the cook but the presentation. Third: by God, finish in time. Dying on a disqualification would be a shame.

(ROBYN, BEN, and CAREN look at the clock)

CAREN

Their time is almost up.

ROBYN, BEN, and CAREN

(looking at the clock, counting in unison)

Seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, stop!

ROBYN

Your time is up, stop everything! Continuing is an immediate disqualification. Let's give a hand to our finalists, Kathryn and Elizabeth.

ROBYN, BEN, and CAREN applaud and the audience is prompted to cheer. ROBYN goes to ELIZABETH'S station, BEN and CAREN following closely. BEN and CAREN stand behind ELIZABETH, looking over her shoulders. ROBYN and ELIZABETH hug and exchange a kiss on the cheek.

ROBYN (continued)

How are you this evening?

ELIZABETH

I'm doing well. A little nervous but happy to be here.

ROBYN

Good, good. When you found out about this competition and decided to try out, what pushed you to do so knowing the odds and the stakes?

ELIZABETH

The opportunity was too good to let go by—

ROBYN

(interrupting)

Winning one billion dollars?

ELIZABETH

Yes, sir, that. It's hard to imagine having that much money, and also the chance to prove something to myself and win. I see these shows all the time and think, "I can do that."
(snickering) So, I just decided to give it a shot.

(BEN and CAREN nod in agreement)

ROBYN

And “give it a shot” you did. You’ve outlasted nearly everyone. What would winning one billion dollars mean to you?

ELIZABETH

Everything. Like I said, it’s hard to fathom that kind of money. It doesn’t seem real. But, if I did win, my husband would never have to work again, my kids wouldn’t have to pay for college. Our house would be ours. So much would change, be better. I’m the daughter of immigrants....
(trailing off)

ROBYN

Wonderful. And your family is here tonight, correct?

ELIZABETH

They are, yes, sir, they are.

(all looking briefly to the audience)

Their support means so much. I wouldn’t have made it this far, gotten through tonight without them. The idea of being alone was almost as scary as the idea of losing.

ROBYN

One of the things I love most about this competition, in fact, is how much it brought families together. Each of the people who competed really looked to their families and loved ones for inspiration and support. It’s a beautiful part of what this show has been able to do.

ELIZABETH

Exactly.

ROBYN

Now, to the matter at hand. What have you prepared this evening?

ELIZABETH

I made an almond-crusted chest with roasted Brussels sprouts and mashed carrots.

ROBYN

Why this dish? At this stage, with only two of you remaining, is this what you're willing to stake your life on?

ELIZABETH

I'm very confident in this dish. I've made it before and knew I could perfect it. I'm confident it's my best, very confident.

ROBYN

And the texture of those almonds won't be like gravel to the bite or that chest muscle pink in the middle?

ELIZABETH

It won't be, no.

ROBYN

Okay, then, I look forward to tasting it.

ROBYN goes to KATHRYN'S station, BEN and CAREN following closely. BEN and CAREN stand behind KATHRYN, looking over her shoulders. ROBYN and KATHRYN hug and exchange a kiss on the cheeks.

Kathryn, describe your journey from Army veteran to finalist of American Meat. It's, in some way, an unexpected path, yes, to go from Afghanistan and Iraq to the brink of winning one billion dollars or losing your life.

KATHRYN

It is, it's been a wild journey. I would never have expected to be here with so much on the line. But I've always loved cooking and been a competitor. I like it when the odds are against me.

ROBYN

Why, why do you like such dire odds?

KATHRYN

Sir, it brings out the best in me. There's a saying my dad used to repeat, "Pressure makes diamonds and bust pipes."

ROBYN

(interrupting, laughing)

And you're a diamond?

(BEN and CAREN snicker)

KATHRYN

(laughing)

I believe so.

KATHRYN'S HUSBAND

(shouting)

Yes, you are!

(all look briefly to the audience)

KATHRYN

(smiling)

My husband.

ROBYN

He's been a great support to you, like Elizabeth's family has been to her, yes?

KATHRYN

Definitely, I can't imagine what my life would be without him. We met not long after I left the military, at a Home Depot. We were buying doorknobs for these raggedly ole apartments we'd just moved into and now we're here.

ROBYN

Indeed. You are here, close to one billion dollars. What would winning that prize mean to you?

KATHRYN

It would change everything, sir. It would be the difference between waking up and our lives being one way and waking up and our lives being a totally different way.... *(trailing off)*

(BEN and CAREN furl their lips, widen their eyes humorously)

ROBYN

Certainly. Are you confident in what you've prepared for me this evening?

KATHRYN

I am, one-thousand percent.

ROBYN

All right, then. Explain to me your dish.

KATHRYN

My husband's family is Italian, so I make this for him a lot. It's a classic marsala using the breast muscle with Marsala wine, mushrooms, garlic, and a bit of parsley.

ROBYN

And the chest muscle is cooked perfectly, not over- or underdone?

KATHRYN

Yes, I believe so.

ROBYN

Very good. I shall start where I am.

Before tasting the dish, ROBYN raises fork- and spoonfuls in the air to eye them in the light, sniffs them on occasion. ROBYN then tastes KATHRYN'S dish, taking more bites than he did previously. ROBYN eats as if he's going to finish the entire plate, looking at her from time to time as she repeatedly makes brief eye contact before looking away. ROBYN goes to ELIZABETH'S station, BEN and CAREN following behind. BEN and CAREN stand behind

ELIZABETH. Before tasting the dish, ROBYN raises fork- and spoonfuls in the air to eye them in the light, sniffs them on occasion. He then tastes ELIZABETH'S dish. As ROBYN did with KATHRYN, he takes more bites than he previously had, as if he's going to finish the serving. He looks at her while he eats. ELIZABETH alternates between looking down and at the audience. ROBYN returns to center stage.

ROBYN (continued)

Kathryn, Elizabeth, please step forward.

KATHRYN and ELIZABETH move to center stage.

From the beginning, I knew you two had the ability to make it here, the finale, and I'm not surprised you're the cooks left before me today. Sadly, of course, there can only be one winner. And that decision you've made very difficult for me. This was surely not an easy choice, but *(he pauses, and with his hands pressed together as if in prayer, he brings his hands to his face)* I am certain of my decision. The winner of the inaugural American Meat is *(he pauses)* Elizabeth!

Celebratory music blares. The audience is led into applause and cheers. ELIZABETH screams excitedly, jumps up and down in elation. KATHRYN'S shoulders slouch, she sobs into her hands, turns her back to the audience, and moves aside. CAREN and BEN remove party hats, noisemakers, and confetti from the box, hand them out, and everyone goes to the front of the stage to celebrate. ELIZABETH'S husband and children come onstage. They hug and kiss, put on party hats, blow the noisemakers, toss confetti in the air. ROBYN gets ELIZABETH'S attention and opens his sport coat.

Elizabeth! Elizabeth, I don't believe you've ever made this decision single-handedly before!

ELIZABETH

(screaming elatedly)

Aaaah! No, I haven't! Aaaah!

ELIZABETH reaches into ROBYN'S sport coat and removes the knife. She then runs to KATHRYN and slits her throat from behind. KATHRYN falls to the ground. CAREN hurries to KATHRYN, feels her neck then turns to the audience, smiling, gestures a thumbs down, and returns to the celebration.

(going to her family while continuing to hold the knife)

One billion dollars! Aaaah!

ROBYN

(laughing excitedly)

Oh, Elizabeth, you've gone and done it again! Sweet lord, woman, perhaps you are mad!

(addressing the audience)

What a finish, ladies and gentlemen, I didn't see that coming. Congratulations to all of our cooks and especially our winner, Elizabeth. *(grabbing her hand that's clutching the knife and raising it in the air)* Thank you all for watching and thanks also to our sponsors, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Wow, what an evening, what a season, good night!

End of play

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *As the "first shot" never initials the beginning of war as a historical process, similarly the "moment of inspiration" does not capture the start of an artistic process. Unlike war and peace, however, the artistic process—the interplay of individual and society, of inspiration and creation—is seemingly less amenable to objective explanations. Why then and why there are more difficult questions to answer when personal psychology assumes such an important role. It's only possible to begin an artist's story in media res, so it is that I recall watching the American version of a British cooking show on a day in July 2019 and, with an idea suddenly and wholly in my head, texting a friend about what appeared in my consciousness. I don't remember when I finally started writing, but the play was finished in January 2020. Linking the historical and the artistic, I like to believe (in retrospect) that on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic an element of the historic process had found expression in my artistic process. The smiley mask was slipping from the face of an oftentimes cruel, unfair world. If that is true, the works of Ionesco and Beckett and Chicago as a city, inspiration, and home of wonderful, abundant theatre helped create this play.*

AUTHOR BIO: My fiction has appeared in *Colloquium*, *The Rupture*, and *deLuge Journal*. Moreover, a chapbook collection of my short stories, titled *Family Affair*, was published by Red Bird Chapbooks. I previously co-founded and served as co-editor-in-chief of *The Blackstone Review*, an online arts and humanities journal, where I also contributed fiction and non-fiction.