

When Dogme's for dinner, the fare is gamy

FESTEN

Written by David Eldridge
Directed by Jason Byrne
Starring Eric Peterson
and Nicholas Campbell
A Company Theatre production
At Berkeley Street Theatre
in Toronto
★★★½

BY J. KELLY NESTRUCK

Muscular theatre has smashed back into Toronto with this unsettling and darkly funny production of David Eldridge's *Festen*. Director Jason Byrne has created a risk-tinged night at the theatre that's as peaceful and comforting as riding a motorcycle through a minefield. Klingelfeldt family patriarch Helge (Eric Peterson) has gathered his family and close friends to celebrate his 60th birthday, and Byrne has assembled the finest ensemble the city has seen since last year's Studio 180 hit, *Stuff Happens*, to portray them.

The core family members are Helge's successful, but mentally unstable son Christian (Philip Riccio); his estranged, loose-cannon son Michael (Allan Hawco); his daughter Helene (Tara Rosling), "the eccentric one"; and his devoted wife Elsa (a poised and passive-aggressive Rosemary Dunsmore).

Despite the recent suicide of Christian's twin sister Linda, Helge and Elsa are determined to host a normal birthday party – which in this upper-class household means strange games, rituals and songs lubricated by gallons of red wine and cognac.

But Christian has a family secret he needs finally to unleash. His soup-course revelation isn't surprising – there are only so many dark family secrets one can have – but the reaction



Eric Peterson in *Festen*.
GUNTAR KRAVIS

onstage violence hits and you're left feeling unprotected and vulnerable as if it could spill over into your seat at any moment.

The cast chomp into their roles with relish, mustard, ketchup and onions – they give all-dressed, hot-dog performances. As Michael, Allan Hawco, who is co-artistic director of The Company Theatre with Riccio, stalks the stage, edgy and intense, like a bomb with a sizzling fuse. He's gleefully demented when off in the corner copulating with his equally mad wife (Caroline Cave), then furious and frightening in his final faceoff with his father.

Meanwhile, Peterson, whom we're used to seeing in earnest crusader or addled codger roles, takes a soft approach to the manipulative Helge, his natural Prairie charm here just a mask for a monster.

Smaller roles are equally well handled: Nicholas Campbell, the other TV refugee in the production, squeezes every drop of bleak humour out of depressive family friend Paul

is: The family is mostly embarrassed he's made a scene with company over. Couldn't Christian have saved his just deserts until dessert?

As the horror of what Christian has said gradually seeps in, however, it's like watching an earthquake hit a building in slow motion.

Adapted from Thomas Vinterberg's 1998 Dogme film *The Celebration*, *Festen* was a hit in London and a miss on Broadway in stylized productions directed by Rufus Norris. In contrast, Byrne – the Irish director who also helmed The Company Theatre's acclaimed debut, *A Whistle in the Dark* – seems to have taken a theatrical version of the Dogme movement's stripped-down cinematic "vow of chastity," in which directors pledged to shoot films on location using natural light and handheld cameras.

In a similarly stripped-down aesthetic, Byrne puts *Festen* on a bare stage containing only a bed, a bath, a table and, in a nod to the play's filmic origins, towering floodlights; he has the characters use the theatre's actual doors, including ones leading to the lobby and the snowy street.

Christian is already pacing the stage when the audience arrives, and at the end, the cast unceremoniously moves into their bow positions.

The house lights stay up the whole time. That last decision is initially distracting, but eventually pays off when the

while Gary Reineke is a hoot as the brain-dead grandfather.

And on the servant side of the household, Gray Powell makes a strong impression as the chef Kim, as does recent George Brown Theatre School grad Alex Paxton-Beesley as the sympathetic and sultry Pia.

A pair of the main roles are more problematic: As the damaged Christian, Riccio wanders around in his own protective bubble until he lets his raw emotion burst out. But he retreats to a safe place once more at the end, distancing himself from the emotional conclusion. And Rosling never quite gets a firm grip on Helene; her moments of high emotion seem more calculated than the others – she smashes plates as if it were her job.

The script has its stumbles as well. The servants and the one character of colour are all saintly and act as Christian's guardian angels; there's a sort of reverse classism and racism at play here. (No reverse sexism, however; the women all get delicious moments of wickedness.) But Byrne's exciting production just speeds right over these potholes.

Blood is smeared, bodies are violently manhandled and dinner is ruined. Individual lines may get muffled, mumbled and mangled in the chaos, but it's a masterful mess with all the thrills of a punk-rock concert.

» *Festen* continues until Dec. 13 at Berkeley Street Theatre (www.companytheatre.ca/ or 416-368-3110).

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

★★★★ (out of four)

By J. Kelly Nestruck

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