



By Laura Bernieri

Festen Will Lyman's Celebration Play at Rhode Island's Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre Opens January 12th in the New Year

Why does anyone go to the theater in the middle of a harsh New England winter? Because we crave community, the warmth of the herd, and are willing to plan an evening around a powerful new play. The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre in Pawtucket, Rhode Island mounts the regional premiere of *Festen* from January 12 - Feb 12 in the New Year and this evening out is guaranteed to deliver a Greek scale catharsis. Adapted for the stage from Thomas Vinterberg's 1998 film, re-titled for the U.S. release as *THE CELEBRATION*, the drama involves a family secret that the London Times called, "Electrifying, shocking and profound."

It was apparently a hard slog convincing the Danish auteur to allow young British playwright David Eldridge to adapt his script to a play – the process usually being the other way around. But shot under the rules of *DOGME 95*, Vinterberg and Lars Von Trier's mandate to make films stripped of Hollywood artifice, using a handheld camera on location with natural light, the *Dogme* rules worked beautifully to give a cinema verite feel, as if you are a guest recording the events with your camcorder. *THE CELEBRATION* took its place in the canon, changing the way independents viewed their storytelling ability, how they used the new technology and budget limitations to their advantage.

Enter the play: As Gamm Artistic Director Tony Estrella attests, "You have to go after the story from a different perspective, using a



(top to bottom) Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre graphic.

FESTEN movie poster.

Will Lyman.

"They're teachers as well as builders. It's not your typical blue collar setup. Many of them have come out with music degrees from places like Rochester and the New England Conservatory, and have gone into organ building based on an initial idea about a musical career."

"It's a very highbrow group of craftsmen. They operate like the old guilds. If somebody new comes into the company, they're on a five-year probation. After five years, they'll decide if they fit with the company or not. It's really almost a medieval system."

In order to tell the story of the Fisk organization, Dennis Lanson turned to another organization, Verissima Productions, a Somerville, MA company specializing in historical documentaries. Pam Pacelli Cooper and her husband Rob Cooper founded the company twelve years ago. Pam does the historical research, archiving and interviewing; Rob does shooting and editing.

Pam has much experience in research for historical documentaries, but, as was the case with Dennis and Rob, the making of pipe organs was a subject she knew little about. Learning about C.B. Fisk, and how they did their business, was something of a revelation to her.

"(I learned about) the collaborative way in which people work together to build a pipe organ. It's as if you brought together a group of people who worked together a thousand

years ago right into the 21st Century. The basic process is the same. People are voicing it one pipe at a time.

"I feel sometimes that when I go into the Fisk shop that I'm walking back in time—that I might see some of the same characters I saw working on an organ in a cathedral during the time of Bach. It's really quite wonderful.

"The other thing that jumped out at me was the fascinating people who choose to do this. Most of them are multi-talented; it's an international group. Most of them have a strong musical sense, and a strong engineering sense. That's a unique combination.

"(They have) the fascination of building something to perfection. Also, with this kind of organ, there's a direct connection between the player, and the sound that comes out of the pipes, in a way that there isn't with an electric instrument."

Different, too, were the methods used to build this and the other Fisk organs.

"We have some video of the people actually smelting the metal that makes the pipes. (They) make sure that they get exactly the right combination of metals to make the tone in the pipe correct. Then, someone will be carving an intricate model of the organ that is to be built. So, you have these scale models with a working clock! It's astounding; it really is."

Making a film about people who will go to any

different language. Find rough equivalents given the limited space. But it's that immediacy that gives the live stage experience its power. For example, in the film there's a sequence that occurs in 3 separate bedrooms of the home. In the play, those scenes all occur on the same set. We found a way to 'jump-cut' by placing them on top of each other. Such close proximity increases their intensity."

If you've seen *THE CELEBRATION*, you know what Estrella refers to – but no spoilers here! Wait to see the film until after you see the play in the Gamm's cozy 137 seat theater. Estrella directs *Festen* after closing *Hamlet*, in which he played the title role to rave reviews, a modern tragedy four centuries after Shakespeare's classic Danish tale of woe.

Helge, the patriarch, assembles his family for the celebration of his 60th birthday. Played by the great Will Lyman in his Gamm debut, Helge "seems to hinge on the idea that his children owe him," says Lyman, quipping, "I consider that to be a major mistake in the area of parenthood." With no provocation, Lyman offers to show a picture of his latest production, his grandson.

"It's a new group of actors for me. Very exciting," Lyman says of the Gamm cast. No matter how much preparation he may do, he's enthused to make discoveries in rehearsals with Tony, whose father he played in Joyce Van Dyke's *Love In The Gulf*.

length to get just the right sound raises the question of what the filmmakers will do to get exactly the right look.

"It's almost impossible for us not to have an elegant shot on the screen," explains Rob Cooper. "The process of making the instrument is just so physically stunning. We're getting absolutely gorgeous images of pipes being smelted, then the pipes become gilded, then there's the wood chips.

"Then, there's the whole musical aesthetic, when the instrument is played. There's the visual aspect of the pipes and so forth. It's hard to get a bad angle on the instrument. It's an unusual film in that it has a self-contained soundtrack. We're seeing pipes tested or voiced, or we're seeing someone actually performing. We've got a reservoir of organ music.

"We sort of developed our aesthetic of how we present life histories, which is our primary realm. In all the years that we've been doing this, I don't think I've ever had the opportunity to make a film about a group of individuals who are themselves so dedicated to their aesthetic. Our challenge is to try to equal that in the way we present their process, and to try to have our presentation be up to the level of what they're trying to accomplish."

A film celebrating craftspeople devoted to perfection in what they do would seem to demand skilled craftsmanship itself. Dennis Lanson attests that the man who filmed those at work at C.B. Fisk in such pursuits shares

As the 'all-knowing narrator for PBS staple *Frontline*, Lyman is lucky to have such a fascinating day job, one that enables him to live at home but also to roam the lofty network of New England theaters, taking on material that feeds the soul, if not the bank account.

"There are roles I missed," he muses, "that my career never encountered. Sometimes I wonder what would my *Hotspur* have looked like? But there's still a ton of great work to do. My career has followed a logical course; it makes sense to me as a journey, and I'm still enjoying it."

This is the aspect of live theater that compels us to wander out into the chill: If you miss a performance that belongs in the record books, you miss a *Redwood* falling in the New England forest. Don't miss out!

For more information visit www.gammtheatre.org or call 401 723-4266.

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their qualities.

"The guy who's been shooting for us is Austin DeBesche. He's really good. He shot John Sayles's first two features. He's known within the Boston filmmaking community for commercials, features and a variety of documentary works. He's a great hand-held cameraman."

At least one more scene from the film has yet to be shot: its first performance at Memorial Church on Easter Sunday, 2012. According to Dennis Lanson, several cameras will be on hand for this event.

Charles Fisk and Dennis Lanson, Rob Cooper and Pam Pacelli Cooper may be pursuing different areas of creativity, but all have their motivations. Dennis states his.

"Somebody once asked Charles Fisk why he bothered building organs. He replied, 'To hear the music better.' In the end, what interests me are people. (Although the organ is magnificent), what interests me are the various individuals who have come together to put this thing together. That's my main interest."

For more information about *The Opus 139 Project*, go to the websites www.tohearthemusic.com or www.der.org.

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