Stage Adaptation by David Eldridge
Based on the Dogme film and play by Bo hr. Hansen, Mogens Rukov, and Thomas Vinterberg
Directed by Dr. Joanne Gordon

Study Guide

California Repertory Company
2009-2010 Season
Theatre Arts Department
California State University Long Beach
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## CHARACTERS

**CHRISTIAN**, Son to Helge and Else, older brother to Michael and Helene, and twin brother to Linda  
**MICHAEL**, Son to Helge and Else, younger brother to Christian and Helene  
**HELENE**, Daughter to Helge and Else, sister to Christian and Michael  
**METTE**, Wife to Michael  
**HELGE**, Father to Christian, Linda, Helene and Michael, Husband to Else  
**ELSE**, Mother to Christian, Linda, Helene and Michael, wife to Helge  
**HELMUT**, Employee of and Lodge Brother to Helge  
**POUL**, Friend and Lodge Brother to Helge  
**GRANDFATHER**, Father to Helge, Grandfather to Christian, Linda, Helene and Michael  
**PIA**, Maid  
**KIM**, Chef  
**LARS**, Butler  
**GBATOKIA**, Boyfriend to Helene  
**LITTLE GIRL**, Daughter to Michael and Mette

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## HISTORY OF FESTEN

**History of Festen: The Movie**  

*Festen* is a 1998 Danish film, written and directed by Thomas Vinterberg and Mogens Rukov, which was released in North America as *The Celebration*. *Festen* tells the story of a family celebration for their father’s 60th birthday. At the party, the eldest son, Christian reveals dark family secrets. The film was inspired by a telephone prank which was broadcast on a Danish radio station hosted by Keld Koplev. On the radio station, a man called in and made up a story about family abuse. Thomas Vinterberg heard it on the radio and discussed the possibility of using it as the plot of a film to the script writer, Mogens Rukov. Soon thereafter, the two men wrote and directed the film.

The film is known for being the first Dogme 95 film. Dogme 95 is a filmmaking manifesto that was begun in 1995 by Thomas Vinterberg and Lars von Trier. The manifesto aims to do away with expensive movie special effects and post-production adjustments. The goal of Dogme 95 is to focus more on the organic performances of the actors and the narrative being told.

The film received many positive critical reviews, winning rewards such as: The Cannes Film Festival Jury Prize, The European Film Awards Prize for European Discovery of the Year, and the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award for Best Foreign Film.
History of Festen: The Stage Adaptation
As of 2008, there have been many theatrical performances of *The Celebration*, translated into Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, Spanish, Swedish, Polish, German, Czech, and Estonian. The English stage adaptation, written by David Eldridge and directed by Rufus Norris, maintains the film’s original name, *Festen*. It premiered at the Almeida Theatre in 2004 by producer, Marla Rubin. The production was a critical success and toured the UK, before moving on to Broadway.

PLAYWRIGHT
David Eldridge
David Eldridge is an English playwright, born in Romford, London, UK. His plays have been performed at The Royal Court Theatre, Bush Theatre, Finborough Theatre, and The National Theatre. Eldridge wrote his first play, *Serving it Up*, at the age of 22 during his second year of college. Prior to writing his first play, he studied English Literature and Drama at Exeter University. He originally planned to become a director after seeing his first play, a production of *King Lear* directed by Nicholas Hytner. Eldridge refers to seeing this particular production of *King Lear* as a “revelatory experience.” At the age of 20, after directing a few plays in college, he decided that he had more of an interest in writing his own plays. Since then, he has written many successful plays including, *Under the Blue Sky*, *Summer Begins*, *Sideways Moving*, *Market Boy*, and a stage adaptation of the film *Festen*.

SONGS OF FESTEN

**Danish Birthday Song**
It’s Daddy’s birthday
Oh yes it is and it is today
It’s Daddy’s birthday
Oh yes it is and it is today
And now you’ll hear how loud we sing
And now you’ll hear how loud we sing
Tra la la la la
Tra la la la la

It’s Daddy’s birthday
Oh yes it is and it is today
It’s Daddy’s birthday
Oh yes it is and it is today
And now you’ll hear how loud we baa
And now you’ll hear how loud we baa

Music in *Festen* signifies truth and lies. Moments of song, dance, eating and indulgence are used to indicate the covering up of truth. “The songs are utilized in order for people to avoid confronting truth,” comments director Joanne Gordon. Truth or avoidance of truth is at the heart of the play. The simple sound of a utensil tapping a glass embodies the musical question of truth. Truth is as simple as this sound but social and family intricacies of man mask it and as sounds increase in complexity, so do lies and betrayal.

Festen’s musical score has been created by Sarah Underwood. And the songs reflect a tradition of family celebrations.

For the Danish Birthday Song, traditional German folk songs inspire the melody. As part of the birthday celebration, songs help move action forward and punctuate the story line.

The Teddy Bear Song provides the opportunity for the family’s party game, musical chairs. Each verse is composed of slightly different melodies, but as a whole creates a childlike atmosphere.
Teddy Bear Song
The big old Teddy Bear
As all good children know
Is having a birthday party
And all his friends will go.

The little mice they squeak (eek eek)
And give a splendid gift
A lollipop for big fat Ted
Which he gulps down fast and swift (slurp).

The elk he shakes his head (shake shake)
And makes a speech so boring
He talks of this and that and this
And everyone starts snoring (snore).

The fox he howls like this (waa waa)
Weeping tears of joy
But big fat Ted he pats his back
And says don’t cry my boy

All the animals toot and clap (toot toot)
It is your special day
Let’s fill this room with birthday cheer
And shout hip hip hooray

Lullaby
In the lonely woods
There is peace and calm
The longing heart can rest here
With no fear of fright or harm.

By the lake a frog croaks loudly
And the sleeping robins dream
The church bells cease their ringing
As the fog rolls over field and stream

The church bells cease their ringing
As the fog rolls over field and stream.

Sambo

The Lullaby drew inspiration from Puccini, as Underwood uses Puccini’s strong sense of continuous flow and connectivity to construct a musical environment. Unexpected elements are added with the saxophone accompaniment.

Sambo is a racial term for a person with mixed Amerindian (Indigenous Americans) and African heritage in the Caribbean, and also for a black person in the United States and the United Kingdom. It is considered a racial slur.

One origin of the word "Sambo" stems from a story dating back to the British Empire. An unknown Caribbean slave ship had docked in the popular resort Morecambe Bay. It was noticed that a black member of the ship's staff was left ashore when the ship went back to sea. The man's name was Sambo; shunned by the people of Morecambe, he was made to live out the remainder of his days on the outskirts of the town. To this day, there is a monument known as 'Sambo's Grave' on the coast of the Lancashire village of Sunderland Point.
**INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR**

What central theme is explored in *Festen*?

The central theme is using a family drama as a microcosm to reflect on the macrocosm of our current society. It is always easier to look forward and pretend what we have done in the past does not exist, to ignore past sin. I think the play points out that unless we confront and acknowledge the evil in our past, we cannot move toward a moral future.

What is the significance of *Festen* today, to a Cal Rep audience?

I think it works on two levels, the more I deal with this play the more I realize everyone’s family has secrets and everybody thinks their family is the only one that is messed up. If we begin by being honest, we must all face the skeletons in our closet. Somehow the skeleton emerges and we all suffer but we all love, that’s one level of identification that is universal.

Second, on a political level, we came to a celebration of Obama’s inauguration but part of the reason we are finding it difficult to move forward is that we have to come to terms with what was done in our names in the past. We have to come to terms with the political reality of the previous administration.

How has a new venue, the Queen Mary Royal Theatre, influenced the artistic process?

On a number of levels, first of all is the delight I feel in the contrast of our work set aboard the Queen Mary. The elegant slightly faded glory of the 1930’s grand dame of the sea on one hand and a challenging, exciting play on the other. In many ways we have created the best space; the extreme rake of the seats makes it audience friendly, the thrust with all this contemporary lighting and sound equipment make it an exciting production space. It’s a very vibrant contrast between a modern constructionist set with all its Brechtian machinery exposed in the belly of this elegant old lady.

*Festen* has been an international success outside of the United States, why do you feel this play speaks to people across the globe?

I think it has to go back to family drama, the same way as *Oedipus, Long Day’s Journey into Night*, or *Death of a Salesman*. At their heart, they are family dramas and it doesn’t matter where you locate them. The heart of family drama unites us as a global family, whether it’s in Israel, South Africa, Australia or England. That feeling of identification with family secret and pain, I believe, is universal.

What is the significance of live theatre and why we continue to perform it today?

We live in a society that is so insular and so mediated. I walk down hallways and see kids looking at computer screens with things in their ears and they are in no way interacting with each other or with another live human being. For me, theatre now becomes the new church where you have to be in a community; you are in a community sharing energy both within an audience and between the audience and the theatre. It becomes absolutely critical to being human.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Which character do you most identify with? Why?
2. Who is telling the truth? How do you know they are telling the truth?
3. Can there be such a thing as truth in family dynamics?
4. The play is set in Denmark. Does that affect your response to the play?
5. The film was made in 1998 and reflected the 1980s; does that period say anything specific about the issues in the script?
6. The character Gbatokai is based on the actual black musician who took part in the original play. What is this play saying about racist attitudes? What connection exists between racism and lies?
7. The play revolves around eating. What does the notion of sharing a meal/eating together mean to you? Does this affect our response to the play?
8. Tell us about a family meal or event where you had to confront a family truth.
GLOSSARY
Anthropology: \(\text{an(t)-threi}-\text{pä-}\text{-lā-jē}\), the science of human beings; especially: the study of human beings and their ancestors through time and space and in relation to physical character, environmental and social relations, and culture

Bon Appétit: \(\text{bō-nä-pä-tē}\) French term, good appetite: enjoy your meal

Chop-chop: \(\text{chāp}-\text{chāp}\), adv, quickly

Copenhagen: \(\text{kō-}\text{-pōn}-\text{-hā-gān}\), geographical location, proper n, city and port of Denmark; located chiefly on E Sjælland Island population 501,285

Fascist: \(\text{fa-shist also -sist}\) n or adj, often capitalized: a political philosophy, movement, or regime (as that of the Fascisti) that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition

Gatecrashers: \(\text{gāt-},\text{-kra-shār}\) n, a person who enters, attends, or participates without ticket or invitation

Intermezzo Pianissimo: \(\text{Italian language, n}\), piano break or quieted musical intermission

Lodge: \(\text{lāj}\) n, club or gathering place exclusive to initiation and membership, most often relating to masonry

Lodge Brother: \(\text{lāj}\) \(\text{bra-thēr}\) n, initiated member to a lodge

Lyon: \(\text{lyō}\) geographical name, proper n, city SE central France at meeting of the Saône & the Rhône rivers population 445,274

Master of Ceremonies/Toastmaster: \(\text{tōs(t)-},\text{-mas-tēr}\) n, one who presides at a banquet and introduces the dinner speakers

Schnapps: \(\text{shnaps}\) n, any of various liquors of high alcoholic content; especially: strong Holland gin

Young Socialists: In the play refers to Helene’s leftist political view and rejection of capitalist governments

LIBRARY and WEB RESOURCES

David Eldridge Playwright Info:
http://www.whatsonstage.com/interviews/theatre/london/E8821145887892/20+Questions+With%85David+ Eldridge.html
http://www.musicomh.com/theatre/features/david-eldridge_0608.htm
http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/features/335/David_Eldridge-Interview.html

Thomas Vinterberg Info:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgBnbOFNHFo
Library Reference IIPA, found on library website http://coast.library.csulb.edu/search/e?Theatre%20Arts or http://iipa.chadwyck.com/articles/search.do?reset=yes


**Dogme 95 Info:**

**History of Festen Info:**

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVNCSiZLurQ
http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=dogma95&view=videos&sort=d

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imDBK1gW3gI
http://wapedia.mobi/en/Festen_(play)
http://www.eyeweekly.com/theatre/article/45974
http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/The_Celebration
http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/4359/festen