

The secret to making the perfect lasagna

a short play

by

Bobbi-lea Dionysius, Ingrid Gang, Justyna Kiczor, Kate Prestt, Daphne Quah,
Nathan Slevin, Janeen Sonsie, Lara Woolf and Alex Broun.

This play is free to download and perform. The only condition is that you must **email Alex at abroun@bigpond.net.au** and let him know **where and when you produced his script**, listing the **director, cast and theatre**. If you have any production photos send them along as well and they may just end up on this website.

March 2009

Email: abroun@bigpond.net.au

www.alexbroun.com

Alex Broun 2009 ©

Characters

NATHAN

CAROL

CRESSIDA

MAY

JENNIFER

MONICA

VIOLET

JASMINE

The Secret to making the perfect Lasagna

NATHAN: So she said yes. Which was a bit of a surprise. I thought she'd say no. Definitely. But I ask and her mouth opened and out pop the unexpected answer: "Yes I will come to your house for dinner." Now this is a big event because 1. I've never actually had dinner with a girl and 2. Especially when my parents are away for the weekend. I'm not expecting anything to happen. I'm not. I'm not even hoping. I wouldn't even know what to do if something did happen but to just spend sometime alone with her. Together. Just us. By ourselves. Me and Wendy Malvern, the cutest girl in school, in my opinion. You get the picture. So my plan is working but then she adds the condition : "Only if you promise to cook." Cook? I can't cook. Why didn't I say DVD. "Come to my house to watch a DVD ?" Microwave Popcorn. Easy. Dinner ! Who ever thought of dinner ? "Sure, and what do you like to eat ?" Please say party pies, I know how to cook party pies. I cooked them for my seventh birthday. I didn't even burn them – too badly. But then she says it – the death sentence: "Lasagna." Lasa – what ? "My favourite food is home cooked lasagna." And then she looks me in the eyes. She has these beautiful crystal blue eyes and she gives the final warning: "And don't buy it frozen and re-heat it. I'll know – and I won't be happy. And you don't want to make me unhappy." Then she gave me a little smile, spun around and ran away – the sun bouncing off her red curls. So let's recap. Firstly she said yes – Wendy Malvern said she would come to my house for dinner. That's a positive and you've always got to focus on the positives. Now in the negative column what do we have – LASAGNA ! I have to make lasagna. How the hell do you make lasagna ? I can not buy it – or Wendy Malvern will be unhappy and probably never speak to me again. So I have to make lasagna. But not just any lasagna. This has to be the perfect lasagna.

CAROL: (ENTERS) The secret to making the perfect lasagna ...

NATHAN: So I decided to consult the experts. The women in my family. And luckily I have a very large family with lots of women.

CAROL: Hmm. Well if I told you then it wouldn't be a secret. Ha, ha.

NATHAN: Firstly I go to see cousin Carol. She lives in Carlton, she must know how to make lasagna.

CAROL: I suppose it wouldn't harm to share it with you ...

NATHAN TAKES OUT A NOTEPAD.

CAROL: but only a little!

NATHAN: Did I mention we call her "Crazy Cousin Carol"?

CAROL: My mother, that's your Auntie Susannah, never made lasagna when I was a little girl so before I met Massimo my secret to making the perfect lasagna was to go to Benedicts on Acland Street -

NATHAN: Isn't that in St Kilda ?

CAROL: Last time I checked.

NATHAN: I thought you'd get the best lasagna in Carlton.

CAROL: Are you kidding ? I'd go down to Benedict's, pick one up, remove it from the foil tray, decant it into my own "special" yellow floral lasagna dish, pop a sprig of basil on top and voila ! There it was ... the perfect lasagna, all served up and ready to go !!!

NATHAN: I'm not allowed to buy it. Has to be homemade.

CAROL: Homemade ? Then I will have to tell you about Massimo. Massimo, Massimo, Massimo. The delicious, darling Massimo. He was an absolute master in the kitchen, as well as elsewhere - I'm pleased to report -

NATHAN: Gross.

CAROL: A regular chef extraordinnaire. And he made a lasagna that rivalled even the one from Benedict's !

NATHAN: Can you remember the recipe ?

CAROL: Write this down. Firstly he would tell me it is important to have a lovely bottle of red wine on hand - to use as a reduction for the sauce - but also as a tittle for oneself. It always gets you in the mood for working up a storm in the kitchen - and other places - Massimo would say.

NATHAN: (WRITING) Red wine.

CAROL: How old are you ?

NATHAN: Sixteen.

CAROL: Well, it's good to start young. Use fresh herbs – that's non negotiable !!! And three types of cheese – all full fat - and don't be stingy ... and lots and lots and lots of garlic ... add a pinch of cinnamon too. That's a very special secret. Read me what you've got.

NATHAN: Red wine, herbs, fresh cheese, three types of garlic and lots of lots of cinnamon.

CAROL: Perfect ! Away you go.

NATHAN: Isn't there anything else ?

CAROL: Golden squares of lush, tender pasta. Massimo would make his own. I would sit on the kitchen bench next to him and watch his arms flex and ripple as he kneaded and rolled and ground the pasta dough into submission. Then he used his mother's gorgeous little pasta roller – his mother's, so sweet, all the way from 1950s Napoli – to roll out the sheets on the thinnest setting possible. They would be transparent and melt in your mouth. And there were never just a few layers of pasta sheets but multiple – ten at least !!! But the hardest thing about the perfect lasagna – Massimo told me this as we lay in bed one night, clasped in each other's arms – is that you should stop yourself from eating it as soon as it comes out of the oven. Let it cool, put it in the fridge and let it sit for that first day ... Only on the second day does it come into its own. Only then does it reveal its maximum flavour potential. So on the second day you put it back into the oven to reheat. And enjoy it ! Share it with friends and lovers. The perfect lasagna will never be perfect if it's sampled by only one person ! And enjoy the process. If you enjoy making it, others will taste the enjoyment, the love in every forkful. Massimo would sing-a-long to old Dean Martin records while marinating the meat. (SINGS) "When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore." Then we would dance, in the kitchen. Sometimes he would stretch out his arm and -

SHE GRABS **NATHAN** AND THEY START TO SPIN AROUND THE KITCHEN

CAROL: spin me around and around, faster and faster and faster. (SHE STOPS, NOW VERY DIZZY) Did you get all that ?

NATHAN: I'm up to the part about the little pasta roller.

CAROL: Darling, I'm exhausted. Go ask Auntie Cressida.

CAROL EXITS.

NATHAN: I'm not sure why we called Auntie Cressida – Auntie.

LIGHTS UP ON **CRESSIDA**.

NATHAN: She wasn't my mum's sister. I don't think she was related to my mother at all. But we still called her Auntie.

LIGHTS UP ON **MAY**

NATHAN: She lived with Auntie May – in Northcote. She wasn't my Auntie either. But we called her Auntie too.

CRESSIDA: First and foremost: Attention to detail - the tiniest things make the biggest difference. I can't explain it to you but that's the way it is. Just that tiny bit of chilli could add that special tang and make it stand out from the rest.

MAY: The difference between a good lasagna and a great lasagna lies in the richness of the sauces and the subtle nuances of the herbs used. The bolognese sauce needs to be brimming with full tomato flavour and a rich red colour that stains the plate. To obtain this you have to use a lot of tomatoes. By boiling down the liquid the flavour develops. A bay leaf or two with a sprinkling of thyme will also give the sauce a subtlety of aroma.

CRESSIDA: Timing. Never rush a good lasagna. All good things take time. If you don't give your lasagna ample time to incubate all your efforts in making it would have gone to waste. Be patient. But don't leave it too long, otherwise it'll get hard and stale and lose its succulence. Timing is very important.

MAY: What would a lasagna be without a gloriously pale béchamel sauce oozing out between the layers of pasta and augmenting the meatiness of the bolognaise sauce ?

CRESSIDA: Everything in moderation. I know May likes her lasagna very cheesy and creamy but you'll get sick of it quicker that way. (TO **MAY**) Well if you don't, I will.

MAY: My special ingredient is a touch of grated nutmeg, which surprises with its vaguely nutty nuance.

CRESSIDA: (TO **MAY**) Are you talking about me?

THEY BOTH LAUGH.

CRESSIDA: (TO **NATHAN**) Practice makes perfect. Some people get it right the first time. Some people take ages but when they get do finally attain perfection they realise it was fully worth the wait. Others never get it. It doesn't mean they give up - they just keep trying.

MAY: When assembling the lasagna the quantities have to be sufficient to make three layers each of pasta, béchamel and bolognaise and to finish with a layer of pasta, a little grated parmesan on top, a drizzle of oil and into the oven.

CRESSIDA: There has to be layers, like an onion. Some people eat their lasagna that way.

MAY: (LAUGHS) They do!

CRESSIDA: First they peel off their top layer, then they work their way down. And the more layers you add to your lasagna, the more enthralled these unique layer-by-layer lasagna consumers will be.

MAY: A lasagna that scrimps on the amount of sauce between the layers will always leave an unsatisfied feeling. There has to be enough sauce to bathe the sheets of pasta and yet not leave pools of liquid in the base of the dish.

CRESSIDA: The lasagna should be firm enough to cut into rectangular blocks that lift easily from the dish but soft enough to quiver gently on the eater's plate. A mouthful of lasagna – satisfaction supreme.

MAY: Keep it interesting. Throw in some new ingredients every now and then. Add some spice. Variety is the spice of life. Tease and bait the tastebuds. Leave them wondering - "Ooh that was an interesting situation - what was it?"

CRESSIDA: Go with your impulse, your gut feel. If you feel like having more cheese go for it. Listen to your taste buds. They know what they are about. They aren't inhibited by the other organs. You must follow through with your actions - tantalise them and satisfy them. Never leave them high and dry. It's poor form.

MAY: And most important of all - never get complacent. You must always give your utmost care and attention every time you make a lasagna. No one loves a slapdash cook, do they?

CRESSIDA: And if something goes wrong. Never hesitate to act. It's never a one-man -

MAY: Or one woman -

CRESSIDA AND MAY PUT THEIR ARMS AROUND EACH OTHER'S SHOULDERS, LOVINGLY.

CRESSIDA: Show.

NATHAN: Thanks Auntie Cressida. Auntie May.

MAY AND CRESSIDA: Our pleasure dear.

LIGHTS DOWN ON **CRESSIDA AND MAY. JENNIFER ENTERS.**

JENNIFER: I believe you're searching for the secret to making the perfect lasagna.

NATHAN: Yes Auntie Jennifer.

JENNIFER: Why haven't you made an appointment to see me?

NATHAN: I was going to.

JENNIFER: I may be Senior Partner in one of the top legal firms in the city - but I can still make the best lasagna in Melbourne. Come into my office. Thursday. 9.45am.

NATHAN: Yes Auntie Jennifer.

LIGHTS CHANGE. **JENNIFER'S** OFFICE. **MONICA** ENTERS TAKING DICTATION.

JENNIFER: Lasagna is an over used and much abused dish. It's a dish you see on many a pub and restaurant menu, but very rarely is it done properly, let alone well. Way too often it is just a nasty runny bolognaise sauce poured over the layers of pasta with cheddar cheese melted on top. Or it's microwaved and served up as luke warm mush. I'm a lasagna aficionado, and I know a good one from a bad one. And the best one I have ever had is the one I cook myself, of course. What makes it so superb? Let me share with you my lasagna secret. The first and most critical step involves getting the bolognaise sauce right. This requires premium quality minced beef mixed with some minced pork. Add to that oven roasted capsicum, fresh Roma tomatoes, bacon, onions, tomato paste, enough garlic to flavour strongly - without overpowering, good quality beef stock, and a decent half bottle or so of a good quality red. Are you old enough to drink ?

NATHAN SHAKES HIS HEAD.

JENNIFER: (TO **MONICA**) Scratch the wine. A teaspoon of sugar and another of vinegar enhances the tomato flavours and rounds them off. The *piece de resistance* of the sauce is the fresh herbs – plenty of basil, some oregano, thyme and a couple of bay leaves.

NATHAN: That's just what Auntie Cressida said.

JENNIFER: Did she ? How is old Cressie ?

NATHAN: Good.

JENNIFER: Still with that ... woman

NATHAN: You mean Auntie May?

BEAT.

JENNIFER: Allow the bolognaise to simmer slowly for a few hours to allow all the flavours to expand and merge. The next important step is the béchamel sauce. And I bet Auntie

JENNIFER: (CONT) Cressida didn't tell you this. Heat the milk with an onion studded with cloves, so the flavour permeates the milk. Make sure you cook the butter and flour together before blending in the milk. Now you are set to start compiling your masterpiece. Start with a layer of bolognese on the bottom of the pan – not pasta first, bolognese - then a layer of pasta. And forget that crap about homemade pasta - bought pasta is just as good. Let the experts handle that component. Then another layer of bolognese sauce. Now the next is an important and much over-looked step – sprinkle some ricotta and grated mozzarella cheese over the meat sauce before you put your next layer of pasta on. Repeat those layers until you fill the dish with the last layer of pasta, then pour on to that layer enough bolognese sauce to *just* cover it and then pour your béchamel sauce over the bolognese. The final touches are a sprinkling of grated mozzarella *and* parmesan cheese – freshly grated of course to ensure the maximum flavour. It is most important that it is baked in the oven so that the cheese melts on the top and goes a little crusty. Microwaves make mushy messes. I already said that. And then – tick in the box - you will have a first class lasagna.

NATHAN: Sounds delicious. When did you last make it ?

JENNIFER: Make it. Are you kidding ? When would I have time to do all that? Monica will type that up and fax it over to you this afternoon. I have to get to court.

JENNIFER EXITS.

MONICA: She's a very busy woman your Aunt.

NATHAN NODS.

MONICA: But she left out one thing. The most important ingredient. Love. I come from a big Italian family and we all get together to make the family lasagna. Everyone has to bring something. Their own special ingredient. Basil, cinnamon, parmigiano. Each ingredient also adds the key ingredient – love. No good meal is without it. It's amazing to hear all the voices – gathered together in my Momma's kitchen. Young and old - laughter and wine – making the family lasagna brings all the generations together. The lasagna recipe

MONICA: (CONT) that my family has followed for generations brings the women together to make a meal for their family. But as everyone gets older making lasagna become less and less. It used to be once a week – now just once a month. But we never make lasagna alone. Our tomatoes are home grown and we make a day out of preparing the feast. It is my role to dice the tomatoes – very fine – to mix into the bolognaise. Grandmomma sits at the head of the table, watching us make the lasagna. From my place I can see how proud she is of us, adding the layers of pasta and covering each layer in tomatoes and cheese – showing how much we love each other by the love we put into making the lasagna. I sometimes think to myself, now we've moved to a new country how many generations will continue the tradition. I don't know the answer to that. People think growing up in a family that follows tradition is repetitive and boring but when it's your family who are in your Momma's kitchen making the lasagna from scratch I now know why my Grandmomma said it as so important. One day I will make it in my kitchen, and momma will sit at the head of the table where grandmomma sits and my eldest daughter will dice the tomatoes.

MONICA EXITS. VIOLET ENTERS.

VIOLET: So, it's serious. No, don't say a word. I can just tell. You have that look about you. The question is, what are you going to do about it ? Does she know what you feel? Perhaps it's time for a romantic gesture.

NATHAN: What's that Auntie Violet ?

VIOLET: Just Violet please. You know I hate that word. Makes me sound so old.

NATHAN: (TO AUDIENCE) Violet is a Drama Teacher. Very ... dramatic.

VIOLET: What do you mean you haven't heard of a romantic gesture ? You and your generation ... let's just say it doesn't involve a text! It's up close and personal. A romantic gesture can be anything that's from the heart and shows your beloved that she's the one.

NATHAN: Like what ?

VIOLET: I don't know ... you could take her for a moonlit stroll, serenade her ...

NATHAN: You mean like ... sing ?

VIOLET: What does she like?

NATHAN: Lasagna.

VIOLET: I hope it's vegetarian.

NATHAN: She didn't say.

VIOLET: So cook for her then. Cook her a lavish feast. Maybe lead her in blindfolded then when she opens her eyes - your romantic gesture unfolds. A sumptuous Italian meal. The perfect chianti, fresh crusty bread, crisp salad ... and a gourmet vegetarian lasagna with eggplant and zucchini. Make this night special ... delectable. Like the lasagna it should be rich and memorable, layered with romance and with the aroma of honesty and thoughtfulness. Sprinkle it with a hint of spice and devour it slowly - as you mean to devour her.

NATHAN: Auntie Violet - I'm sixteen.

VIOLET: So was I. Once.

VIOLET EXITS.

NATHAN: So I'd been to see all my Aunts - Cressida, May, Violet, Carol - (HOLDING UP FAX) even got the fax from Auntie Jennifer. And Monica had told me about her amazing family tradition of making the lasagna. But now I was more confused than ever. Nine layers or ten, parmesan or ricotta, nutmeg or cinnamon ? I needed to speak to someone my own age.

JASMINE ENTERS.

NATHAN: My sister - Jasmine.

JASMINE: Why didn't you ask me before? Lasagna is my favourite dish and one of my best culinary achievements - *and* the best thing about when I cook it is that it's different every time. I like to call it adventure cooking !

NATHAN: Adventure cooking ?

JASMINE: It's great. Haven't you ever tried it? You know all the basic ingredients but you throw away the scales, the exact portions and the recipe books ! I'm a mood cooker. If I feel like spice I'll put in spice. If I feel textural, I'll add extra cream and cheese. If I'm feeling fat, I'll use light cream, lite cheese, lite milk and extra trim mince. Now because lasagna is my favourite dish, I've eaten it a lot over the years and somewhere along the line, I O'D on it. So now I need to break it down with a nice fresh garden salad and dressing – again choosing the dressing by mood – and I find that makes a perfectly balanced meal, leaving me completely satisfied. Probably because it now has all the five food groups in it – somewhere – and I don't feel guilty from complete over indulgence. Some people would argue that I'm completely crazy being an Adventure Cooker. Mum says that I should be banned from all kitchens because it's too eventful – I've set fire to the oven more than once! - but I just put all that down to a learning curve. And once you're over that, and discover the boundaries of the science of cooking, which I was never really that good at, you can freely enjoy what you love without getting sick of it. You know the best thing about lasagna ?

NATHAN: What ?

JASMINE: Even the worst lasagna tastes good.

JASMINE EXITS.

NATHAN: So the big day arrived. The night before I sat up very late and made a list of all the ingredients I had to buy the next day. I worked my way through all my notes from my meetings with Auntie Carol, Auntie Cressida, Auntie May, Monica, Auntie – but don't call her that – Violet, Jasmine and Auntie Jennifer's fax – trying to come up with my very own perfect lasagna. 8pm became 10pm, 10pm became Midnight.

NATHAN LIES DOWN ON THE KITCHEN TABLE.

NATHAN: At some point I fell asleep – right on the kitchen table.

HE GOES TO SLEEP. LIGHTS CHANGE.

MAY AND CRESSIDA ENTER CARRYING BASKETS OF FOOD.

MAY: Here he is.

CRESSIDA: Poor love.

JENNIFER ENTERS, FOLLOWED BY **MONICA** CARRYING A SHOPPING BAG.

JENNIFER: (TO **NATHAN**) Come on. Up you get. Food isn't going to cook itself.

NATHAN WAKES UP, RUBS HIS EYES. **CAROL** AND **VIOLET** ENTER.

CAROL: Let the poor kid sleep.

VIOLET: (TO **NATHAN**) Where does your Mum keep the coffee ?

JASMINE: (ENTERS) Right here Auntie Vi.

VIOLET: It's Violet not Vi – and don't call me Auntie.

NATHAN: They were all there. All my Aunts. Cressida, May, Jennifer, Carol and Violet – even Monica and Jasmine. Jennifer heard about Monica's family's lasagna-making tradition so she decided to instantly adopt it as one of our own.

JENNIFER: No point re-inventing the wheel.

NATHAN: Keeping up with the Guddicinis – so to speak. But Monica didn't mind. As soon as I was off the kitchen table they were cooking up a storm. Carol brought Massimo's 1950s pasta roller -

CAROL: (HOLDING UP PASTA ROLLER) He gave it to me.

NATHAN: Auntie Jennifer brought the Roma tomatoes, which Monica was sent to David Jones to buy specially. Violet bought the red wine, though not a lot of it actually went into the sauce, (**VIOLET TAKES A BIG GULP OF RED WINE**) Cressida bought the nutmeg and May bought lots and lots of garlic.

CRESSIDA: He wants to kiss the girl May, not suffocate her.

NATHAN: Even Jasmine joined in.

JASMINE: Can't you at least try Adventure Cooking?

VIOLET: (POINTING AT MINCE) What's that ?

CRESSIDA: What does it look like ?

NATHAN: A potential controversy over vegetarian or non-vegetarian was avoided by Auntie Jennifer negotiating a settlement.

JENNIFER: Girls, girls. We'll make one of each.

NATHAN: All that was left for me was to sit back and watch.

CRESSIDA: (TO **NATHAN**) Out of the way darling.

NATHAN: I guess it really wasn't cheating. Wendy said it had to be home made. She didn't say I had to make it. Standing in the corner, watching my Aunts and Jasmine and Monica working so hard I realised I finally knew the secret of making a perfect lasagna. It was just like Monica said - love.

THEY CONTINUE TO MAKE THE LASAGNE.

CAROL: (SINGING) When the moon hits your eyes like a big
pizza pie

ALL: That's Amore.

VIOLET: When the world seems to shine like you've had too
much wine

ALL: That's amore....

CRESSIDA: Bells will ring ting-a-ling-a-ling, Ting-a-ling-a-ling

MAY: and you'll sing Veetabella...

CRESSIDA: Hearts will play tip-py-tip-py-tay,tip-py-tip-py-tay

MAY: Like a gay Tarantella.....

JENNIFER: When the stars make you drool

JASMINE: Just like pastafazool,

ALL: That's amore....

MONICA: When you dance down the street with a cloud at your feet –

CRESSIDA AND MAY: You're in love....

NATHAN: When you walk in a dream

CAROL AND VIOLET: But you know you're not dreaming

JENNIFER, JASMINE AND MONICA: Signore,

NATHAN HOLDS UP THE FINISHED LASAGNA. EVERYONE ELSE GATHERS AROUND.

ALL: Scuza me but you see back in old Napoli that's amore.....

END PLAY.