

THEATER

Fireworks aplenty in Gamm's Danish tragedy 'Festen'

A bookend to last fall's 'Hamlet' revival, adaptation of the Lars Von Trier film serves up more family dysfunction

By RICK MASSIMO JOURNAL POP MUSIC WRITER

Tony Estrella, the artistic director of the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, says that 'Festen,' the play that opens Monday at the Pawtucket company, serves as something of a bookend to last fall's revival of their production of 'Hamlet.'

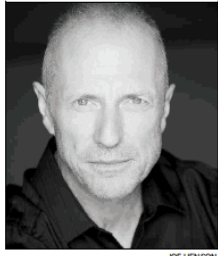
Estrella, who is directing 'Festen,' considers both plays 'Danish tragedies' that, while 400 years apart, share a lot of the same themes and many parallels — these tight-knit, upper-class families with secrets and ghosts and revenge and fathers and sons. 'Hamlet' fans will see 'some interesting resonances,' he adds.

The play is an adaptation by Englishman David Eldridge of the 1985 Lars Von Trier film of the same name (released in the States as 'The Celebration') in which the gathering of an extended family to celebrate the 60th birthday of their patriarch is interrupted when one of the sons reveals a

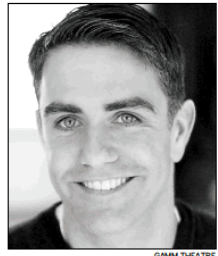
family secret that forces a series of sometimes-ugly confrontations. But at that point, Estrella says, the play is just getting warmed up. 'The first revelation we hear,' he says, 'would be the climax of any other play.' He adds that there are four or five more — 'this thing is relentless.' Formally, the play script is a little different from the film, but not much, Estrella says. Most of the play is set around a dinner table, and there's an embodiment of a long-dead sister, but otherwise 'the story is pretty much there.'

The film 'Festen' was the first film released under the aegis of the Dogme 95 doctrine of ruthless naturalism — hand-held cameras only; location shoots only; no added light or sound; not even any props that aren't already at the location anyway. Theater can't work this way, but Estrella says this version of 'Festen' takes what the art form gives it.

'What the play does that the film does not do is what Eldridge did magnificently, was embrace theatrical convention to reach the same kind of power the film does, employing things that only the theater can do.... We could set ourselves apart



JOE HENSON



GAMM THEATRE

Will Lyman, left, plays Helge, the patriarch of a Danish family rocked by the revelation of a dark secret by eldest son Christian, played by Steve Kidd, right, in 'Festen,' at the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre in Pawtucket.

from cinema and TV, and not fight the fight with naturalism that we can't win against those guys.' He cites a scene from the film that cuts quickly between three conversations in many rooms. Here, it all happens in one bedroom, with conversations overlapping between pairs of people unaware that the other exchanges are happening. It's perhaps paradoxical that a film can be more naturalistic than a play, with real actors standing a few feet from the audience, but Estrella says the 'ism' part of naturalism makes a big difference, and that the

definition of the word has expanded over the decades. 'When you go to theatrical school, you learn a lot of words that end in '-ism.' ... I don't consider myself any kind of -ism now. [And] I think our audience is sophisticated enough to get it all.'

Boston actor Will Lyman plays the father, and Estrella says they first met years ago when they both worked at the Boston Playwrights Theatre. He's been trying to

get the actor down to the Gamm for years, and this was 'just a matter of the right thing at the right time.' When Estrella decided to do 'Festen' and began thinking of casting the patriarch, he 'couldn't really think of anyone better,' and 'crossed my fingers and took a shot.... He liked the play so much.'

He hopes that the casting will play into the Gamm's growing reputation in the Boston area, resulting in more fans willing to take the trip down to Pawtucket. In the end, while 'Hamlet' and 'Festen' have the Danish pedigree and the family drama in common, when Estrella put the two plays back-to-back he was shooting

for an update of the tradition of tragedy. 'We think of it in these classical terms... [but] how does it translate to modern storytelling?' He cites 'Death of a Salesman' as an early example of the attempt to take the themes of tragedy and place them in everyday life, rather than 'this idea that it's about people we see as above us. This is an upper-class family, but they're still well within our world.'

There's 'a finality' to tragedies such as 'Hamlet' — 'not only has the ruling family been destroyed, but they've lost the country' — but Estrella says 'the slate is not wiped clean in 'Festen.' There is a transformation, but something endures, and there's the human capacity for endurance in spite of great suffering.... We see [tragedies] as melodramas, and we want the bad guys to pay and the victims to have a new life. And that's not how life works.'

And while that may not make 'Festen' a singing-and-dancing celebration, Estrella is confident that it'll result in 'a pretty uniquely powerful evening.'

'Festen' begins previews on Thursday night, opens Monday night and runs through Feb. 12 at the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, 172 Exchange St., Pawtucket. Call (401) 723-4266 or go to gammtheatre.org for tickets and more information.

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MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., HOLIDAY WEEK OF MONDAY, JANUARY 16, 2012. Holiday Week - Trash Pick Up One Day Later. Monday pickup will be Tuesday, Tuesday pickup will be Wednesday, Wednesday pickup will be Thursday, Thursday pickup will be Friday, Friday pickup will be Saturday.

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THEATER OPENING. 'Festen,' Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, 172 Exchange St., Pawtucket, 723-4266; gammtheatre.org. 'The Godfather Murders,' Murder On Us Dinner Theater, Bravo Brasserie, 123 Empire St., Providence, 465-0820; murderonus.com. 'The Godfather' and 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,' Sat 8 pm \$42 includes dinner/show/tax/Tip. Closes Feb. 25.

Greenberg's passionate and patriotic look at 'The Great American Pastime' sneaks a peek into that most exclusive of boys' clubs: the locker room of a major league baseball team. Previews Fri-Sat 8 pm, Sun 3 pm, \$15. 'Urbetown, The Musical,' Beacon Theatre Workshop, 300 Main St., Woonsocket, 671-6811, ext. 150; beaconart.org. Musical comedy is a tale of greed, corruption, love, and revolution in a time when water is worth its weight in gold. Thu-Sat 7 pm, Sun 2 pm, Thu (pay-what-you-can), \$10, seniors \$8, students \$5. Closes Sun.

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