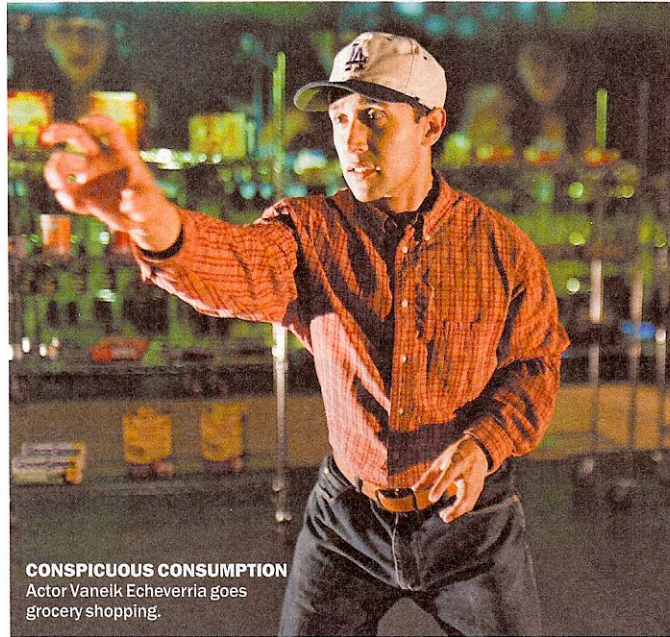


Food for thought



CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION
Actor Vaneik Echeverria goes grocery shopping.

LightBox's multimedia show *Milk 'n' Honey* asks if we really are what we eat.

By David Cote

Ellen Beckerman is neither a fussy foodie nor a raging vegan, but she refuses to eat chicken again—ever. “Our sound designer sent around a video that shows little chicks getting their beaks cut off,” the director, 38, recalls. “I don’t know why, but that did it for me. I can watch footage of cows in slaughterhouses—and I don’t eat a lot of meat—but if I want a steak, I’ll have it. But with chicken, it’s like a hard-and-fast rule now.” Beckerman and her collaborators have spent so much time immersed in the big, bad world of agrobusiness, junk food and chemical additives, it’s a miracle they can keep anything down. The fruits of their labor are now on view in the multimedia docudrama *Milk 'n' Honey*.

A production of Beckerman's multidisciplinary group LightBox, *Milk 'n' Honey* is a unique fusion of downtown theatrics (dance, video and found text) and the burgeoning field of food activism. The director and her crew have been developing the work since March 2003, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The initial impulse, Beckerman says, was in response to the political apathy she witnessed after September 11 and the invasion of Iraq. “The show is really about democracy,” she says. “It’s about choice-making and awareness and when we choose *not* to be aware.” On a practical note, there will be an after-show café where audience

members can learn more about various food-activist organizations.

As research, the LightBox crew spent years traveling the country interviewing hundreds of players in the industry: farmers in Iowa, migrant workers in Florida, waiters in New York City, flavor chemists in New Jersey and scores of others. They dog-eared recent books such as Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*.

Having amassed reams of transcripts and boxes of source materials, the LightBox folks approached Madeleine George, a member of the playwrights collective 13P, to provide dramatic shape. “My sister is a chef in New Mexico, so for many years I’ve been tangentially aware of all this stuff,” George says. “I learned about the ‘slow food’ movement from her and the idea that people might shape their lives around the pursuit and appreciation of a purer palette.” George denies being a finicky eater herself. “My political contribution to the text has often been as the curmudgeon,” she says with a chuckle. “You know, ‘What’s wrong with a Big Mac?’”

The writer also undertook first-person investigations that could kill a person’s appetite. “I went Dumpster diving with freegans and foraging in Central Park with ‘Wildman’ Steve Brill, eating weeds,” she says. “Fact of the matter is, I have now eaten more things that I never would have because of this show.”

Milk 'n' Honey is playing at 3LD Art & Technology Center through Nov. 18. See *Off-Off Broadway*.

Theater