

Digging into Dogme

Stage adaptation of Danish film challenges actors to stay on their toes

By Jon Kaplan

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With cake, toasts and celebration, birthday parties are happy events, right?

Not in David Eldridge's *Festen*, in which a dysfunctional group honours the 60th birthday of the family patriarch. When long-buried secrets are revealed and generational as well as sibling antagonisms surface, the day turns into a mini Greek drama.

If the title and synopsis sound familiar, you might have seen the 1998 Danish film (called, in English, *The Celebration*), the first effort of the Dogme collective, whose mandate is to return filmmaking to its basics, without special effects or post-production gimmicks.

Eldridge's stage adaptation aims for the same simplicity of narrative and reliance on the performers' skills, reasons that the Company Theatre's co-artistic directors, Allan Hawco and Philip Riccio, chose to present it. They play Michael and Christian, the sons of successful hotelier Helge.

"Theatre is a performer's medium," reflects Riccio on a rehearsal break. "Without great performances and strong energy between the actors, a stage work can neither entertain nor have meaning. Allan and I want to do ensemble pieces and provide an intimate experience for the artists and audience.

"*Festen* has just the right ingredients that we ourselves want to see when we go to the theatre." They've invited back director Jason Byrne, who guided the company's superb inaugural production, *A Whistle In The Dark*, and recruited some of Toronto's finest actors – including Eric Peterson, Rosemary Dunsmore, Caroline Cave and Tara Rosling – to join them onstage.

One new face for most viewers is Alex Paxton-Beesley, who plays the maid Pia, involved with Christian on several levels. The recent grad from George Brown Theatre was a standout in last year's school productions, where her work included the title character in *The Madwoman Of Chaillot* (directed by Byrne) and the pert maid Foible in *The Way Of The World*.

How does Pia fit into *Festen*'s domestic drama?

"She has a closeness to the family," offers Paxton-Beesley, "with an emotional connection to them even though she's absolutely a servant. My job is to marry those two ideas: that she has lower status than anyone else onstage but that she still can say what she wants to Christian and have a relationship with him.

"In an odd way, she feels like part of the family and knows that while she's in a lesser role in the household, she'd be missed if she left. Pia seems a bit like an unwanted stepchild."

From Riccio's viewpoint, Pia's link to Christian develops over time.

"At first, he's not in a space to be close to anyone, and his revelatory speech at the birthday dinner explains why," says Riccio. "Over the course of the play, he's able to see the potential for a connection with Pia, but that relationship only just begins at the end of the action."

That action, contained in time and space to a day in the family home, again suggests a classical Greek tragedy. Yet at times the script, like the movie, is darkly comic in its portrayal of family relationships.

Has either actor seen the film version?

Paxton-Beesley looked at it a year ago, as homework to prepare her audition.

Riccio hasn't, though he respects the Dogme style. He sees parallels between the purity of the film collective's intentions and the purity of performance the Company Theatre aims for.

"Jason's encouraging us to work with a fixed text and yet keep the performance alive, engaging the audience in what's happening in front of them. It's old-fashioned to think that acting is about tricks or even craft. We're pushed to follow our instincts and not to 'act.'"

But is he tempted to see the film?

"No," Riccio smiles, "there's no reason to watch the movie. That would mean the screen actor would influence some of my acting choices. Only bad could come from that."