

# BIG NIGHT (1996)

by

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*Big Night. Directed by Campbell Scott and Stanely Tucci. Screenplay by Joseph Tropiano and Stanely Tucci.  
Photography by Ken Kelsch. Culinary Consultant Gianni Scappin. Foot Stylist Deborah J. DiSabatino.  
Distributed by Rysher Entertainment – 1996.*

After arriving from Italy in the early 1960s, Secundo (Stanley Tucci), a restaurateur, and his older brother, Primo (Tony Shalhoub), a master chef, open a restaurant in a small sea-side New Jersey town. However, they serve wonderfully sophisticated cuisine rather than the "spaghetti and meat balls" the New Jersey public demands and thus have little business. In desperation, when the bank is about to foreclose, Secundo consults Pasqual (Ian Holm), the owner of a competing and successful low-brow restaurant. Pasqual suggests a publicity stunt in which the brothers will entertain the famous musician Louis Prima. Each brother is simultaneously involved with a woman: shy Secundo with Ann (Allison Janney), a widow who runs a flower store, and Primo simultaneously with Pasqual's mistress, Gabrielle (Isabella Rossellini), and an American bank clerk, Phyllis (Minnie Driver). In expectation of the "big night," the brothers invest all their money in preparing a sumptuous meal. When Louis doesn't show up, they and their friends enjoy an evening of unparalleled dining and camaraderie. Pasqual admits that he engineered the brothers' demise so that he could hire them for his own restaurant. They refuse and the film leaves them still deciding their future course of action.

More than any film in recent times, *Big Night* is a film about the art of film making. But, much to its credit, in this film there is nary a director (as in Truffaut's *Day for Night* [1973]) nor a producer (as in *Get Shorty* [1995]), nor an actor (as in so many films like *A Star is Born* [1954, 1995]) in sight. There is no wheeling-dealing, there is no Hollywood. *Big Night* goes much deeper than the trappings of a creative industry, into the very nature of creating art in a realistic, nitty-gritty world. As many of the best films about filmmaking, *Big Night* is filled with moral decisions, compromise, and, of course, ego.

(However, unlike most of its predecessors, *Big Night* actually gives us insight into the nature of creative egoism.)

Primo, the first-born older brother, is an uncompromising artist. In 1950s America, few restaurant patrons had ever heard of risotto, especially in a seemingly small town on the New Jersey seashore. When the "philistine" customers – the only customers – order a side of spaghetti and meat balls with their risotto, Primo has a fit. Secundo, the more practical brother, is willing to compromise for the survival of their beloved restaurant. The key to understanding one level of the psychological symbolism in this film is to look into the three-way confrontation that follows: Primo refuses to compromise his conception of Italian cuisine, Secundo sends him out to speak directly to the customer. Through the open kitchen door he glances out at the woman picking at his masterful risotto and refuses to budge. The keys: time (a '90s dish in the late '50s) and the feminine (the grumpy female customer).

Both Primo and Secundo have problems with time and with women. Primo is so shy that he cannot gather up the courage to ask Ann, the congenial flower-shop owner, to join them for dinner. Secundo, by contrast, is dating an American girl who he eventually hopes to marry and keeps their relationship "clean," that is asexual, while at the same time having "quicky" sexual encounters with Gabrielle, Pascqual's mistress. Thus the brothers point in opposite directions in terms of their relations with women. However, this is the "text" of the film. These relations have many deeper meanings which explain what is going on even better.

I believe that the feminine, both symbolic and literal, is a constant factor in *Big Night*. In fact, the very first words we hear lead us to the symbolic feminine: ". . . more salt?" Salt is a very important component not only in cooking, but in human history. At times it was used as money (that is where the word "salary" comes from) as we now use precious metals, wars were fought for it as they are now fought for oil. The right kind of salt (iodized) now prevents thyroid diseases throughout the world. Like food itself, salt is so important to our lives that it goes far beyond the literal into the symbolic.

Salt, because of its source, is associated with the ocean, and because of its taste, with blood. Via both the ocean and blood, salt is associated with the feminine – the ocean being the great womb of the world and blood being associated with birth.

And, of course, the feminine has long been associated with creativity (in men) through the agency of the muse. In Greek mythology, the nine muses – all female – are responsible for all artistic creations from dance to poetry to astronomy.

Pascal is at the other end of the scale from Primo and Secundo. He has abandoned all aspects of the muse for the benefit of sheer commerce. What is needed is a compromise between art and commerce. Surprisingly, *Big Night* doesn't show us that compromise – neither Pasqual's sell-out nor the brothers' hold-out is the answer. Pasqual's idea of "today give them what they want and tomorrow what we want" is never put to the test. Nor is Pasqual a trustworthy enough character to put much stock in his philosophy. Nevertheless, it sounds

like a workable compromise, a balance between the real world of commerce and the ideal world of art.

In *Big Night*, each of the brothers' problems is the alignment of their feminine: Primo can create dishes but he cannot connect with his customers. Art in isolation can neither inspire nor educate the public. An artist must make an effort to speak to his or her audience. Without this effort there is a great danger that the artist will speak to no one but him- or herself – and this can lead to dangerous ego inflation and ultimate self-destruction. (Ignoring the artist's responsibility to the viewer – being true to the artist's "self" – is one of the great diseases of contemporary art – isolated, insular and so in-grown that it has lost all public support. The difficulty, I believe, is that artists are true to their "self" rather than the "Self" – the former being the ego while the latter is the core of the personality, that universal component of the individual which necessarily reaches out to others and nourishes through that very connection. The artistic ego – self – has recently replaced the true core of art – the Self.) And so Primo cooks dishes only he can understand. (He would do quite well today's art world, in the 1990s, rather than the '50s in which he is stuck.)

Secundo, on the other hand, has no problem connecting physically with women. In fact, he has too many women and too little sensitivity. Yet he is as out of touch with the symbolic feminine as his brother, but in a different way. Before he can harness the power of the creative feminine, he must recognize and integrate it. Secundo remains in an early developmental stage (where, unfortunately, a large portion of the male population of our society still resides), seeing a woman in only one of two modes – the virgin or the whore.

Blonde Phyllis is on a pedestal while the dark-haired Gabrielle is used for sex. A divided feminine cannot be integrated and her power never harnessed. Thus, Secundo easily falls victim to Pasqual's machination and his own ultimate ruin. Just as Primo is mired in the hermetic aspects of creativity, Secundo is so drawn to soullessly pleasing his customers – not educating them – that the muse refuses to alight on his shoulder.

The first image we see is Secundo on the beach, very early in the morning, eating. The symbolism here defines the film – it is surprising how many finely made films will symbolically alert their viewers to the psychological nature of the film with the first image. Here the beach is a boundary between the sea and the earth, a boundary between the unconscious and the conscious. And certainly the film travels back and forth across that boundary many times and in many ways. The dawn symbolizes the beginning of a new day, a new adventure. And a person eating shows that the film will be about the nourishment of self and others.

In addition to being misaligned with the feminine, both brothers are also misaligned in time. Primo's cooking is thirty years ahead of his time – today his restaurant would be featured in *Gourmet* magazine (in fact, there are rumors that Tucci is working on a cook book). Artists are typically "ahead of their time." However, it is again artistic responsibility to reach back through time to draw the lagging society forward. Of course, this involves a level of compromise, but an artist isolated from society – especially by egotistic choice – is no artist at all. (Some of the greatest artists in our history have been crowd-pleasers – Michelangelo, DaVinci, Cellini, Bernini, etc.) Primo's refusal to make a connection with his public in part leads to their downfall.

Secundo, too, is out of time. This is seen most clearly in his visit to the Cadillac agency. Here he discovers that this year he can buy next year's model and next year, the year after's! He delights in this. Everything in America is futuristic (not hard to see in an early '60s Cadillac – all chrome rocket noses and tail fins). He wants to marry Phyllis sometime in the future, "not now." Yet Secundo, so fascinated by the external future, is stuck in the internal past. As I outlined above, Secundo must move psychologically forward in the external world and realign his infantile view of women before he can move forward in the mystical world of creativity.

At the end of the film, we leave Primo and Secundo in apparent despair, having lost their restaurant. Secundo now walks into the abandoned kitchen and makes an omelet to nourish Primo even before he arrives on the scene. We know that they either still have something valuable or have gained it in their adventure. Because of the nature of the film, it is hard to put one's finger on exactly what they gain, hard to describe verbally the glowing aura of love that surrounds the brothers. Almost everything in this film is small, subtle, and underplayed, except the cooking, of course.

Perhaps because it is such a ubiquitous experience, food is a metaphor of almost infinite variety. Look at some of the "food" films of recent times: *Delicatessen* [1991] (in which post-apocalypse Capitalism becomes literally cannibalistic rather than just metaphorically), *Like Water For Chocolate* [1992] (in which the kitchen becomes an alchemical furnace for mutating the soul), *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* [1989] (in which the nouveau riche consume the intellegensia – literally), *Babette's Feast* [1987]

(in which the bourgeoisie are served the world's finest meal and are oblivious to the experience), or *Le Grande Bouffe* [1973] (in which gourmet Marcello Mastroianni decides to commit suicide by eating himself to death). And if food is not central to a film, think of how important scenes of eating are in the development of a story or a character, from the decade-spanning breakfast of *Citizen Kane* [1941] to the orange that falls out of the hand of Vito Corleone at the end of *Godfather III* [1990], to the food fight at the end of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* [1964] that was never filmed. But rarely has food been used to explore such important issues as artistic responsibility and personal growth as in *Big Night*. And, surprisingly, the film tells it like it is: if you don't shape up psychologically, you don't stand a chance, no matter how talented you are. While the message may be depressingly realistic, the film itself is exhilarating, a true feast for both the eyes and the mind.

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