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It's easy watching when you just want blobby TV - cooking shows with chefs who have a theme, persona perk in exotic places and who are waxing on about food that takes you away from real world stresses. That's television for you, but, live, that's a different kind of cuisine all together. *Chef*, written by Sabrina Mahfouz and presented by Virginia Plain as part of the Panimo Pandemonium takeover of KXT is not easy watching. Here, in the flesh, an audience will experience uncompromising theatre created with fluid and intuitive direction of a remarkably skilled and engaging performer.

There has been a bad thing happen in the kitchen of a prison where an incarcerated ex Michelin-aspiring chef has been locked away for a crime of which we are unsure. What we will learn from her own relation is her passion, her love of food from an early age and how that was subjugated by the circumstances of class, poverty and strong, wrong men. This is a woman of appetites and as we get to know her background, and how luck, and drive when harnessed, had made her a chef, the skins do peel away to get to the core of who she is.

The team of performer Alice Birbara and director Victor

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every word is clear and heard without effort and the accent is flawless characterisation. Other characters may appear but they are layered over the chef, no excessive jolting out of her history as she tells it. And it's a complex, lyrical script with wordplays that keep an audience's brain ticking. 'In case there's a case' lands deliciously on the ear and, one of my favourite lines, 'what goes into what goes into them' is a keeper! Kalka, however, doesn't treat *Chef* as just word pictures.

Chef will write the names of dishes on a whiteboard and speak movingly to those recipes, ingredients and preparation but the focus is always on narrative. Thereby, leaving an audience to wonder constantly why. Why this moment made her so emotional or why that memory feels loose, misremembered or perhaps, falsely related. Travel around the stage, upright and proud or sunken to the floor with the speaking of it, is organic and varied as new moods are applied to the story and somewhat horrific events. Yet Birbara and Kalka seamlessly allow Chef to be alone despite engaging us as confidantes.

She has her whiteboard on which she will inscribe her dreams, a small chef's station and some lights for company. The upstage bars of lights burn bright with implication and the lighting design uses orange for memory and purple for violence. The sound effects and music are excellent, yet as discreet and subtle as a memory. Distant club beats and the crackle of indistinct phone wires or an icy wind when a decision is planted and acted upon.

However, the tech, as successful as it is, is merely a dressing delicately applied to lift the flavours from the performance palette. *Chef* is a theatre piece which sends an audience out with many questions and a desire to see the one-hour show again to fully appreciate the way in which the conclusion is built towards. This is confronting closeup theatre with an intimacy that only acting and direction of the finest quality can create. An intriguing, lingering yet satisfying watch.





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