

Exploring Theatricality and Performance in Everyday Life  
*FESTEN* BY THOMAS VITTENBERG AND MORGENS RUKOV  
ADAPTED BY DAVID ELDRIDGE

Anouk Kemp

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Theater Arts Program of the School of the Arts

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015

## CONTENTS

Introduction: An Eleven Minute Applause.....	3
Chapter 1: Preparation, Why This Play Now?.....	7
Chapter 2: The Design Process and Creation of a World.....	19
Chapter 3: The Rehearsal Process .....	30
Chapter 4: Aftermath and Reflection on Training.....	43
Conclusion: To the Audience.....	51
Annexes.....	55
Bibliography.....	61
Acknowledgments.....	63

## Introduction

### **An Eleven Minute Applause**

I was raised in a family that has always been sensitive to the impact of culture and art on society. When I was a child, my parents bathed my sister and I with books and movies that confronted me with the horrors of the Holocaust. I was too young to truly comprehend, and let alone imagine, the experiences that Primo Levi, Jorge Semprun, and all the other victims underwent, or even assimilate the monumental work of a historian done by Claude Lanzmann's testimonial documentary *Shoah*. But one of the first moments that stimulated my critical mind was when my sister, who was writing a paper about collective memory, showed me Simone Weil's speech at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. At the end of a beautiful call to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive, Weil ponders, "*comment dire l'indicible?*": "how does one speak of the unspeakable?". That question fascinated me, and sparked what became one of my personal battles: to insist on the importance and necessity of communication between individuals.

Perhaps because I have always been given the freedom to express myself in every medium, have been taught that knowledge and, more importantly, *transmission* of knowledge constitute power, I am sad and uncomfortable when I find myself in situations where the unspoken must remain unspoken, whether it is in favor of politeness or simplicity or all the other reasons we have found to behave in such a way. I hate feeling like I am betraying myself by performing somebody that I am not. I hate actively participating in an exchange made up of falsities: it simply makes me sad. It cannot be the way that we decide to exchange with others in life. In a world in

which so many of us have various avatars owing to technology, truthfulness is not easily cultivated. I like to think that one can only begin to know their essential selves by knowing about where and *what* they are from. And in our modern global society, the notion of belonging is less and less linked to a country, a culture, or even a religion. Growing up, it was fundamental to me that my roots were solidly grounded by the members of my family. I was lucky and privileged to be a member of such a truth-seeking community, made up of people in search of authenticity.

Reading *Festen* for the first time left me with in a pit of dry emptiness. I had entered a space that was dangerous, morbidly void, and that was made up of characters who had sacrificed so much of themselves, that they almost seemed like empty bobbleheads. I found it terrifying. And menacingly reminiscent of the performance that we engage in, in life.

*Festen* was born in 1998 in the form of an almost documentary-style movie made by Thomas Vittenberg and produced by Nimbus Films, and stood as the first movie that represented the values put forth by Dogma 95: a return to the traditional principles of story, acting, and editing. It tells the story of a wealthy family who gathers for the celebration of the sixtieth birthday of its patriarch, Helge. At the event, his son Christian reveals to the guests that his recently passed twin and himself were sexually abused by their father when they were children. The response from the guests is one of grotesque silence and circumvention. Through a harsh respect for tradition, the guests sing and dance their way around the elephant in the room, until Christian's efforts pierce through the empty shells that surround him and let out the truth. One by one, the characters in *Festen* are forced out of the present instant of politeness and confronted with their past –their past, and its effect on their individual futures.

The movie premiered at the Cannes Festival that year, and won the Jury Prize after enjoying an unprecedented eleven minute standing ovation and applause. It was perhaps due to the courage with which the movie explored the primal impulses of which an individual is made of. Vittenberg did not shy away, and had the perception, to reveal the human tendency for violence, disguise, and, ultimately, love. Interestingly, the story enjoyed a similar success when its adaptation by British playwright David Eldridge premiered at the Almeida Theater in London in 2004, directed by Rufus Norris. Michael Billington, writing for *The Guardian*, describes *Festen* as a black comedy that is “about social hypocrisy. It offers us a formal celebration in which no one stands up to speak without first tapping their glass: what it uncovers is a world of paternal abuse, wifely complicity and racism.”<sup>1</sup>

The play then transferred to the Lyric Theater and remained on the West End until April 2005. It was nominated for five Lawrence Olivier awards. It then moved to the Music Box Theater on Broadway in March 2006. Ben Brantley for the New York Times applauded the production’s

use of Danish rituals of revelry — the toasts, speeches, songs and games that become perverse conduits for confrontation and evasion. The childishness of silly commemorative ditties, of anecdotes about youthful misbehavior and of bouncy physical activity all suddenly, in this context, seem sinister instead of joyous or innocent. A sense of poisoned high spirits perfumes the air like a noxious laughing gas. And the titters that erupt from the audience arise from discomfort in the presence of a cruel absurdity.<sup>2</sup>

The Broadway production did not however enjoy a long run, and closed after a few months due to low viewership. Most critics seem to agree that the main flaw of the production was due to its cast:

---

<sup>1</sup> Billington, Michael. "Festen." Theguardian.com. The Guardian, 26 Mar. 2006. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Brantley, Ben. "Haunting Memories of Daddy Dearest in "Festen" The New York Times. Nytimes.com, 10 Apr. 2006. Web. 14 Mar. 2015.

At almost every point through the production, tension is diffused by actors either lobbying too blatantly for laughs or simply showing an awkward disconnect from the material... The master stroke of Norris' production is that as the truth becomes increasingly impossible to ignore with each fresh revelation, the regimented tableaux of his staging slowly dissolve into twisted disorder... But there are crucial holes in the cast that sink the production.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps *Festen* was not so well received because, as the joke goes, the British are much more private about their emotions than the Americans. Perhaps the text didn't speak to American mores. Coming from and having lived in both Europe and in the United States, I agree with the suggestion, *up to a point*. I wanted to challenge it by confronting an American cast and audience with *Festen*. The play showcases a story touching primal human impulses that nevertheless remain daily aspects of behavior. Indeed *Festen* is not easy to watch, it is not light, and even laughter comes with its own heaviness. Faced with an umbrella of archetypal characters in *Festen*, I was inspired by the theories of Maurice Maeterlinck and Gordon Craig to work with actors on creating not impersonators of characters, but rather symbols of various types of human essences. What resulted was an exploration on the value of communication, a greater awareness about the role of performance and theatricality in every day living, and its subsequent invitation to observe our personal, intimate lives with a voyeuristic eye.

---

<sup>3</sup> Rooney, David. "Did the Critics Celebrate *Festen* on Broadway?" Broadway.com. Broadway.com, 10 Apr. 2006. Web. 14 Mar. 2015.

## Chapter 1

### **Preparation: Why This Play Now.**

On March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1996, radio journalist Kjeld Koplev started his interview with “Allan”, the 34 year-old anonymous guest of the week, with the following question: “On your father’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, you travelled home and made a speech in front of 78 guests. What was it you said?” Allan replied, “I told him a little bit about my childhood, what he had done to me during my childhood, and what he had taken away from me.”<sup>4</sup>

Allan spent the following two hours recounting his story into the microphone of a national radio. When he and his twin sister Pernille were two years old, their mother remarried and moved her children with her from Copahengen to a small provincial town in Jutland. Her new husband was a very well-respected and wealthy chef in a hotel. He ran in the finest circles and pampered his step-children with gifts. Allan recalls the envious eyes which stared at his and his sister’s clothes. The four of them seemed to be the perfect family that everyone else wanted to be. Yet, “just like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”, explains Allan, his step-father was also capable of great violence. When the twins were 5, he started to rape them on the couch in the hotel office. Allan is particularly haunted by his step-father’s “empty, piercing eyes” and the “silent, silent, silent” atmosphere during the attack, “like when you turn down the sound of a radio”<sup>5</sup>. The twins’ mother walked in on the horrid act multiple times, but never said anything. The twins eventually grew up and moved back to Copenhagen to

---

<sup>4</sup> Christensen, Claus. "Der Var Engang En Fest." Filmmagasinet Ekko. Ekkofilm.dk, 21 Oct. 2001. Web. 8 Mar. 2015.

<sup>5</sup> idem.

attend nursing school, and Pernille began to alienate herself from her surroundings. Her mental health deteriorated and she ultimately committed suicide. After Pernille's death, the rest of the family tried to pretend nothing happened. With vengeance, and a desire to stop pretending, Allan exposed his step-father in front of important guests on his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday.

A friend of Thomas Vittenberg had heard this story over the radio and immediately pitched it to the 26 year old filmmaker. In December 1996, Vittenberg, standing in the kitchen of his writing partner, Morgens Rukov, excitedly tells him that he wants to make a film about this dark tale of incest, abuse, suicide, and revelation.

Rukov's answer is simple:

I am bored by stories about gays, incest and paedophilia. Of course it is serious. Every kind of abuse is serious. It's just not my story. But I can imagine other stories. I can imagine a story about a family gathering. I remember the gatherings from my childhood. I remember the family. We will make a story about a family party. We will inject the incest into the family and the party<sup>6</sup>.

Therefore right at the inception of the project, *Festen* already had a Dr. Jekyll / Mr. Hyde dichotomy, with Vittenberg's attraction to the abuse and violence on the one hand, and Rukov's desire for a celebration on the other. Still, the seeds for *Festen* were all planted by Allan's story: the wealth and respectability of the family, the patriarch, and even the couch in the office (which has remained through the English adaptation by David Eldridge as well).

Vittenberg went off and wrote a first draft which was 33 pages long. At that point, Rukov joined and together, they worked every day from March to June, when production was scheduled to begin. Speaking about the writing process and collaboration, Rukov recalls,

---

<sup>6</sup> Rukov, Morgens. "Adventures of a Productive Idiot." Theguardian.com. The Guardian, 26 Oct. 2002. Web. 8 Mar. 2015.



We develop a few rules. We love rules. Narrative has rules. Every narrative has a few rules. The rules I remember are the following: **1.** We tell the story of a family party, we don't evade any of the steps in such a party, from arrival through to leaving. No step is omitted. **2.** Every sequence - approximately 13 minutes each - has its own form of storytelling. We have linear storytelling, parallel storytelling, telling with ellipses or without ellipses, subjective storytelling. Sequence by sequence. We love the incongruity of the parts. It's a challenge for the storytellers, we feel. **3.** We will try to add the supernatural whenever we can.<sup>7</sup>

This way of working allowed for the pair to develop a collaborative sense of humor that steers clear of fruitless criticism, and thereby established a crucial tone for the entire project. Rukov explains that there was no reason to argue: if the partner didn't respond well to a suggestion, then it wasn't good enough. The rules also imposed an educated distance from the story that stayed far away from a specific lens. They simply wanted to *look at* a story.

The writing process between Vittenberg and Rukov also aligned with the rules of the Dogma 95 group, created in 1995 by Vittenberg and Lars Von Trier in order to create films that support traditional values of storytelling and condemns elaborate, studio-created special effects or technology. The set of Dogma 95 rules are compiled in what the members call their 'Vow of Chastity'. Some of the restrictions state that the filming must happen on location, that the sound must come organically from the images, that the camera must be hand-held, and that temporal and geographic alienation is forbidden (in other words, the story must take place here and now).

What began as two twenty-somethings exchanging their ideas at a kitchen table turned into the winning film of the 1998 Grand Jury prize at Cannes, and what is more, earned the team an eleven-minute applause. Almost immediately, Rukov and Vittenberg started being contacted by playwrights who wanted to adapt the story for the stage. The first happened in Germany, and pretty soon adaptations were opening

---

<sup>7</sup> idem.

all over Europe, in Scandinavia, the Balkans, Poland, France. When the British playwright David Eldridge contacted the pair, it was decided that he would work under their supervision. Rukov advised Eldridge that he should “obey rules. If you do you can act crazily within the rules. Just like Hamlet. He obeyed”<sup>8</sup>. Eldridge had seen the film and developed a profound admiration towards the clarity of its storytelling. He found the prospects of retelling this story in the context of a live performance absolutely thrilling.

In a radio interview with *Telegraph* theater critic Dominic Cavendish on the eve of first previews for *Festen* at the Almeida Theater in London on March 19<sup>th</sup> 2004, Eldridge discussed the influence of the Dogma principles on his own writing process. Interestingly, he reports that the technical tools employed to make the movie were irrelevant to him. Rather, he discovered what Rukov and Vittenberg describe as ‘the natural story, which is the writing part of their credo. It’s about storytelling that’s much more organic and really is the writing end of getting away from predictable, commercial storytelling.’<sup>9</sup> Eldridge celebrates the whole Dogma movement as a return to true storytelling, devoid of a lens maneuvered by stylistic devices. It is the attention to the essence of the story that made Eldridge want to tell it again.

From Allan’s story to Vittenberg and Rukov’s collaboration, to Eldridge’s restructuring for a live performance, the life of *Festen* never dwindled because, as Eldridge puts it, the focus has always been on storytelling and characters. I find it fascinating that the initial interest for the story was split between Rukov, who just wanted to talk about family traditions, and Vittenberg, who was attracted to the abusive behavior of the patriarch. In my mind, this apparent divide encapsulates the

---

<sup>8</sup> idem.

<sup>9</sup> Cavendish, Dominic. "David Eldridge on Festen." *TheaterVoice.com*. Theater Voice, 8 Apr. 2004. Web. 13 Mar. 2015.

the core reasons for putting this multi-dimensional, bi-tonal story in front of an audience.

What pushed me to choose *Festen* as my thesis production was the following director's note written by Robert Woodruff when he was working on his own adaptation of *Festen* at NYU, and later in Cluj, Romania:

I am attracted to a performance which tackles the extremes of human behavior and *Celebration* is such a project. Families, like societies, are often built on lies, secrets, and half-truths. That these falsehoods are buried in the DNA of the group is reflected in the face of the family or culture. It is a strained one. It is a mask of pretense. And the behavior of a group living under such a pact of silence reflects this unease. It is aggressive. Diseased. Wild. *Celebration* portrays the tremendous strength and fearlessness of the individual action of overcoming this code of silence, the beauty in the courage to shine a light on the truth of our lives, both personally and in our cultures.<sup>10</sup>

Woodruff, in these few introductory lines, gets to the bottom of *Festen* as a theatrical piece. Because, and this was Eldridge's first question, "why bother"? Why recreate this story on a stage if the movie is already very successful at telling this story to an audience? For Woodruff, and for me, the answer is that the Hansen family calls on theatricalization as a means to survive their imposed code of silence. Therefore *Festen* allows for a commentary about theatrical style, and very much suggests the necessity of showmanship in our current world, which demands that societal masks be worn. The prospect of using the medium of theater to tell this story was already very exciting to me, but the idea that I could use this story to talk about the importance of theater and theatricality— that is what I found so very special about this project.

Throughout my time at Columbia, but long before that as well, I have been fascinated by extreme human behavior that is at once unthinkable and wholeheartedly, if disturbingly, natural. The impulse to kill, the confusion of feelings of love with feelings of lust, the manifestation of guilt and anger through violence, all

---

<sup>10</sup> *Festen*. Dir. Robert Woodruff. Theater of Cluj, 2011. DVD.

are themes that I have always felt are rarely treated from an objective, distanced point of view, instead of being villainized. I tried to maintain the same distance and impartiality that the Dogma group demanded of the movie and of Eldridge's adaptation in my own production, such that we could talk about the real issue without judgment: the power and constraints of denial. The brilliant achievement of this story is that it addresses the topic of denial by first confining its influence to the family structure, and then by allowing for the familial group to serve as a metaphor for a functioning society.

I began my research by focusing on the family, and specifically, on family secrets and the effect that they have on the group. Serge Tisseron, in his book *Secrets de famille, mode d'emploi*, points to a very important distinction one must make in defining what qualifies as a family secret:

A secret cannot be defined simply in terms of communication and relationship. A secret is an aspect of *psychic organisation before being a type of relationship*. This psychic organisation is sometimes partially conscious, and sometimes completely subconscious. This distinction between secrets as a relational phenomenon and secrets as a psychic phenomenon is essential...What characterizes the Secret is the fact that the personality of the holder is divided into two facets.<sup>11</sup>

What Tisseron is pointing to here is that the holders of secrets in a way need to reformat the way that they function and carry themselves –in essence, *create a character*- such that they may present themselves in a manner that aligns with the secret that they are protecting. A part of themselves needs to be killed off in order to assure survival in the group setting. When the curtain rises, the audience then needs to be immediately confronted with half-corpses, beautifully painted but empty shells.

What is fascinating is that the life-span of a family secret can be much, much longer than that of the people it concerns. I studied numerous testimonials (not to

---

<sup>11</sup> Tisseron, Serge. *Secrets De Famille: Mode D'emploi*. Paris: Ramsay, 1996. Print.

mention my family's and surroundings' own experience with the subject matter) in which younger generations diagnose a particular behavior and can finally trace it back to a buried family secret they had no conscious idea even existed. Tisseron relates the differences between the initial holder of the secret, or what he names "the first generation of the secret", and the child and grand-child who will still experience its effects. According to him, the secret is unspeakable for the first generation, but can still be expressed using words: the content of the secret is known to its guardian. For the second generation, the secret cannot be expressed verbally: it is not so much the content that one asks about but rather the mere *existence* of an unspeakable act. By the third generation, the family secret become unthinkable, and will manifest itself subtly through images, strange thoughts or feelings that will have no way of being explained through the individual's psychic life and family past. I translated this to mean that for the second generation, which was of particular interest to me for the creation of the siblings' characters, the unease of a family secret is first expressed *physically*, and words may come when the body becomes an insufficient expressive tool. The game then becomes a bit of a mystery adventure: one must look for the signs, the specific words uttered, the surprising physical comportment that may lead us back to the root cause: the secret. This particular notion caught my interest and began to steer me towards the question of how I would encourage the characters to develop their physical life on stage.

Tisseron calls this "*les suintements*", literally, "the perspiration" of a secret. He uses this term to point out that language is so rarely the medium one uses to unearth a secret. The clues are in the behavior -the theatrical organisation orchestrated to hide and reveal *at the same time*-, not the words. This realization allowed for the following question, which in my training at Columbia, I have been asked countless

times: “When does it become necessary to speak?”. What specifically, physically, psychologically, politically, can put someone in a situation such that there is absolutely nothing else to do, but speak? What pushes someone to such an act of bravery as speaking in front of people?

Tisseron also speaks about the danger of fostering a family secret as a way to cement and ultimately isolate the family. Indeed, this play deals with a certain group who has come to an agreement to keep something quiet and have together made a pact. The idea of a secret as a unifying dynamic readied me to narrow my research down to families that have experienced and silenced incest. I must admit that I did not want to spend too much time on that topic because, like Morgens Rukov, I did not believe *Festen* to be a play so much about an incestuous relationship as than about censorship *as exemplified* through this unhealthy dynamic.

A psychoanalyst in France referred me to what became a very important source of material, *L’Inceste et l’incestuel* by Paul-Claude Racamier. The author does not stop at his analysis of an incestuous relationship between two family members, but rather uses it as a point of access into his broader topic, ‘l’incestuel’, an adjective here used as a noun, and which I will therefore translate as ‘the incestuous’. Racamier defines this term as follows:

The incestuous is a climate: a climate in which the wind of incest blows, without there needing to be incestuous activity. The wind blows within and between family members. Wherever it blows, it creates emptiness and instills suspicion, silence, and secrecy.”<sup>12</sup>

What he seems to be describing is the *atmosphere in which ‘incest’ is a tacit possibility*. Racamier goes on to argue that such an environment exists in all family structures and that, if properly dealt with, it is a normal and healthy one at that. This

---

<sup>12</sup> Racamier, Paul-Claude. *L’inceste Et L’incestuel*. Paris: Ed. Du Collège, 1995. Print, XIII

clued me into the life that a secret can have: I had been studying and thinking about denial and was now being confronted to the secret's inability to remain forever concealed. This dangerous world in which all relationships have the potential to be sexualized fascinated me.

Racamier's study thus involves the perpetrator and the victim of incest, but also the surrounding family. He argues that

the intrapsychic life of an individual and the interpsychic life of a family operate under the same model. It is one of combined attraction and repulsion in the psychological makeup of the *individual* who endures the incestuous act, in the interpsychic relationship of the *couple* united through the incestuous act, and in the more complex relationships that exist with a *family* living under the influence of an incestuous act.<sup>13</sup>

A parent who abuses his or her child operates under a narcissistic relationship of mutual seduction. In fact Racamier argues that "incestual relationships are more matters of narcissism than they are of sexuality"<sup>14</sup>. They are made up of both attraction and repulsion. And similarly, the family wants at the same time to reveal and conceal the violent act, to alienate those living outside the family structure and plead them for help. This is the agglomeration fantasy, which "corresponds to the desire of the incestuous couple of forming an indisociable nucleus. This fantasy can extend to the entire family (rightfully called 'the nuclear family'), in which the compact nucleus seems to erect a forteress around itself"<sup>15</sup>.

The suggestion that similar forces can dictate the various other relationships in the family is an interesting theory, one that I found especially fitting in the case of the Hansen family. Perhaps more than that, I found it to offer exciting possibilities as to how to talk about such a taboo topic as incest. Maybe I was more interested in the

---

<sup>13</sup> *idem*, 33

<sup>14</sup> *idem*, 36

<sup>15</sup> *idem*, 50

cohabitation of love and hate in family structures. That duality is something I felt I could address, and what's more, something I found innately theatrical. Understanding the subject of incest through the lens of opposing laws of attraction allowed me to further feed my answer to Eldridge's question, "why bother adapt the movie into a play"?

Paul-Claude Racamier's style of writing is very crude and (at times gratuitously) violent. While I did not always find his use of words enjoyable or frankly useful to his project, it made me think about violence more concretely and reminded me the very obvious fact that any act of incest –be it sexual abuse itself or the act of silencing such an abuse- is an act of *extreme violence*. There would have to be no soft edges in the relationships that drive the characters in *Festen*. Or rather, there would have to be a constant struggle between the appearance of pacifism and the violent reality bubbling underneath.

Ultimately, diving into the psychology behind acts of incest enabled me to see more clearly what I thought *Festen* to be about. It is a play about invasion: invasion of personal space –be it the home, the mind, or the body. It studies both the short and long term individual responses to such an attack, supplying a portrait of how the Hansen family evolved over the past thirty years and of how they will change after this fateful night. I think that it can be said of every Hansen family member that their response to the consequences of Helge's abuse is isolation. *Festen*, from the first time I read it, felt like Sartre's *No Exit*. It is almost impossible for a stranger like Gbatokai to pierce through the walls that have been erected around the family. It is almost impossible for Else to let go of her poised mask. In a large way, then, *Festen* deals with the dangers of isolation: in the forms of denial within the individual psychological makeup, of silence in interpersonal relationships, and of seclusion from



the outside world: the estate is difficult to get to, and the staff has been with the family since the siblings were children.

The tension between home as a place of safety and home as an entrapment speaks very personally to me, and I believe that it is something most people can identify with. I think that my personal incline towards this project came from that very tension. It is perhaps for this reason that I began my research by looking to my own family, and my own *responses* to my family. I do not want to spend much time recounting what are commonplace personal issues, but I think it important to express that my own feeling of alienation within my larger family fed my relationship to *Festen*. My inability to assimilate with the American side of my family, my struggle and ultimate refusal to align with the religious ideas put forth by both sides of the family, and my geographic distance from my parents and sister, all made *Festen* a very personal journey for me. In fact the very first question that we started working with in rehearsal was an attempt to understand what the family is, and what the absence of choice meant for individual relationships. How can we explain feeling so close to people who we do not fundamentally know, or so far from people who we have known, and who have known us, our entire lives? How can we translate this antithetical, dynamic relationship of personal attraction and rejection?

The dangers of isolation put forth in *Festen* do however probe questions outside of the family structure. Very much like Robert Woodruff, I believe that the family is a brilliant tool for the stage when it comes to creating larger metaphors pertaining to the makeup of a society. Vittenberg suggested in an interview that the movie can be seen as a metaphor for fascism, but that,

you know, fascism is very much about the anxiety of the “foreign”. And I guess this whole story is about that. The anxiety of something else other than what you’re used to. Something breaking the rituals, something disturbing the system that you live in...But a story like this can be seen in many ways. You

can find many metaphors. And if this film encourages people to re-think what they had in mind, then I'm very glad.<sup>16</sup>

I think it simple to draw comparisons between the dynamics of the Hansen family and those of too-fervent nationalism, closed states ruled by censorship or by tyranny, or even issues of naturalisation. When I first read *Festen*, my mind immediately went to Montaigne's *Essais*, specifically the chapter "Des Cannibales", which I discovered in high school and which had a tremendous impact on me. "Des Cannibales" is an ironic text in which Montaigne critiques the conquest of the New World and colonialist expansion, arguing that "there is nothing barbaric or savage about these nations, except that *one calls barbaric that which is not one's own custom.*"<sup>17</sup>

Like Vittenberg, I did not want to have a political agenda in my approach to *Festen* because it would have been dishonest. I did not enter this project with the desire to make a commentary about a specific country, or even a specific political structure. That was not *my* story. However, if my way in was personal, I knew and kept in the back of my head the fact that there were many interpretative layers to this story. Ultimately, and I think Vittenberg aptly points to it in the interview above, the story deals with *otherness*, and the extreme response to the fear of the other: the total seclusion of a group, as expressed by the ambitions of Helge, in the attempt to maintain narcissistic *sameness*.

---

<sup>16</sup> Lehrer, Jeremy. "Vittenberg Delves into "The Celebration"" WebCite Query Result. IndieWire, 14 Oct. 1998. Web. 8 Mar. 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Pouilloux, Jean-Yves, Françoise Argod-Dutard, Gabriel Conesa, and Franck Neveu. *Essais. Montaigne*. Paris: A. Colin, 2002. Print.

## Chapter 2

### **The Design Process and Creation of a World**

One of the Dogma 95 clauses in the ‘Vow of Chastity’ demands that the director take the following pledge:

I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste. I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a “work” as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.<sup>18</sup>

With *Festen*, my belief was that the best way to squeeze the truth out of the characters was to stage a world as seen through the eyes of the family. Unlike film, it is impossible to render completely true life on the stage. For starters we are in a theater, not in a wealthy estate. The Dogma project allows for more directorial distance in the creation of the world and context, for instance because of the site-specificity clause. The question for us was, through whose eyes should the audience witness this story?

Working with designers is something I had never done until I came to Columbia. I had never fully grasped the various responsibilities that go into designing a show, let alone the collaboration that is necessary to articulate a fully created world on stage. The Designer/Director workshop that we take in our second year at Columbia began to supply me with the muscles I continue to cultivate and exercise. In that class I met a wonderful collaborator in Mike McGee, the lighting designer for *Festen*. Our team was completed by Derek Miller, a set designer who fortuitously emailed the Theater Department to find collaborators, and Jess Malcolm, who had just

---

<sup>18</sup> Lehrer, Jeremy. "Vittenberg Delves into "The Celebration"" WebCite Query Result. IndieWire, 14 Oct. 1998. Web. 8 Mar. 2015.

graduated from Barnard College, as the sound designer. I insisted on being the costume designer. Producing *Festen* were Elizabeth Goodman, a SoA alumna in Theater Management, and Elaine Carberry, who is pursuing her Master's degree in Dramaturgy at Columbia. Both are longtime collaborators, and both were actively present through all of our design and dramaturgical meetings.

I first read and began thinking about *Festen* while I was living in Iasi, Romania, assisting Andrei Serban on his remounting of Gaetano Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lamermoor*. The macabre atmosphere that Andrei created with *Lucia* remains perhaps my greatest visual and tonal influence for the production. The story of the opera follows Lucia, who is forced by her brother to marry a man that she does not love in order to protect her family from bankruptcy and political humiliation. In a state of frenzy she murders her husband on their wedding night and commits suicide. Andrei directed a much disputed production of the opera, in which he chose to highlight the monstrosity of Lucia's brother and the violence that reigns in their world. In essence, he was able to simultaneously direct two separate events as one: the celebration of a wedding, and the tragedy of a funeral. Because indeed, as Lucia signs the marriage license, she signs away ownership of her own life. The clarity with which Andrei was able to evoke these opposite dynamics influenced me greatly for *Festen*. I needed to make visible both a birthday celebration for Helge and a funeral for Linda, both a culture of tradition and a complete scission with the past and well-rehearsed behaviors.

Nervous that my daily confrontation to the world of *Lucia* was going to dictate my conception of *Festen*, I decided that I wanted to organize a reading of the play upon my return to New York to serve as a palate cleanser. At this point I knew that I would cast Seth Reich in the role of Christian and Peter Romano in the role of

Michael, both students in the Acting program at Columbia. I had originally planned to work with the pair on Martin MacDonagh's *The Pillowman*, and wanted them involved in my thesis production even when we lost the rights to the play. I called them in, along with other actors, to read *Festen* at my apartment. Before we read, I told everyone that I did not want to discuss the play. We would simply read to hear the words and the story and nothing more. The designers and producers were present that evening, and so the reading provided our first, common window into the play.

The first design meetings that followed were general discussions; no one brought in any research. We wanted to figure out what the play was about, and had a difficult time boiling it down to a single idea. Whose story was it? Was it a play about sexual abuse? About denial? Was the hero really Christian? Was the villain just Helge? Why was it important that Michael and Mette had a little girl, what was her role? Why was it important that Gbatokai was a black man? Faced with too many questions, we decided to take a step back and I invited everyone to start a conversation about something that fascinated everyone at the table: family secrets.

I chose to share the story of my grandmother, Gisele Halfon. When she passed away seven years ago, my mother and her brother discovered the existence of Pierre. At age nineteen, my grandmother was forced into marriage and almost immediately became a mother. The story that my family had been told was that, when her child Pierre started manifesting symptoms of autism, my grandmother ran away from Tunis and from her husband, and embarked on a pilgrimage to Lourdes, hoping for some miraculous healing. She ultimately left her son in the care of nuns at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, and attempted suicide. She came back to Tunis, left her husband, and met my grandfather, with whom she had my mother and her brother. My grandmother had told us that she received news of Pierre's death a few years after her

trip to Lourdes. Sorting out papers after her death, we learned that for fifty-seven years, Pierre had been very much alive and was living in a psychiatric institution in France, and had been punctually visited by my grandmother. When this secret was finally revealed, my mother realized that she, somehow, had always known that her half brother was alive. And that her mother's abandonment of her child had probably shaped her own approach to motherhood.

I shared this with the design team, and we began to discuss the notion that family secrets create the common history and culture for that group. That the intimate, sometimes painful truths of a family, are also what define it. They anchor the family, but also weigh it down. We wondered about the relationship between the weight of a secret, the dread of revealing it, and the tendency to create a self-sufficient, alienating community in which strangers are not welcome. The 'stranger', as we came to understand it, was embodied by Gbatokai in *Festen*. In the film, Gbatokai is American, further distancing him from the mores of the Hansen family. The family's racism, then, was more a metaphor for its general inability to introduce new elements into the group, rather than a concrete commentary on race.

We began to introduce visual imagery, starting with Gordon Matta Clark's fissured houses and past set designs of Sartre's *No Exit*. Matta Clark had an identical twin brother, Sebastian, who committed suicide at a young age. We were especially taken by his "building cuts", works in which he took apart abandoned buildings. Matta Clark used this device as a way to make a commentary on the futility and unattainability of the values put forth by the American Dream. Mike and I had begun exploring Matta Clark's work when we were working on a design for Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolfe*. We enjoyed the idea of a family home that looked picture-perfect on the outside, but was structurally unsound. The houses by Matta Clark were

fake because they were not founded on solid grounds. Similarly, the various secrets and acts of violence gnaw at the pillars of the Hansen family, causing it to eventually fall apart.

Instead of presenting the perfect family to an audience and gradually taking them on a journey through its deconstruction and revelation of their structural flaws, my goal was to stage a group that simultaneously oscillated between the two extremes of presentational flawlessness and rabid violence. A family on a seesaw, always on the brink of falling off the edge. I joked that *Festen* should feel like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Downton Abbey* at the same time. My joke took our research to old, abandoned, once beautiful mansions –the one element these opposite universes share. We began to focus in on the staircase as an object, finding that it visually evoked the idea of generational transmission and hierarchy. Taking that object and attempting to give it more meaning, we began playing with the idea that staircases might pop out of nowhere and lead to nowhere. This idea was based on the research that incest tends to repeat itself through generations in a particular family, and that more generally, the secret haunts not just the generation which creates it, but weaves its way into the DNA and collective memory of the family. The room that is presented on the stage would stand as the only room in this maze of a home, which has no entrance or exit. Everyone would be stuck there.

The first set design was just that: stairs coming out of nowhere. Derek had also created an eight-foot high platform, which I had always envisioned a necessary playing space for this play. We found that height achieved three key elements that we wanted the audience to take in: hierarchy (and patriarchy), generational transmission, and horizontal imprisonment. We wanted our set to literally “carry a weight on its shoulders”. This original design also had three doors on the platform, which Derek

had come up with to help me stage the bedroom scene in Act I, in which three distinct scenes take place at the same time.

Initially because of financial constraints, we needed to synthesise our staircase concept. Scott Mancha and Tom Gilmore at Columbia gave us the following option: we could keep the stairs if we accepted to have a five-foot tall platform instead of the full eight feet. There was a wonderful moment of agreement between all of us at the table when we all gasped in one voice –the five-foot platform was absolutely not an option. We needed height. This proposition however led us back to the drawing table and forced us to truly ask why we felt so strongly about the image of the stairs. We realized that *Festen* was taking place in a world of manichean oppositions. We wanted the stage to reflect both grandeur and oppression. We thus decided to frame the height of the Connelly stage with two eighteen-foot French windows. We would then create an obtrusive platform upstage right that would split the stage in two. We would keep one single staircase, further dividing the visual landscape.

More and more, the set began to look like the cafeteria of a prison, to the extent that Tom Gilmore called me into his office to make sure that I was getting what I wanted from my design team. I had indeed been speaking of lavish New England mansions, yet our latest design looked like a Meyerhold, industrial, black-and-white warehouse. I hadn't realized this, and I was delighted to hear Tom describe the set in those terms. I found it very fitting, and surprising that we had gotten to this point in our design. When I pointed this out to the rest of the design team, we decided to continue to create a cold, gray space which felt oppressive. In fact we would further accentuate this heaviness by painting the horizontal lines of the platform and the stairs in bright red. Insisting on the linearity of the set truly created a prison for this family. The rest of the color palette would be dull nuances of grey.



We spent quite some time discussing where and when we wanted to stage *Festen*. The play by Eldridge is set in 1995 Denmark. I wanted to stage it in the ‘here and now’, in an attempt to universalize the ideas that the story brought to light. I did not want to give an audience the opportunity to distance themselves from the action, both temporally and geographically. We made the relevant changes in the script, placing the Hansen estate in a New England town not too far from Hartford, and opted for a contextually ambiguous, bare set. It was however important to convey the socio-economic background of the Hansen family. Their wealth and culture of affluence contributed to their desire to keep up appearances. Remembering Georgio Strehler’s concept of boxes, we decided that each design element would be created in support of a different dynamic of the play. The props and costumes would all belong to an affluent household, in the hope of contrasting with the otherwise naked stage. At this point we did not have a properties designer. I had never worked with one before and did not understand its importance until this process. Eventually my classmate Maridee Slater joined the team. The only notable set piece other than the staircase would be a dining table. The inspiration from Matta Clarke is clear as the table is fissured at the edge and actually comprised of two thinner tables which could move and allow us to illustrate the progression of relational dynamics. I did not want there to be chairs, partly for efficacy, partly because benches kept the actors from claiming their personal space at the table: they would all be squeezed together and had no easy way out of the table.

Our initial conversations about sound design involved Jess Malcolm, who had been the sound designer for my second-year production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Jess and I envisioned that there would be two aspects to the soundscape: the “song of the house”, as Jess called it, and the “song of the family”. The song of the house

would be a compilation of water running through pipes, floorboards being cracked. The idea was to support Helene's line, "there have always been ghosts in this house" (scene 1.3). As for the song of the family, there was little that needed to be added. I made up a few lullaby-sounding options for "It's Daddy's Birthday Yes It Is", which the cast immediately loved and sang ad nauseam, as the characters do in the play. I had told Jess that perhaps we could record the cast singing that song in a variety of ways and tempos. Unfortunately, Jess had to pull out of the project and we did not find another sound designer until I asked yet another classmate, Chris Murrah, to join our team. This frustrating inability to replace Jess meant that, for some time, sound was not part of the design conversation. Eventually, Jess' absence ended up revealing that there was already a lot of sound that came from this family alone. Indeed, working with Chris allowed me to realize that this is a play that is largely about silence, silence that is chosen and silence that is imposed. What were we trying to "add" with sound? Together we remembered Allan's chilling description of how "silent, silent, silent" the room was when his step-father was abusing him. This particular play, we concluded, did not call for non-diegetic sound.

The French title for Sartre's *No Exit* is *Huis Clos*. The title has become an expression in French used to express a space or situation which has, not surprisingly, no exit. I am in a "huis clos" if I haven't left the house in days. I believe that we ended up with something similar on stage, using black masking to further this idea of an incubated family living within these four walls. There was no comforting texture on stage, save for the bed that is brought into the third scene of the first act. The bed – and all that it connotes – was the only object of warmth and depth present on the stage. For these reasons, we did not want to have curtains on the windows, or pillows on the benches. We were beginning to create a space which had the potential for danger, for

eruption. We were hoping to create a world *confined* to this one room, because the family inhabiting it, with the exception of the Hansen children, did not dare or want to know what was outside its walls.

The nuance that was both our obstacle and our goal was that we wanted to achieve a world in which both tragedy and comedy could coexist. I was very comfortable talking about *Festen* as a ‘dark comedy’, but hadn’t really stopped to ask myself what that meant, and what I needed to supply the playing space with in order to create a landscape ripe for both genres. The objective was to create a world in which certain behaviors, which would appear strange in the ‘real’ world, were considered normal. These slightly heightened behaviors would come out as the incarnation of the underlying anxieties that make up the characters.

In *The Theater of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin points to Buchner as

one of the pioneers of another type of the Theatre of the Absurd – the violent, brutal drama of mental aberration and obsession. *Woyzeck*... is one of the first plays of world literature to make a tormented creature almost feeble-minded and beset by hallucinations, the hero of a tragedy.<sup>19</sup>

*Woyzeck* is told through the eyes of its hero, supplying us with snippets of the story, and painted with Woyzeck’s vision. Much in the same way, *Festen* pulls together a kaleidoscopic point of view in which all the characters make an argument to support their vision of the world, and their perception of the past.

Similar to Woyzeck’s grotesque cast of ghosts, more strikingly perhaps the Doctor who imposes his strange experiments on him, Christian and the other characters have a simplified and hyperbolic perception of those who surround them. There is the villain (Helge), and his partner in crime (Else), the violent brother (Michael) and the flighty sister (Helene), the pristine angel (Linda) and the kind-

---

<sup>19</sup> Esslin, Martin. *The Theater of the Absurd*. 1st ed. New York City: Random House, 2004. Print. Vintage Books. 339.

hearted lover (Pia). I recalled my own family gatherings that are, in my case, rare and concentrated in time. This constriction means that flaws and qualities are boldened, present. I even find a certain comfort in witnessing the basic make-up of the various members of my family so clearly and so fully. There is comfort in this consistency. It is perhaps for this reason that, together with the company, we aimed to create what Alfred Jarry, speaking of *Ubu Roi*, describes as “the exaggerations of [man’s] vicious nature”<sup>20</sup>. The rigidity of this affluent society dining with the proper codes of conduct further allowed for this heightened world. Ultimately, we discovered that the comedy in *Festen* does not so much coexist as it does *come out of* the tragedy. This is for instance made evident with the character of Poul, whose exaggerated chronic depression creates moments of comic relief.

The attempt to find the juxtaposition between comedy and tragedy went hand in hand with a difficulty to establish the stylistic tone of the performance. Visiting my most extreme references of theater, I concluded that *Festen* was neither Ionesco’s *Bald Soprano* nor Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, though it carried elements of both: from, for instance, the absurdist repetition of Grandpa’s promise that he’ll “probably say something later, but it won’t be for the ears of little girls”<sup>21</sup>, to the chilling scene between Helge and Christian, strongly reminiscent of Big Daddy and Brick’s argument in Act II. *Festen* needed to live somewhere in the middle of this spectrum of genres. The destination that I wanted to lead the cast towards was somewhere near Appollinaire’s conception of Surrealism, “an art more real than reality, expressing essences rather than appearances”<sup>22</sup>. The constant danger was to

---

<sup>20</sup> Idem. Alfred Jarry, ‘*Questions de theatre*’ in *Ubu Roi*, cited by Esslin. 358.

<sup>21</sup> Eldridge, David. Thomas Vinterberg, Mogens Rukov and Bo Hr. Hansen's *Festen*. London: Methuen, 2004. Print. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Appollinaire, Preface to *Les Mamelles de Tiresias*, in *Oeuvres Poétiques* (Paris: Pleiade, 1956), 865.

heighten the acting for style only, and not work from the inside out to extract, and then indeed augment, the core identity of the characters. The goal was to develop the perspicacity that would allow us to dive beneath the surface of the reality of this family and create a topsy turvy world: the swollen surface of these characters would showcase what is actually the most intimate, the most secret.

The French-German surrealist writer Yvan Goll describes this as the “superworld”, or *Uberwelt*. He explains that the *Uberwelt*

will by no means be a relapse into the mystical or the romantic or the clowning of the music hall, although it has something in common with all of these –the probing into a world beyond the senses. It has been quite forgotten that the stage is nothing but a magnifying glass... It has been quite forgotten that the first symbol of the theater is the mask... In the mask there lies a law and this is the law of the theater- the unreal becomes fact. For a moment it is proved that the most banal can be unreal and ‘divine’ and that precisely in this, lies the greatest truth... The stage must not only work with ‘real’ life; it becomes ‘surreal’ when it is aware of the things behind the things. Pure realism was the greatest lapse in all literature.<sup>23</sup>

It is through this lens that I was able to set *Festen* on my imaginary scale of genres. And I realized that it was the surrealist treatment of *Lucia di Lamermoor* that had inspired me. What ended up being the driving dogma for every design element and for every character was, again in the words of Goll, to create a world in which “the appearance of reality is unmasked in favor of the truth of being”<sup>24</sup>.

---

<sup>23</sup> Yvan Goll, autobiographical note, in K. Pinthus, *Menschheitsdammerung* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1920), p.292, cited by Esslin. 372.

<sup>24</sup> Idem, 374.

## Chapter 3

### **The Rehearsal Process**

Rehearsals for *Festen* were divided between December 10<sup>th</sup> to December 21<sup>st</sup> and January 5<sup>th</sup> to January 28<sup>th</sup>, which meant that we would benefit from a two-week break in the middle of our process. As we got closer to the start of rehearsals, I became more and more distracted by the fact that we were doing a play about imposed silence. As a person, I am comforted when I talk things through. As a director, I am learning that talking is often more a hindrance than a way to blow a text open. Especially with *Festen*, I felt that the company and myself should not have the privilege to enjoy a free-flowing conversation about the themes that the characters in the play are forced to keep silent about. I was afraid that talking would lead us to jump to conclusions about the characters and the relationships that exist between them. I decided the night before rehearsals started that the company and I would play a game together, leading us in an exploration of what communication is: how, why, and when we choose to communicate.

My original interest with *Festen* was to explore the sexualized nature of relationships, as much outside of as within the family structure. But rather than develop a rigid argument, I wanted to offer the audience the *portrait* of a family that would hopefully serve as a canvas to explore the question at hand. This desire for a portrait led me to the thought that what we would show on the stage would simply be our process. Indeed the rehearsal room is comprised of the same dynamics which drive the dinner party: whether it is because of Helge's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party or because

of my thesis production, a group of people are brought together and are inevitably led to constitute a community through the event that they are participating in. We would therefore need for our rehearsal room to align with the atmosphere of this dinner party: certain things would need to be left unsaid and our work would be to figure out when they would come to the surface.

On the first day, I explained the ‘rules’ of our game to the cast. We would stick to the action and events of the play, and answer questions which have undeniably factual answers. Interpretation and psychology would literally be left outside of the room, where every day, there would be a large white sheet of paper on which everyone was welcome to write down questions, ideas, and thoughts about the play. The cast decided that we would give our white board the title, ‘Dynamics’. This worked beautifully throughout the entire process. By the end of January we had filled up four big sheets of paper, all of which were displayed outside the rehearsal room every day. Originally, I had imagined that we would come back to the ideas evoked on our ‘Dynamics’ board and discuss them. This never happened. Instead, however, the actors began answering questions on the board and communicating to each other through this now public thread of thoughts. No one really knew who was writing what, and writing on the sheets of paper became a healthy way for everyone to explore their frustration with the ‘rules’: during a break, certain actors would go outside to write what was on their mind, leave it outside, and come back in with an attempt to focus only on the action of the scene.

On the topic of communication, we decided that, while talking in a more interpretative manner was of course not forbidden outside the room, it was important for the actors to protect the intimacy of their characters. Much like meeting someone for the first time, we would be cautious in our decision to divulge the secrets that

drive the characters. We were interested in witnessing what natural intimacies and alliances would be created throughout our time together. I was eager to create that very frustration of the unspoken that the characters feel in the play, and to see what event would force us as a company towards the *need* to break our 'rules' and finally talk it out.

In the attempt to recreate in our room the parameters of the *Festen* dinner table, I realized that, unlike the seventeen strangers meeting at Columbia for the first time, the Hansen family shared a history, a past that dictated their traditions, from the common place conversations about lobster soup to the palate-cleansing conga line breaks. We needed to work on creating our own history and traditions. One of my favorite scenes in the play is Act I, scene 3, in which the audience witnesses Christian, Michael, and Helene prepare for dinner. These characters all leave something behind in order to be able to join the party. They need to prepare their performance for the event. Inspired by this scene, I wanted to create a space that takes a change, a sacrifice even, to come into. On the first day, I invited the cast to explore what personal tradition they wanted to engage in before checking into rehearsal. The experiment would perhaps lead to the creation of our own traditions, our own company history.

To my great surprise, this proved to be successful. Throughout the first week, everyone performed their tradition alone. Slowly, we all began to pick up on everyone's habits. Some were amused by them, others were indifferent or even bothered by some. Whichever way, people were responding to each other. These 'traditions' were big and small: for instance one actor decided he would go around the room and shake hands with everyone, introducing himself not as Josh but as Grandfather. The actor playing Lars, the butler, simply sat down on a chair, took off



his winter boots, pulled out shiny white slippers, slowly tied his shoelaces, and stood up ready to work. This idea was certainly only a small gesture towards this bigger goal of creating a cohesive ritual, but it supplied us with the first elements with which we began to understand these characters. Indeed, everyone took a different amount of time to complete their preparation, and it became very interesting to see which actors needed more or less time. One night, when we were rehearsing Helge and Else alone for the first time, the actor playing Helge had to wait for Else to finish her ritual. This propelled us into the scene. By creating an analog experience between the actor and the character, we started to extract the essence of not only the characters but also the relationships that exist between them.

What was wonderful about the structure of *Festen* was that the majority of the scenes required us to be a full company. This gave me the opportunity to develop another rehearsal ritual. On the second day of rehearsal, we composed the melodies to “It’s Daddy’s Birthday Yes It Is”, “Little Sambo Man”, and “The Big Old Teddy Bear”. Everyone took great pleasure in singing these songs, and it was especially helpful to incorporate our youngest actor, who played The Child, into the company. We sang these songs at the start of every rehearsal. Because it placed each character on equal footing, this process was teaching us what a family is, what being a family truly means. On the first day of rehearsal I asked the company to engage in an exercise inspired from the ‘family dinner’ assignment that we complete in our first semester with Anne Bogart. I divided the company into three groups. Each actor would think of one event that *always* happens at a family dinner, and one event that happened *once*. They then rehearsed to create a ten-minute scene in which one element from each actor’s contribution would be explored. It was fascinating to see that, in all three groups, the family dinners featured distractions (alcohol, television,

sports), and frustrations (having to eat a meal that is not aligned with certain dietary restrictions, not being able to give news about something that might stir the peaceful event). A ‘family’ gathering was, for this company at least, far from a simple and joyous reunion. I think that this experience allowed the cast to trust me with my ‘game’, its rules and sacrifices.

Through these ‘family dinner’ exercises, which we would go back to from time to time, we realized that we needed to be very cautious with our creation of a family. Our family, if we were to make it as ‘surreal’ (in Appollinaire’s sense of the term) as possible, needed to be complicated, and not always made of unconditional love. We were especially prudent with touching. It took weeks for Else and Helge to kiss on the cheek. Being comfortable and patient with that reticence helped us understand the sexual politics driving their couple. In the same way, establishing a physical relationship between the three siblings was difficult and touchy. The three actors are close friends, and friends of mine as well. Our first day together, I took a risk and incorporated physical exercises using pillows. I say risk because two of these three actors consider exercises to be the director’s way of talking down to the company. I wanted to play with a ‘what if’: what if the first scene of the play happened on a big, bouncy bed? This suggestion was too early in the process, and although the actors didn’t mind contact, it seems as if the *characters* were reticent. This discomfort did however show me (and after some time, the actors) that this atmosphere of the incestuous that Racamier describes was being felt. It bothered, and irked the three actors. Ironically, it had been created without us addressing it.

We eventually were able to address the sibling dynamics. The actor playing Christian felt that the character did not have a clear understanding of the respectable boundaries that should exist between family members. He wanted to kiss his mother

and sister and for that to be normal. The actor playing Michael felt the opposite, and we realized that he even had a difficult time touching his own wife. He decided that Michael did not want to see Mette's face during sex, which the audience witnesses in Act I, scene 3. The actress playing Helene learned that, on the other hand, her character used sex to provoke her family members, something that had already been accomplished by inviting her black boyfriend to this otherwise pristinely white birthday party.

Ultimately, my decision to keep quiet about any interpretation came from a belief that, if we discussed the dynamics, we would approach these characters' story with preconceived notions. Furthermore, my suspicion was that the violent events that characterized this family, from Linda's suicide to Helge's abuse of his children, were not the *consequence* of something but rather the *symptoms* of a great love and conflicted attempt *to be a family*. Perhaps the real family secret is that these terrible actions and behaviors indeed come from a place of passion, most probably galvanized by love, or what used to be love. The secret, perhaps, was that on a certain level, Christian understood how his father could commit such an act, and that Helge was maybe just a little bit proud that his son finally had the courage to confront the rest of the family with the truth.

Part I of the process took us to mid-December. There was something very fortuitous about exploring family and family rituals so close to the holidays. My emphasis in December was on the full company scenes in Act II. We started exploring what this slightly heightened comportment would mean by diving into the silent scene in Act II, scene 2, where everyone simply eats their dinner. Andrei Serban once told us in a Visiting Directors class that there is so much to learn from the way a character eats. We spent some time exploring what that meant, and further studied how we

could clarify the relationships in silence. Did everyone eat what was on the menu? Did some characters know that others didn't eat certain things and habitually removed food from their plates? Did they leave the food to the side, or exchange food with other characters? While everyone was busy at the dinner table, there was a lot of playing room for the actors Pia, Lars, and Kim to learn about their characters. It became evident that Lars was in charge, and most importantly, that he was a voyeur. During rehearsals, the actor playing Lars was always peeking his head in to see what was happening. He was very passionate about the play. Eventually, I brought him my grandmother's opera glasses and invited him to use them as he pleased.

Throughout December we started to piece together Act I, the two first scenes being largely exposition. The siblings reunite, and the parents greet their children. I felt strongly that the work that was being done on Act II would vastly inform the dynamics of Act I. The danger was that the characters wanted very much for their initial handshake to carry the whole weight of secrets and anger. Act I needed to be light. The underbelly of the play boiling underneath needed to be kept to a simmer to take us into Act II.

We happily broke away for the holidays. The actors were able to enjoy some distance from the process and learn their lines. We came back together the evening of January 5<sup>th</sup>, and, as expected, things changed.

The first January rehearsal was a stumble-through of Act II. My new goal for these scenes was to intuit the rhythm that was absolutely necessary to maintain the constant tonal back and forth. That night, the actors felt very unsure, and I could feel it. The rest of the week was spent lightly exploring Act III, working with the fight choreographer, and reviewing the Act I scenes. Some of the actors were still very excited by the way we were working, others were fed up. And we did not feel like an

ensemble. Our first night in the theater was the following Wednesday. At 9.30pm, we started at the top of Act II once more. I made them start again many times, because the rhythm wasn't right. Eventually, the actress playing Else broke and stood up to say that she couldn't go on, that she had no idea what the actors looked like on the stage and what she needed to work towards. This was a fascinating and dangerous moment for me. I let the actors speak amongst themselves, some defending the process, others rebelling against it. I was trying my best to keep quiet, remembering that this explosion was part of the 'plan', that enough time had passed and we couldn't keep our feelings bottled in or laid out on a piece of paper anymore. By the end of their conversation, I simply told them that I had heard them, and that we were going to start working in a slightly different way. At 10pm, we ran the scene one last time. It was a different scene, full of tension and musicality.

That night I went home trying to fight off my negative feelings of self-doubt and bruised ego. I discussed the events with myself and concluded that we *all* needed more clarity about the play. We had been working so hard to satisfy the 'rules' I had imposed that we were losing sight of the story. My role in this process had been, up to that point, that of an educated voyeur. I truly wanted to simply reflect back what I *saw* because I was committed to trusting this cast with the play. The following morning I emailed the ensemble just what it was that I had been observing these past few weeks.

They delivered to me what I then attempted to boil down into a one-sentence 'stupid story': a family who has CHOSEN to DENY their common past comes together for the celebration of a birthday party, and ONE by ONE, they are compelled to face facts and *either* SURRENDER to, *or* SEIZE and DIVULGE, the truth. I then tried to upack what this meant, starting with the given circumstance that this is a family who was given the choice that evening to either stay in mourning over Linda's

recent suicide or to choose to celebrate Helge's birthday. Everybody *chose* to commit to the birthday party. This means that, before the play even begins, *everyone is compensating for Linda's death*, everyone is inflated with the energy needed to mask their individual, tempestuous underbelly in flux. When the play begins, every character tries his or her BEST to keep things bottled in, in favor of the celebration.

What's more, these characters are quite skilled at performing, especially Else and Helge. The play can then be seen as reminiscent of the "Balloon and Dart" carnival game, where the player wins once he has popped the balloons on the entire row. Whose bubble will it be the most difficult to burst? Through the course of the evening, each character is either FORCED (Michael, for instance) or CHOOSES (Christian, for instance) to give up on their 'birthday party mask'. Perhaps more importantly, *this happens at different times for each character*. This is what we had been doing wrong: as soon as Christian made his speech at the top of Act II, all the characters at the table deflated out of the birthday party and into anxiety. We needed to realize that Christian's moment was the first in a *series* of balloon pops. Each pop would happen in its own time, in its own way, at its own rhythm. And up until that change, each character needed to commit so much to their 'birthday party character', to the extent that their performance became almost farcical. Each character needed to prepare for dinner like they would prepare for war, and protect their 'balloon' at all costs, never giving up. This balloon metaphor was my way of instilling the principle of *jo-ha-kyu* into the ensemble, and pointing to the reality that, in *Festen*, each character's *jo-ha-kyu* stretches into one long arc across the entire length of the play. These balloons also allowed for me to introduce another pair of opposites that proved useful to the actors: inflation and deflation.

By the time we get the last scene of Act III, all but two characters' balloons have popped, again either by force or by choice. Even after Helene reads Linda's suicide note to the entire room, Helge and Else are still standing, still committed to their 'birthday party character'. And even when he is *asked to leave* the breakfast table in Act III, scene 3, Helge keeps up appearances and reaches his arm to Else, definitively his *partner in crime* (let us not forget that she kept silent about what she saw in the office for thirty five years), and asks if she will join him in exiting the room. Finally, when Else, who has not given up on the birthday party for the entire play, tells him 'no', Helge is finally alone. Else has the last line of the play, "I think I'll stay here". Throughout the accusations made by Christian and later by Helene, through her own toast to Helge, she never wavers, right until the very end. The play, however, is not over after Else's last line. In that moment, the actor playing Helge has a choice: does he deflate and give up, or does he stand tall and walk out of the room upright? Does he exit like he entered, or do these two crosses reflect two very different men? Is he the last man standing, or have all the balloons been popped?

I let these ideas sink into the company over our day off. When we came back, nobody talked about the email and we got back to work. Somehow, and I don't know if my email has anything to do with it at all, the relationships had been clarified. It became more evident that within the four walls of the Hansen estate, Helge was a totalitarian patriarch, and at his arm was his most skilled collaborator, Else. Both actors suggested that they resembled Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and started to enjoy playing with their charming, poised façade, all the while plotting like allies in the shadows. Interestingly, once Helge and Else started working together, the other dynamics revealed themselves, and are aptly described by Jack Stevenson in his book *Dogme Uncut*:

Class oppression usually leads to revolt and so it does here. Michael, Helene, and the mother must all in different ways finally make a decision and act on it. No more denial, no more hoping that it will just pass. No more collaboration with the enemy in the black tuxedo for the sake of appearances and convenience. In their own ways they all stand up to him and disown him.<sup>25</sup>

We finally had the courage to name something that had only been suggested on our white board: the idea that Helge himself had been abused by Grandfather in his childhood. The intuition came from Grandfather's anecdote about Helge stuffing his bathing suit as a boy with potatoes. We couldn't understand why the character chose a public setting to reveal an embarrassing childhood story, and all felt that he took a perverse pleasure in telling it.

Following the potential discovery of a generational pattern, I started to understand why the Child was a necessary character in *Festen*. It was very clear from Christian's confusement in Act III, scene 1, that she was an embodiment of Linda, and of the childlike innocence with which Linda and Christian were confronted to Helge's violence. Aside from bumping into Christian at the top of the play, the Child's first interaction with a character other than her parents is with Grandfather in Act II, who incessantly warns her that he might say something inappropriate in the course of the evening. The company and I were all very sensitive to this contact between Grandfather and the Child. For all of us, the physical rapport established by Grandfather taking her in his arms felt like a warning that history may repeat itself. That history was already repeating itself when Helge lay a hand on Christian and Linda.

These incestuous, *intra muros* dynamics were thus stretching beyond Helge as culprit and the twins as victims. It involved Grandfather, it involved Else, in the

---

<sup>25</sup> Stevenson, Jack. *Dogme Uncut: Lars Von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, and the Gang That Took on Hollywood*. Santa Monica, Calif: Santa Monica, 2003. Print. 85.



know. It also involved Pia, who is rumored in the play to have had some inappropriate interaction with Michael the year prior the action takes place. This information is subtly burried in the script, but is nevertheless quite important. We learn that Christian cannot commit to a woman except for Pia and are led to suspect that Michael cheated on his wife Mette. Pia's first few lines in Act I, scene 3, supply us with the information that she tried to leave the Hansen estate three times before she finally gave up and stayed. What characterizes Pia as a character is her conscious emprisonment, and her voluntary surrender to her tepid, uneventful fate. In a way then, Pia too is a representative facet of Linda, forever emprisoned in the Hansen estate. It is perhaps for that reason that she is the only woman that Christian can love: she comes *from the house*. Christian's first love, tragically, was his own blood. Perhaps Pia is the only woman in Christian's life who can be an incarnation of both 'the other' and the familial 'I'. This idea is further emphasized by the suggestion that Christian and his brother Michael share Pia as a sexual partner. We also instilled a certain flirtation in Act I, scene 2, between Helge and Pia, provoked by his relentless questions about the young maid's marital status.

The intense familial isolation further clarified the roles of the outsiders: not only Gbatokai, but also Mette. So very little information is supplied about these characters that we had to fill in the blanks and create characters almost out of thin air. We all suspected a flaw in the writing, but I think that their flatness is a reflection of the way they are perceived by the family. They are simply the outsiders, the strangers: we do not need to know anything about them. Gbatokai and Mette are also necessary to counter-balance the collaborationist behaviors of Kim and Lars. Kim, the cook, has been with the family long enough to be childhood friends with Christian. He has seen the horrible events happen, get burried, and knaw at this friend. He provokes

Christian to keep fighting at the end of Act II, but keeps up appearances in front of Helge. He wants to be free of his boss' grip, but needs a hero to do it for him. Lars is new this year to the Hansen estate and has been trained to be excellent at his job. He does not engage in the family politics and simply wants to perform well. The fact that he is new, however, allows for him to be the audience on stage. He begins his own investigation about the Hansen past, thus serving as the journalistic voyeur.

It is in the last week of work that I fully understood where my passion for *Festen* originated. It was for the same reasons that I love *The Bald Soprano* so much: the play served as a brilliant allegory for political oppression. As with a totalitarian system, the family is imprisoned in a dysfunctional insularity that becomes the very cause of its self-destruction.

## Chapter 4

### **Aftermath and Reflection on Training**

I had just graduated college when I started the MFA Directing program at Columbia. I had discovered theater and a passion for directing only three years before that, when, by happenstance, a friend and I founded a French-speaking theater troupe for the purpose of diffusing French culture around our campus. The only skills that I had under my belt were experiential and instinctive. I had been trained in college and high school towards a literary degree, and knew how to dissect a text. But I did not know how to *commuicate* an analysis to a company of actors, even less how to lead them towards their own understanding of a story. Through the course of my time at Columbia, I was given the space to learn for myself by making mistakes in the rehearsal room and sorting through them afterwards in a collaborative critique. I was also pointed in the direction of educating myself in theater history, trends, and figures. Certainly amongst others, I owe my training to three mentors: Brian Kulick, Anne Bogart, and Gregory Mosher.

The tools that I had been given in my first year of training only truly started to metabolize during the process of directing my second-year production in April 2014, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Working on this iconic piece taught me how to direct the *story* of the play and look for the action that drives the characters. Brian spent the first year teaching my classmates and I firstly how to discern units of action, and then how to use staging and performance in order to communicate these units as a sequence which compiles the *story*. In my second year, I took a wonderful class taught by

Gregory. The only objective of the class was to train its students to boil down the narrative of a play into one active sentence that explained both the objective of the hero and his or her obstacle. I have been trying to follow Brian and Gregory's blueprints in my work as much as possible. I began to experiment with implementing their rigor in *Streetcar*, and continued my investigation with *Festen*. Before our first rehearsal I outlined what I thought to be the event of each scene, the uberevent of each act, and the way each event changed the characters and the course of the story. This little "cheat sheet" calmed my nerves perhaps more than anything else. *Festen* is not a difficult play to break down in its units of action. This process however allowed for me to get a sense of the rhythm that was necessary to sustain both the comic and tragic extremes that the play features. Unfortunately, my preparation work hadn't been thorough enough: I only realized a week before opening night that Christian's first toast is in fact not the uberevent of the play –or else we wouldn't need the rest of the second act or the third act.

The play, however, adheres to a somewhat odd structure. Although they are in a logical temporal sequence, the scenes seem episodic, with absolutely no transition in between. In addition, *Festen* thwarts the 'cores' that follow the events for as long as it can. Indeed, characters do not let themselves respond to the bombs that are constantly being dropped on their heads, right until they crack. This makes for a quick-paced story, where allowing time for transitions is risky. With *Streetcar*, I left the transitions to tech week because we needed to be in the theater to work them out, and I was interested to see them happen organically. We ended up having a lot of fun with the actress playing Blanche (Lauren Cipoletti, who played Helene in *Festen*), and created some silent scenes for her character. I made the mistake of working in the same way with *Festen*. Smaller transitions were figured out in rehearsal, but, for the bigger,

more complicated ones, I very consciously decided that I was too scared to think about them until I would have to.

Somewhere along the way I decided that a transition was a beautiful opportunity for the director to compose on stage and be ‘free’ of any demands from the writer. With that I gave myself permission to stage a silent exploration of Blanche’s character throughout her story. I wanted to do something similar with *Festen*, and especially wanted to stage a *tableau vivant* of a family in a frame that was reminiscent of Tadeusz Kantor’s work. I had had the image in my mind for a while and simply wanted to get it out of my system. This portrait ultimately melded with singing “It’s Daddy’s Birthday Yes It Is” at the top of act II. Similarly, I needed to work out a way to clear off the dining table from Act II and set it for breakfast for the top of Act III. I decided to stage a moment of recognition between the three siblings, prompted by Christian and Michael’s embrace at the end of Act II, scene 2. I am proud of these little scenes and I do believe that they accomplish their task within the play. But I feel that they weren’t completely what they needed to be, and that, had I started to explore these moments of breath in rehearsal with the actors, I would have had more information and material at my hands.

I should say the same about rehearsing the ending of a play. I rarely do any work on the last page until we are close to opening. I now realize that there are plays that work well with this approach, and others that do not. I didn’t want to work on it with *Festen*, and am glad I didn’t: the only thing that was ending on the stage was the family’s performance. They could finally return to a semblance of reality. Because this cast of characters had worked on their acting for a full evening, I did not want them to have to prepare for breakfast.

In my work, I often get lost in specific points of research that do not include the totality of the play. I then become excited about concept, and spend too little time focused on the action. At the end of my first semester at Columbia, one of the critiques that I received from Anne and Brian was that I needed to gain a better understanding of how to direct *actors*. They were right. They were also right that this very understanding can only really come with experience. *Festen* was an impeccable opportunity for me to keep working on developing this skill. The cast was made up of fourteen vastly different people of all ages and backgrounds. I had previously worked with four of them. When we started casting, my main fear was directing older actors. I felt that I had no right or credentials. My second fear was directing a child. How was I going to protect the actress from the themes of the play? Would I have to choreograph her, or would she make choices? How could I create the space that she would need to make choices?

We cast Savvy Crawford in the role of The Child, and started by meeting her mother, to whom I made a promise to shield her daughter from the complete story. My idea, I told her, was to create a new play for Savvy, that she would perform *around* the company acting in *Festen*. The reasoning behind this stemmed from the Child's ethereal quality: she seems to live between the world of the living and that of the dead. She is at times the daughter of Michael and Mette, at others the specter of Linda, and perhaps even the potential risk of this pattern of abuse travelling down to future generations. I originally wanted to emphasize the ghost-like quality in her character, and thought it would be interesting if she was removed from the action of the play altogether. It would also be easier for me to direct her and schedule her rehearsals. During the December rehearsals we saw Savvy twice. I organized a first rehearsal of company-building games to develop a kinship between Michael, Mette,

and their little girl. Our second rehearsal with Savvy was for a stumble-through of Act II, and taught us a lot about Grandfather's perverse character.

I decided that I wanted to give the Little Girl an action that would take the entire play to accomplish, and that would establish her relationship to Linda. Because Savvy loved to draw, my first impulse was to supply her with a canvas and paint supplies. The Little Girl would have to set up her entire station, grab her paint and brushes, and start drawing. Her back would be to the audience such that we would never see what she is painting. Savvy and Linda both loved flowers, so that is what the Little Girl would paint. The play would end with the Little Girl alone on stage, having finished her drawing. With her back to the audience, she would stand and look at her art, still not divulging it to the audience. Satisfied with her work, she would loudly close her canvas book, walk off the stage, and the play would be over. All of the decisions had been made; all I had to do was to get back to rehearsals in January and teach her the choreography.

Fortunately for the production, Savvy is a smart, stubborn little girl who very bluntly found my idea "boring". She was entirely right: more than anything else, my idea for her character had come out of my fear to actually work with her. We tried having her paint and quickly moved on. We then decided that she would build a small doll's house and explore the construction of a home. That, too, seemed at once too obvious and far-fetched. And it certainly did not add anything to the meaning of the play. I finally gave into my fear and realized that, regardless of her age, the actress was committed to the part and wanted to rid herself of distractions and simply act out the character's story. I decided to give her a seat at the dinner table, and let Savvy establish her own relationships with the cast. Organically, she began to understand the various dynamics of the play. The actress was still left in the dark about the cause of

the strained relationship between Christian and Helge, and so she still appeared removed from the action even though she was now an integral part of it, which is what I had originally set out to achieve. Looking back, I would have loved to incorporate Savvy into the early rehearsals and learn more from her. It took me too long to move beyond my fear of directing such a young actor.

On the other side of the spectrum were the more seasoned actors that I felt intimidated by. Thankfully, I quickly learned that working in our specific way demanded a lot of trust between the ensemble and myself. I think that the actors were excited (if at times overwhelmed) by the amount of freedom that I was giving them. The actor playing the Grandfather was originally quite dubious, having spent most of his career being blocked on stage, but truly flourished with this new space for experimentation. The actor playing Poul would need more guidance. The actress playing Else would need to be left alone for a part of the process. The various ages and levels of experience taught me to listen for the specific needs of each individual actor. Among the many learning experiences that *Festen* provided me with, the process of working with Alan Altschuler, the actor playing Helge, particularly challenged me to refine my words and direction for the creation of the character.

Alan did not come from an acting background but from the finance jungle that is Wall Street. Fifteen years prior to *Festen*, he had made a decision to quit his job and follow his passion for acting. The producers and I decided to cast Alan because he was physically perfect for the part. He was tall and anchored, menacing and inviting at the same time. Unfortunately, it was difficult for him to understand the various tactics with which the character could accomplish an action. And perhaps more importantly, he struggled with the creation of a 'birthday party mask', and played the



underbelly of his character too much, wearing the truth on his sleeve. Right up to the very end, it was a struggle for both of us to reach an understanding.

Nevertheless, I was incredibly lucky that Alan was a hard-working man who was truly looking to better his acting skills. And what's more, he trusted me. Regardless of what ended up on stage during our Connelly run, Alan and I worked hard together to both improve our respective skills. We very quickly voiced to each other that we were not communicating properly. I knew that I wasn't working in a way that helped him. I tried to be very precise with him, offering him a variety of active verbs to propulse him into action. We tried going out for coffee and talking out the psychology of the character. Although that broke our 'rules', it really helped Alan and I get on the same page. I pointed out to him that he did not have a good enough technique for learning his lines, and that they were not 'in his body', so to speak, so much as in his head, and what resulted was recitation. I am, strangely perhaps, most proud of the work that Alan and I accomplished together. I think that the process of rehearsing *Festen* made him a better actor. And that our collaborative effort to figure Helge out made me a better-equipped director of actors.

Similarly, my skills as a director were challenged with the role of Else. We had originally cast Mary McTigue in the part, but felt that she was not the right fit after a few rehearsals. The producers voiced their concern and we acted quickly. By the end of our first week of rehearsals we had a new Else lined up: Deborah Offner joined our cast for the last week of December. Deborah is a smart, talented actor who portrayed Else beautifully by focusing on her vanity and egocentrism that keep her from being an emotionally available mother. She immediately understood the tension between what was seen and what was veiled. I was very confident in her performance and knew that I needed to give her the necessary space for her character to blossom.

When we moved to the Connelly, Deborah started to become insecure and challenged my patience as she resisted my direction. Our main point of disagreement was about her reaction to Helene's reading of Linda's letter at the end of Act III, scene 2. I felt strongly that Else could not fissure her poised demeanor. It was still too early, and we needed to keep her (and Helge's) feelings hidden, in order to take us into our last scene.

The last scene of the play portrayed the defeat of the power couple. If, in Act II, scene 2, the audience could see so much as a tear rolling down Else's face, they would know that Helge was now alone and without allies. The audience would know that Helge was done before the play wanted it to. Right up until the dress rehearsal, Deborah indulged in a too-performative gesture of losing her balance when she heard Helene read, "Dad has started to take me again" (59), and I wanted that cut. I ultimately had to put my foot down and go against the actor's will, which I hated to do but truly believed is what was needed to serve the play.

Ultimately, these ups and downs trained me, perhaps more than with any other production that I've worked on up to this point, to further sharpen the intuition to discern what an actor needs to succeed in his or her creation of character. These fourteen actors needed completely different amounts of guidance, types of approach, and each entered the world of *Festen* through their own door. I do think that a strength of our process was to allow every actor to *look* for their own way in. Negotiating my role with them individually was perhaps the most challenging and rewarding aspect of directing *Festen*.

## Conclusion

### **To the Audience**

Thomas Vittenberg considered *Festen* to be an important story “not specifically because it dealt with incest but because it dealt with the secrets repressed inside a family”<sup>26</sup>. David Eldridge agreed, and felt that the ‘natural story’ of *Festen* would adapt very well for a live performance. The essence of the story and of its characters is in my mind what keeps *Festen* alive, both on the screen and on the stage. Christian’s attempt to infuse truth into his guarded family is very powerful. Eldridge, when asked why he felt it necessary to remount this story in the form of a play, simply answered that there could never be any reasons against sharing a poignant story over and over again. I very much agree with his statement: some stories are able to point to a little, essential flicker that exists and remains in people through time. Like him, I never thought much of the film while I was working on the play. In fact, I tried not to think about anything except our tight space and our complicated family. That is why I loved working on this production: its insularity, its compression.

That is the first and foremost responsibility that I felt I owed the audience. I have been using the word ‘portrait’ to describe the world that I wanted to offer to the audience. By this, I mean that I did not want to put characters on stage that had previously been judged for five weeks by a group of people. I wanted to show a true exploration that came out of curiosity, a passion for observation, a desire to better understand human behavior. These characters did not need to feel polished: the actors,

---

<sup>26</sup> Stevenson, Jack. *Dogme Uncut: Lars Von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, and the Gang That Took on Hollywood*. Santa Monica, Calif: Santa Monica, 2003. Print. 85.

the audience, and myself were all still looking at them, studying them, changing with them as we found out more information. This idea reflected our work on the play: through it, we learned that family can be made up of people who are strangers to each other, and to themselves. The characters themselves are acting throughout the evening, and so even the process of impersonating them was not enough to discover their true essence. Characters, like people, should be three-dimensional up to a point: we do not know everything there is to know about ourselves and our relationships with the outside world, and we largely perform through life.

The way that I tend to convey my vision of the world to the audience is by blowing up the individual moments of life that catch my eye. It is what I did all throughout my time at Columbia, and is, I hope, my first of many attempts at communicating with a public. With *Festen*, then, I wanted to exaggerate the performance of the characters and the atmosphere of hellish imprisonment. We aimed to achieve this through our angular, heavy set, through our long tables that imposed themselves onto their small playing space, through our harsh lighting under which one could not hide, and through the negotiation between the repressed truths that the actors needed to keep bottled in, in favor of a ‘still waters’, hyperbolized, calmness. The speed of the action, and the energy that was necessary to maintain appearances up until Else’s last line, all further contributed to this feeling of compression of time and space.

The boldening of the performative quality of this family gathering, and of the resulting tension, was perhaps my youthful cry to the audience for more *sincerity*. By the last scene of the play, the characters are closer to who they really are than they were the evening prior at dinner. The blackout cuts off the scene, in what I hope is not perceived as an impolite interruption, but rather as a respectful gesture of kindness to

the characters who have finally begun their journey towards becoming an intimate family.

In opposition to this heavy atmosphere, I wanted to establish distance between the stage and the audience (as much as the Connelly could accommodate). I have realized that I often want space between the stage and the audience, and I think that this points to a trend in my work: I like to cast the audience as a group of *voyeurs*. Traditionnally used, the term indicates a sexual interest in spying on people engaging in intimate activities. The idea of intimacy as a source of arousal for a third party is amusing to me, and is not too far from the way I personally engage in theater as an audience member. I like to sit in the audience and think of everything that I am *not* seeing, imagining rehearsals, relationships between actors, debates on technical and staging decisions. I like watching how the audience comes into the space, who people came with, and how they react to what they see. The directing program at Columbia has taught me to look at the world with rigor and passionate curiosity. This is how I want an audience to come into a theater. My job as the director, then, is to make everything in that space *deliberate*.

*Festen* is an extraordinary production for an audience to secretly peek into, which is why I worked on creating a “peeping Lars” on stage, hoping for the audience to engage in a similar voyeuristic way. Sprinkled in the form of short moments in our production, one could have found other characters seeking some form of satisfaction out of intent observation: for instance, an inebriated Grandfather excitedly watching his even drunker grandson Michael feverishly kissing Mette in Act III, scene 2.

Ultimately, I hoped for the audience to join us in approaching this story (and perhaps theater) through, and as, voyeurism.

As I continue to explore and investigate human behavior, I hope that I will never stop refining my search for specificity of action and depth of character, and that I will keep playing with my attempts to communicate my findings to an audience. I think that one of my goals as a director is to teach the audience what my time at Columbia has taught me: to never feign presence, and always be open to receive information, from both outside and within.

## Production Stills

Credit: Carol Rosegg



Transition into Act II.



Transition into Act II.





The conga line, Act II.



Christian's speech, Act II.



Else's speech, Act II.



Grandfather and the Child, Act II.



Grandfather's anecdote, Act II.



Helge and Christian, Act II, scene 2.



Michael, Christian, and Helene, transition into Act III, scene 3.

## Bibliography

- Alfreds, Mike. *Different Every Night: Freeing the Actor*. London: Nick Hern, 2007. Print.
- Billington, Michael. "Festen." *Theguardian.com*. The Guardian, 26 Mar. 2006. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.
- Brantley, Ben. "Haunting Memories of Daddy Dearest in 'Festen'" *The New York Times*. Nytimes.com, 10 Apr. 2006. Web. 14 Mar. 2015.
- Cavendish, Dominic. "David Eldridge on Festen." *Theatervoice.com*. Theater Voice, 8 Apr. 2004. Web. 13 Mar. 2015.
- Christensen, Claus. "Der Var Engang En Fest." *Filmmagasinet Ekko*. Ekkofilm.dk, 21 Oct. 2001. Web. 8 Mar. 2015.
- Donnellan, Declan. *The Actor and the Target*. St. Paul, MN: Theatre Communications Group, 2002. Print.
- Dumas, Didier. *L'Ange Et Le Fantome: Introduction a La Clinique De L'impense Genealogique*. Paris: Editions De Minuit, 1985. Print.
- Eldridge, David. *David Eldridge: Plays: Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness: Market Boy: The Knot of the Heart: The Stock Da'wa*. London: Methuen Drama, 2012. Print.
- Eldridge, David. *Thomas Vinterberg, Mogens Rukov and Bo Hr. Hansen's Festen*. London: Methuen, 2004. Print.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theater of the Absurd*. 1st ed. New York City: Random House, 2004. Print. Vintage Books.
- Festen*. Dir. Robert Woodruff. Theater of Cluj, 2011. DVD.
- Lecoq, Jacques, Jean-Gabriel Carasso, and Jean-Claude Lallias. *The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.

Lehrer, Jeremy. "Vittenberg Delves into "The Celebration"" *WebCite Query Result*.

IndieWire, 14 Oct. 1998. Web. 8 Mar. 2015.

Peduzzi, Richard. *La-bas, C'est Dehors*. Paris: Actes Sud, 2014. Print.

Pouilloux, Jean-Yves, Françoise Argod-Dutard, Gabriel Conesa, and Franck Neveu.

*Essais. Montaigne*. Paris: A. Colin, 2002. Print.

Racamier, Paul-Claude. *L'inceste Et L'incestuel*. Paris: Ed. Du Collège, 1995. Print.

Rooney, David. "Did the Critics Celebrate Festen on Broadway?" *Broadway.com*.

Broadway.com, 10 Apr. 2006. Web. 14 Mar. 2015.

Rukov, Morgens. "Adventures of a Productive Idiot." *Theguardian.com*. The

Guardian, 26 Oct. 2002. Web. 8 Mar. 2015.

Stevenson, Jack. *Dogme Uncut: Lars Von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, and the Gang*

*That Took on Hollywood*. Santa Monica, Calif: Santa Monica, 2003. Print.

Stout, Katharine. *Contemporary Drawing: From the 1960s to Now*. N.p.: n.p., n.d.

Print.

Tisseron, Serge. *Secrets De Famille: Mode D'emploi*. Paris: Ramsay, 1996. Print.

## Acknowledgments

Anne Bogart, Brian Kulick, Gregory Mosher, Andrei Serban, David Diamond, Maridee Slater, Chris Murrah, Dara Malina, Peter Petkovsek, Juan Pablo Felix.

This program has taught me how to observe and participate in the world that surrounds me.

The cast of *Festen*: Sophie Labelle, Nico Kiefer, Matthew Whitfield, Savvy Crawford, Vanness Vache, Gary Lawson, Peter Romano, Seth Reich, Lauren Cipoletti, Alan Altschuler, Mary McTigue, Deborah Offner, Josh Frank, Steve Fogelman.

The creative and technical team of *Festen*: Elizabeth Goodman, Elaine Carberry, Mike McGee, Derek Miller, Alayna Graziani, Paige Carter, Weizhe Ke, Torrey Wigfield, Scott Mancha, Tom Gilmore, Joe Novak, Adrienne Jackson, Ebony Burton, Robin Erikson, Palina Jonsdottir, Emily Murphy, Stephen Foglia, Max Sterling.

My family, who teaches and challenges me in communication every day.