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*'The essence of the art of entertaining lies, I always think, in establishing an atmosphere of grace and decorum.'*

*Hyacinth Bucket*

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# THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

There are arguably few things in life which provide greater pleasure than welcoming guests into your home. Except, perhaps, to see them leave it – effusively thanking you for your hospitality.

Entertaining is an art. Like a musical instrument, it takes practice and tuning. Some hosts have a natural flair and can make it look effortless; others obsess for days just to prepare the simplest of kitchen suppers. It doesn't matter which category you fall into, as long as you get it right on the night. This can call for bluffing skills of the highest order, requiring you to pretend to each guest that the occasion would be diminished without their presence, however grindingly dull they might be. Some people do this for a living (God help them): it's called working in the 'hospitality industry' (or what used to be known as 'hotel and catering'). From the lowliest greasy spoon to the loftiest Michelin-starred restaurant, the rules are the same. The most important thing to remember about entertaining, as a professional or an amateur, and however irksome the

realisation might be, is that your guests are the priority. If you are enjoying your own party too much then it probably means there is a guest somewhere looking for the lavatory, peering forlornly into an empty glass, or in need of rescuing from a tedious fellow guest.

Entertaining is not just about hosting a party: the most successful exponents of the art are just as good guests as they are hosts. It is true that there is generally a significantly smaller financial outlay when attending a bash, yet there should never be any economy on your wit, rapport and charm. Exemplary guests are few and far between and if you learn the social skills needed or – more aptly – bluff that you have the skills needed then you won't go far wrong.

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For those trying to bluff their way through successful entertaining, it is important to remember that confidence is the key. No guest will enjoy being hosted by someone who does not give the impression of relaxed and nonchalant self-belief in their ability to hold a good party. People have spent lifetimes trying to achieve this sense of effortless aplomb.

The bluffer hasn't got a lifetime to spare, so when you