

Reason to celebrate

Festen is one film-to-stage adaptation that works brilliantly

★★★★★ (out of five)

One needn't embrace the whole notion of making plays out of movies (or vice versa) to recognize that, while each medium remains unique, after years of cross-fertilization there remain things to be learned.

Case in point: David Eldridge's stage dramatization of the Danish film *Festen*, the first film created in the wake of *Dogme95*, the celebrated minimalist manifesto from Lars von Trier and director Thomas Vinterberg (who shares a writing credit with Mogens Rukov and Bo hr. Hansen).

A family drama set around a birthday party -- the title is Danish for "celebration" -- *Festen* opened in its Canadian premiere at the Canadian Stage Berkeley Street Theatre Thursday, a production of The Company Theatre.

Yes, it throws out many of *Dogme's* attempts to extract art from artifice; not only is stage lighting in use, it figures prominently in the minimal set dressing, all of which is in contravention of *Dogme* principles. But *Festen* embraces others, sometimes with telling effect.

Primary among these would be the use of the space more or less as it exists, allowing the action to unfold on a stage, rather than on a set. That means the bed, the dining room suite and the bathroom fixtures scattered across an otherwise largely bare set create only loosely structured areas, allowing the play -- set in the confines of what is apparently a sprawling one-time hotel -- to unfold throughout the space available. By refusing to define the space, the creative team manages to, counter-intuitively perhaps, increase it proportionately.

That one-time hotel is now home to tycoon Helge Kligenfeldt (Eric Peterson) and his wife Elsa (Rosemary Dunsmore). Despite the fact their eldest daughter has only recently killed herself, the rest of the couple's surviving children, joined by a host of relatives and hangers-on, have gathered to celebrate Helge's 60th birthday in what is traditional Danish style -- which apparently involves much imbibing and a whole lot of singing.

But when Christian, the couple's eldest son (beautifully played by Philip Ricci), rises to propose the first toast to his father's health, it turns out he's singing from a totally different songbook than the other celebrants.

By John Coulbourn

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Christian's childhood recollections shock some guests and enrage others, but in the style of dysfunctional families the world over, the Kligenfeldt clan simply soldiers on, clearly steeped in a tradition of dealing with problems by pretending they never happened.

With Allan Hawco and Tara Rosling playing Christian's troubled siblings and Gary Reineke as their delightfully demented grandfather, the party is rounded out by a cast of characters played by Caroline Cave, Richard Clarkin, Nicholas Campbell, Isabella Lobo and Milton Barnes, while Alex Paxton-Beesley, Gray Powell and Earl Pastko play the servants' roles.

It's an impressive cast doing almost universally impressive work. Director Jason Byrne combines them with elements of the *Dogme* tradition, quite often to great effect: a scene set in several bedrooms but played out around a single bed is particularly memorable, echoing as it does elements of *LePage's* brilliance. In a more or less constant refusal to define their space, designer John Thompson and Byrne conspire to turn the whole theatre and its surroundings not only into the sprawling Kligenfeldt home, but to fill it with the sprawl of hidden familial horror as well.

In fairness, other elements of the *Dogme* tradition do not translate nearly so well to the stage, not the least of which is a certain carelessness with dialogue, exacerbated here by acoustics that would no doubt be better served by a more traditional set.

With an audience hanging on every word, too many of those words seem to float carelessly into the nether reaches of the theatre without falling on an audience's ear.

Still, those are problems that, likely as not, will disappear in the playing -- and happily, Byrne draws such superb performances from the seemingly fearless Peterson and the rest of this magnificent cast that those swallowed lines, frustrating as they may be, are easy to forgive.

In the process, Byrne offers powerful proof theatre can still learn a thing or two from its upstart siblings in the movie world. *Festen* may not be pure *Dogme* brought to the stage, but informed as it is by the *Dogme* tradition, it certainly puts a compelling new wrinkle into the theatrical tradition.