

AN EXQUISITE MEAL

*What the hell is in the oven?*

# an **exquisite** meal



PRESS KIT





## **SALES INQUIRIES**

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## **OTHER INQUIRIES**

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**61 MIN**

runtime

**2.39:1**

aspect ratio

**DOLBY 5.1**

audio

**USA**

in English &  
French (subtitled)

## **GENRE**

Dark comedy, thriller



## **LOGLINE**

A dinner party descends into sex, violence, and the absurd when one of the guests discovers something unexpected about what's for dinner.



## SYNOPSIS

An affluent couple hosts a dinner party for friends, promising them an amazing meal. As the night goes on, uninvited guests arrive, wine flows, and dinner is strangely delayed.

When the party is interrupted by a shocking diversion, one of the guests goes off on his own and discovers something unexpected about what's being served for dinner.

As identities unravel, the host tries to maintain control of his carefully orchestrated evening as the party descends into violence, bizarre sexual escapades, and the absurd.



## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

*An intelligent comedy with something to say about the culture.*

I wrote the screenplay in 2015. At the time I was reading a lot of *The Last Psychiatrist* and grappling with his ideas, as well as watching a lot of Buñuel films and listening on repeat to *Elevator Music* by The Indelicates (the song "Love and Kindness" plays at the end of the film).

I wanted to create something somewhat absurd or surreal that dealt with the modern condition in general, specifically narcissism and identity.

The film, to me, is about many things, but the essential theme is that taking shortcuts to an identity lead to suffering, and that people will go to great lengths, even violence, when their identities are threatened.

It's about a culture that tells you to follow your passion, to do something meaningful, but doesn't offer any guidance on how to get there, or why.

And it's about the consequences of cowardice and the fear that keeps people from changing or speaking up until it's too late, and about how politeness and middle-class culture reinforces these phenomena.

Above all, I wanted to make a film that took risks, made bold choices and did some inexplicable things with confidence.



# SCRIPT

I wrote the first draft in 2015. The script kind of just fell out of me over the course of a few weeks. Not that there wasn't a lot of rewriting – but the basic skeleton and much of the dialogue from the first draft remained in the final shooting script.

At the time I was working on my first film project, an improvised web series, and hadn't made any short films yet. I knew I really wanted to make a feature film but had to figure a lot of things out before I could tackle a project that big.

I knew that the easiest way to pull that off would be to write something that could take place in a single location, although the original script had a parallel storyline that followed another character, Charlie, whose name is mentioned several times in the film.

Charlie was invited to the party but didn't really belong there – the idea was to have a character that represented everything that the partygoers didn't – honesty, playfulness, and a certain (non-sanctimonious) moral code.

I cut the Charlie sequences because they took place all over Chicago but after I wrote *An Exquisite Meal*, I wrote another screenplay with Charlie's story – he meets a woman and they go on a surreal adventure across Chicago, so I guess I created my own weird cinematic universe.

Rewriting continued up until production started. Some scenes had to be rewritten or moved to accommodate the layout of the house. After an initial table read, I cut about ten pages from the script to improve the flow of the story and get the intrigue started sooner. The ending continued to change up until the days before shooting started.



## DEVELOPMENT

I met the producer, Josh Itzkowitz, in the summer of 2017, at a monthly meetup for film directors that I organized at the Music Box Theatre in Chicago. We quickly became friends and in early 2018, we started talking about making a feature film together.

Josh had already produced four microbudget features and knew how to make something good on a tiny budget. I sent him two scripts to read and he convinced me to make *An Exquisite Meal* (at the time, the working title was just “Dinner Party”).

He didn’t sign on right away, but he advised me to get the ball rolling and I set up bank accounts and started sketching out a budget. He also provided notes which led to a significant rewrite, and after a few weeks of talking through the project, he officially signed on in May 2018 and we set production date in mid-June, which gave us six weeks to prepare.



# FUNDING

All my projects up to this point were self-funded. My strategy was to work the highest-paying job I could find, live frugally, and save the rest to make movies.

An Exquisite Meal was funded in a similar fashion - I had been working and saving for over a year and then in 2017 I caught a lucky break. I started a new job at a startup in Chicago and I happened to be sitting next to a co-worker (and now, friend) who was obsessed with cryptocurrency.

I had been familiar with bitcoin since around 2011, when I had bought a few on a whim and then forgot that I had them until a friend told me the price had skyrocketed to \$900. I thought I had sold them, but it turned out that the transaction never went through and I managed to track them down and sell some before the exchange where they were housed went bankrupt.

On the advice of my friend, I started buying bitcoin again in 2017 and in an incredible stroke of luck, the prices skyrocketed through the end of the year and into early 2018. I missed the peak, but was able to sell off what I had just in time to miss the crash and was able to double my savings.

That, along with an additional \$5,000 raised from family, was enough for the initial \$22,000 budget, which later became \$26,000 when the City of Chicago awarded us a \$4,000 grant as part of the DCASE Individual Artists Program.



## PRE-PRODUCTION

With just enough money to fund the film and live through the end of production, I quit my job to work on the film full-time. Six weeks is not a long time to put a movie together and the tiny budget meant that we couldn't throw money at our problems to make the go away.

This is where Josh's expertise came in. We were able to save money on meals by getting friends to prepare lunches and by buying crafty in bulk at Costco. Instead of renting an expensive camera and lens kit, we went with whatever we had (with some exceptions). We shot on the Canon C100 camera owned by the cinematographer, Zoe Lubeck, and an array of lenses that we had free access to, with the exception of a Canon servo zoom that we rented.

We could only afford ten production days, which meant shooting seven to twelve pages per day, which is about 2-3x the normal pace. This required a nimble approach to crew and lighting equipment - no grip trucks, a small camera crew, just the bare essentials.

The final two weeks leading up to production were filled with long days spent writing, location scouting, securing equipment, finalizing the cast & crew, handling insurance and SAG paperwork, and planning the art and photography.





## LOCATION SCOUTING

Our original idea was to make the shoot a kind of summer camp where the cast and crew would all go away for two weeks and live in a house together while making the movie.

We went as far south as Paxton, IL and as far north as Appleton, WI in search of a location. These road trips around the Midwest were a ton of fun and landed us a production designer when our mutual friend, Allison Kilberg, joined us on our visit to Appleton and decided along the way to jump on board as the production designer.

Eventually, we gave up on the summer camp idea when we found a house in the Ravenswood neighborhood of Chicago that fit our budget and had the right look -- I wanted a house that had the feeling of upper-middle class strivers, people with some money but not real wealth.





## CASTING

Initially we planned to cast the film ourselves, something I had done on my short films, but we reached out to Sarah Clark at Compass Casting and she was able to handle casting at a rate that worked for our budget. This turned out to be a huge win as she saved us many hours and brought in a wonderful cast.

All but one of the actors came through Compass, the lone exception being Amrita Dhaliwal (Irene), who I had been friends with since my sketch and improv days. She flew in from L.A for the production (all of the other actors lived in Chicago at the time).

The last two roles to fall into place were Dave (played by Mike Jimerson) and Edouard (played by Bassam Abdelfattah). I honestly don't know what we would have done had they not come to the final audition - I had toyed with the idea of playing Edouard myself but I didn't feel that I would have nearly enough time to prepare for a role while also directing.

Mike and I had actually been on an improv team together but I hadn't seen him in three or four years.

We finalized the cast a week before shooting.





## CHICAGO-STYLE PRODUCTION

Chicago is one of the best places in the world for an independent filmmaker to live and make films. There's an amazing community of indie filmmakers, a deep talent pool on both sides of the line and a culture where people show up on time, work hard, and get along.

Chicago also has a deep comedic tradition rooted in a collaborative and improvisational spirit. I moved here as an actor and spent seven years studying, writing, and performing comedy, and I always try to bring that spirit to set.

And while we had little time for pure improvisation (95% of the dialogue on screen matches the script), many of the creative choices were a result of collaboration. I tried to foster a culture on set where everyone, from the cinematographer to the production assistants, could pitch ideas or feel empowered to make creative decisions.

Production began on June 18, 2018. We filmed Monday through Friday for two weeks, for a total of ten shooting days. Everything was shot in the house in Ravenswood, except for one scene at the end of the movie, which we shot at the Logan Square blue line stop (and later decided to cut from the film).



Most indie productions assume that days will go twelve hours or more but we wanted to limit our days to eight to ten hours and we only had one day that went longer than ten hours, something that we're proud of.

One reason was that the house was still inhabited during production – the family left after breakfast and returned as we were wrapping up in the evening. Another reason was that work quality starts to slip after eight hours – as people get tired, it's harder to maintain focus, mistakes get made, and efficiency declines. I think that we earned some trust from the cast and crew once they saw that we meant to stick to that schedule.

The result was a set that was relaxed and friendly. We had friends stopping by with lunch and or just to offer moral support. And because people were fresh and rested every day, we were able to get along and work well together.

Our philosophy of production was to question everything. We were willing to say yes to things when we felt like there was an artistic reason but we were not willing to say yes to anything just because “that’s how things are done.”

This philosophy was influenced in part by Josh’s experience on his previous films. For my part, I was greatly influenced by *The Celebration* by Thomas Vinterberg, which I watched in the months before production. The original Dogme 95 film, I was astounded by how something so low-def and grainy could be so visceral and gripping (and hilarious).





Working from first principles, we talked a lot about what would make for a good microbudget movie. I love beautiful cinematography but I also felt that the strength of *An Exquisite Meal* would lie in the story and performances and that the job of the cinematography was to be more concerned with creating images that were striking rather than aesthetically pleasing.

In the end, I think the cinematographer (Zoe Lubeck) achieved both, which is incredible given how little we gave her to work with in terms of gear and personnel.

The crew worked collaboratively and we broke down the normal silos of crew specialization. Our sound mixer (and talented writer/director), Alex Phillips, doubled as a grip, and our co-producer, Curtis Matzke (also a talented writer/director), worked as a swing gaffer/grip/AC and shot our b-roll.

The result was a remarkably uneventful production. We avoided major disasters and adapted quickly to any unforeseen challenges. And our light setup meant that we could experiment and take risks with the camera.

# THE CAST



**Mike Jimerson (DAVE)**, a long-time Chicago improviser and actor, has appeared on comedy stages, theater productions, indies films and shorts, and primetime television. Recent work includes upcoming Fox series 'Next' and FX's 'Fargo,' as well as the independent feature 'An Exquisite Meal.' He is a cast member of Improvised Shakespeare Chicago where he performs regularly. In his spare time he enjoys music and visual art and eagerly anticipates the juicy and delightful roles in his future.



[amritadhaliwal.com](http://amritadhaliwal.com)  
[@amrithatha](https://www.instagram.com/amrithatha)

**Amrita Dhaliwal (IRENE)** is a Jane of all trades and master of all of them because she can and she does. Currently, she can be seen performing regularly on stage and on screen and is an ensemble member of The Murge. She also co-produces, writes and hosts the hit LA show, Indian Wedding, featured in LA Weekly as "Top 15 Things to do in LA." Behind the scenes, Amrita recently directed Rag Head, a play about the increase in hate crimes against Sikh Americans post 9/11. Amrita is a graduate of the School for Theatre Creators, a Lecoq based physical theater program. She has trained extensively in clown with Paola Coletto, Aitor Basauri, Philippe Gaulier and Clown School LA and she is a graduate of Second City Chicago, iO Chicago, Annoyance, UCB and Groundlings.



**Victoria Nugent (BETH).**





**Ross Magyar (MARK).**



**Mark Pracht (PAUL)** was raised near Colorado Springs, Colorado, and graduated from the University of Nebraska, Kearney. He is also a director and playwright. In addition to *An Exquisite Meal*, he has appeared on *Chicago Fire* and the webseries *Outed*. On stage, he's appeared *Blizzard '67* at 16th Street Theatre in Berwyn, IL (2017 Equity Jeff Nomination for Best Ensemble), and is a proud member of Chicago's Artistic Home Acting Ensemble, where he appeared in *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (2019 Non-Equity Joseph Jefferson Award for Best Performance in a Principal Role).



**Emily Marso (ANNIE)** is a Chicago-based actor. Her television credits include a recurring role as Nurse Susie on *Chicago Med* and *Chicago Fire*. Film credits include *Message Received*, *Version One* (directed by Stephen Cone), and the upcoming *Swipe Up*, *Vivian!* and *The Last Stand of Bobby Coe*. Theatre credits include work at the Goodman, Writers, Northlight, TimeLine, Silk Road Rising, The Gift, and many more. Her work has been praised as "Played to perfection ... a strong breakout performance" (Chicago Theatre Review), "Jaw-droppingly powerful" (Buzz News), and "Radiant" (Stage and Cinema). Emily just completed national ad campaigns for State Farm and McDonald's. You can also catch her motion capture performance as Kitana in the video game *Mortal Kombat 11*. She holds a BA degree from Northwestern University.

[emilymarso.com](http://emilymarso.com)  
[@missmarso](https://www.instagram.com/missmarso)



**Bassam Abdelfattah (EDOUARD).** Bassam is a film and stage actor who lives in Chicago and has worked with several well-known Chicago theaters as well as The Public Theater in New York City.

His film work includes Showtime's *The Chi*, Amazon's *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams*, and the upcoming Fox Television show *NeXt*. He has also been in several indie films. Currently, Bassam is writing a television show that you will hopefully be able to watch on Netflix or Amazon in the near future.

[IMDB](#)

[Resume](#)



**Siddhartha Rajan (MOPED DRIVER).**



**Luke Johnson (DELIVERY DRIVER).**

# THE CREW



[Website](#)

## **Writer & Director // Robert Bruce Carter**

Robert Bruce Carter is a writer, director, and producer based in Chicago. After eight years of writing and performing comedy on stage, he transitioned to film in 2015. He makes comedy films that are playful, satirical, and often dark or absurd.

His short films include WHAM and Off Book, which have played many film festivals, including the Sidewalk Film Festival, DC Shorts, and the Middle Coast Film Fest.

His feature screenplays have placed in the 2nd round of the Sundance Screenwriters Lab and the Austin Film Festival Screenplay Competition. His first feature film, a dark comedy thriller titled "An Exquisite Meal", will be released in 2020.

He's half Puerto-Rican and speaks fluent Spanish and (pretty OK) French.



[Website](#)

## **Producer // Josh Itzkowitz**

Josh Itzkowitz is a film and commercial producer. He's produced five independent feature films that have collectively screened at festivals around the country, including Austin, Philadelphia, Cinequest, Brooklyn, and des Films du Monde de Montréal.

His latest films, EMPATHY, INC., a sci-fi thriller, and SAME BOAT, a sci-fi comedy, were released through Dark Star Pictures. He is a lover of ice cream and is lactose intolerant.





[Website](#)

### **Co-producer // Curtis Matzke**

Curtis Matzke is a Chicago-based screenwriter and director who also works as a producer and cinematographer. As the founder of the media production company Unfurnished Films, Curtis has contributed to dozens of short films and produced four micro-budget features. His work has been included as part of the Austin Film Festival, Chicago International Film Festival, Cinequest Film Festival, Nightmares, Cinepocalypse, and more.

SPLINTER, a short film written and directed by Curtis, was recently released by ALTER, earning over 150K views in less than a week. His latest short film, THE ORCHESTRA, has screened at over two dozen festivals and is currently being developed as a feature. In 2018, Curtis was named "Most Diabolical" by the National Academy of Sciences and the Austin Film Festival. Curtis holds a B.A. and an M.A. in Media Arts and Technology from Michigan State University.



[Website](#)

### **Cinematographer // Zoe Lubeck**

Lubeck is a queer interdisciplinary filmmaker based out of Los Angeles and Chicago. She currently works as the in house Director of Photography and camera operator for BRATtv. She graduated with a masters in digital cinema from DePaul's School for the Cinematic Arts in 2017. Her short film "Lucy" won the special jury prize at the Student BAFTA awards, and premiered at the Chicago International Film Festival.

Lubeck served as Director of Photography on the feature "King Rat" (2015). She shot Quinn Tsan's experimental dance narrative film "Bedrooms" which went on to win the Jacksonville Dance Film Festival grand prize, In/Motion Chicago Film Festival's 1st place, and the Flatlands Dance Film Festival grand prize.

Additionally, she served as the Director of Photography on the pilot "Drive Slow" (2017), which had it's premiere at the New York Television Festival in 2017. In her work Lubeck strives towards creating space and representation for all races, genders, and LGBTQ individuals.

She recognizes the need for a more inclusive and diverse filmmaking method, and is committed to creating stories that center this in front and behind the camera.

**Production Designer** // Allison Kilberg

**Editor** // Anna Pinchuk. Anna Pinchuk is a NYC-based editor working in film, documentary, and television. Her most recent credits include Ballet Now (Hulu Originals), AlphaGo (Tribeca Film Festival), Dancer (BFI Film Festival) and Emmy Award Winning TV-Series The Years of Living Dangerously ([website](#)).

**Associate Producer** // Joshua Wilkerson

**Composer** // Jessica Jarvis

**Casting Director** // Sarah Clark, CSA

**Casting Assistant** // Jill Allenby

**Production Sound** // Alex Phillips

**Key Grip** // Agron Karameti

**Additional Camera Operator** // Curtis Matzke

**Makeup** // Jacqueline Meller-Vogt

**Original Artwork** // Paul Kenneth, Lara Mann

**Still Photography** // Brian McConkey, Jeanne Donegan

## Post-production

**Colorist** // Matthew Filipek

**Sound Design** // Brian Flood

**Visual Effects** // Kris Sundberg

**Title Designer** // Sara Jean Potts

**ADR Engineers** // Ralph Loza (Experimental Sound Studio), Ted Wulfers (663 Sound)

## Music

“Build Me a House”

Written & Performed by Sophia Kennedy  
Courtesy of Pampa Records

“Luna”

Performed by Vivian Garcia  
Written by Vivian Garcia & Mike Przygoda

“Love and Kindness”

Performed by The Indelicates  
Written by Simon & Julia Indelicate  
Courtesy of Corporate Records

“No King”

Written & Performed by Outcalls  
Courtesy of Outcalls





**SAG-AFTRA®**



City of Chicago  
Mayor Rahm Emanuel

CHICAGO DEPARTMENT OF  
**DCASE**  
CULTURAL AFFAIRS & SPECIAL EVENTS

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