

EIGHTEEN

By [Madeleine Shaner](#) | Posted Nov. 12, 2003, midnight

It's a well-known maxim in many different cultures that two women in the kitchen is grounds for war. Anyone who has ever opened her home, or her kitchen, to a stranger or a relative knows that the danger lurking in the pantry often migrates to the bedroom. This maxim is no stranger in this psychological kitchen—a place where mothers relate to their children, women reflect on the nature of men, and nourishment happens. With the best intentions in the world, Dan (Rob Nagle) and Marie (Jennifer Bledsoe) welcome their niece, Christine (Melanie Hawkins), into their home when her mother, Dan's sister, dies of cancer. Christine is understandably a 17-year-old container of grief, who unwittingly changes the parameters of the couple's marriage. This isn't a revolutionary thesis, but Allison Moore's connecting of the dots bears an intelligent examination. Her dialogue is impressively realistic and sometimes quite stirring, if disturbingly repetitive. Dan is on the verge of selling his revolutionary fingerprint identification program, which will prevent identity theft, to the major players in the investigative ranks; Marie is a healthcare professional involved in research; their marriage is a good partnership— healthy, compassionate and sexually satisfying. Christine's arrival is icing on Marie's unbelievably erotic brownies. But identity theft becomes a rather dangerous boarder in the household. Marie feels her position being usurped; Dan begins to feel something altogether different; Christine, given to insomniac ice-chewing and helpless addiction to Marie's almost forced carb-loading, finds herself disappearing. This is anything but kitchen-sink drama, and the possibilities are endless but, unfortunately, not fully realized by the playwright and by director Jay Dysart. The 90-minute drama has been divided into three acts with two quite unnecessary intermissions, which makes for spotty cohesion. The first two acts, while stylishly directed (interesting set design by John Williams), move annoyingly slowly. These people are unmasked as being as sweet as Marie's famous strawberry pie; the repetition of recipes of the food they're eating, recited sensuously to the eaters, and the opening of each segment of the play on a darkened stage, with Christine doing sexy and dangerous things to ice by the light of a torch, wear thin by the 85th minute of the play. The beats are too few to visit this often and the symbolism a trifle obvious. But, Hawkins is exquisite as the lost and lonely teen; Bledsoe and Nagle give equally charming and well-tempered performances, even though several of the sequences don't altogether make a lot of sense. The subject matter here is sensitive, serious, and important, but we are led away from it by an excess of sentiment and cliché. "Eighteen," presented by Meadows Basement Theatre at the Dorie Theatre at the Complex, 6476 Santa Monica Blvd., L.A. Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun., 2 p.m. Nov. 7-Dec. 14. \$15.