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Efter Festen (After The Celebration): A Review

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Abstract

This 2002 feature is a masterpiece of our genre. On one level, the story examines how a young man called Allan told on Danish radio how he confronted his father at his 60th birthday celebration with the devastating fact that the father had abused him and his twin sister as children. But Allan's story is also the subject of the successful Danish film *The Celebration* by Thomas Vinterberg, part of the Dogma Film Group founded by Lars von Trier. The feature's title, *Efter Festen*, (*After the Celebration*) is ambiguous in Danish, the Danish word 'efter' being translatable as either 'after' or 'based on'. So knowing that *The Celebration* is the title of the fictional film, emphasises the referential and literary quality of the material being treated. What is narrative and what is reality?

Lisbeth Jessen spent almost two years looking for the 'real Allan'. But the most interesting aspect of this fascinating multi-layered story is how Lisbeth tells the story – the dramaturgy. Even if Lisbeth- the- author sometimes knows more than both Lisbeth-the-journalist and Lisbeth- the-narrator, she nevertheless structures the feature very cleverly so as to let us in on her thoughts on the events. Lisbeth Jessen produces this as a classic three-act drama, an intimate piece of theatre with just four protagonists: Allan, Thomas Vinterberg, Kjeld Koplev (the radio presenter) and herself as the journalist with a quest but also as the reflecting narrator, (talking to the audience). It is this concentration on the essential that makes this feature so strong and impressive. As a narrator she is in search of truth, but as an author she believes in the power of narrative. This story is about family secrets, about a childhood trauma and its psychological effects. She believes every narrative follows its own logic and most of all - it is already an interpretation of reality. It ends as it began, with Allan's story, which leaves many questions unanswered, and which holds a mirror up to us.

AUDIO (in Danish) [here](#): starts at 2.26.

SCRIPT (English) [here](#):

Keywords

radio documentary, audio feature, child abuse, Dogma, dramaturgy

Efter Festen: After the Celebration

Author: Lisbeth Jessen, Sound engineer: Ulla Kristensen

For Danmarks Radio 2002.

Duration: 47'06"

[AUDIO](http://bit.ly/1OvQoDs): <http://bit.ly/1OvQoDs>

[ENGLISH SCRIPT](http://bit.ly/1GaFFiE): <http://bit.ly/1GaFFiE>

Reviewer: Leslie Rosin

We, as feature-makers, know that finding a good topic is often more down to chance than to planning. Sometimes you cannot look for it, sometimes it comes to you. You just have to keep your eyes and ears open. In Lisbeth Jessen's case, she was listening to a radio program that started the ball rolling in more ways than one.

Lisbeth is well known in the international radio documentary and feature community. She used to work for the Feature department in Danish Radio and for 10 years was a coach for the European Broadcast Union's Master School. Her productions have won several prizes, and *After the Celebration* is her most famous feature; it's her signature piece. The feature was produced in 2002 and justifiably won the *Prix Italia* a year later. In 2004 the WDR (West German Broadcasting Service) adapted the feature for the German audience.

Unfortunately, no English version exists (apart of course from the English script, which serves as subtitling), which is why I would like to bring this great feature to the attention of a wider international audience.

For me this feature is a perfect example of what radio documentary can do. It is a masterpiece of our genre. Even today Lisbeth Jessen is still asked to present the making of *After the Celebration*, and indeed the story behind is almost as interesting and exciting as the feature itself.

While in her kitchen preparing food Lisbeth heard a radio interview in which the Danish presenter Kjeld Koplev was talking to a young man called Allan, who had been sexually abused as a child. Koplev's intention was to show that not only girls but also boys could be victims of sexual abuse. He had contacted a charity organisation to find a suitable 'protagonist' for his show. In front of the microphone Allan told his life story - how he had confronted his father at his 60th birthday celebration with the devastating fact that the father had abused him and his twin sister, Pernille, as children.

Does this story sound familiar to you? To Lisbeth it did. Apparently this radio program was broadcast a few months after the successful Danish film *The Celebration* by Thomas Vinterberg, part of the Dogma Film Group founded by Lars von Trier, was released.

Lisbeth Jessen had just seen *The Celebration* and while listening to the radio she suddenly stopped cooking, struck by the thought that this young man was telling almost exactly the same story as in the film. How could that possibly be? Was he making it up or just taking the audience for a ride? The presenter didn't seem puzzled at all and at the end of the show Lisbeth Jessen realized she had been listening to a repetition. It was this niggling doubt about his story, the fact of being so strangely intrigued as to what she could believe and what not, that got her hooked on the story and triggered Lisbeth's search for Allan. Indeed

this doubt was to stay with her for most of her research until the very last interview.

Even the title shows this ambivalence, hinting at a further story to be revealed beyond the actual event in question. This title, *Efter festen (After the Celebration)* is ambiguous in Danish, the Danish word 'efter' being translatable as either 'after' or 'based on'. So knowing that *The Celebration* is the title of the fictional film by Thomas Vinterberg, emphasises the referential and literary quality of the material being treated. What is narrative and what is reality?

Quite a few journalists researched this story, presuming it to be true, but no one found Allan or any clues as to his life, and finally it was assumed that there must have been an actor in the studio playing the role of Allan: no 'real Allan' seemed to exist. It didn't make the author's life any easier.¹

Lisbeth Jessen spent almost two years looking for the 'real Allan' and only found him through long-term research. He had moved from Copenhagen shortly after the interview and nobody seemed to have contact with him. People even assumed he was dead, because he had been suffering from HIV.

Allan told Lisbeth that he hadn't seen the Thomas Vinterberg film that had been inspired by his live story, so Lisbeth decided to visit him and show him the film.

¹ European feature makers refer to themselves as 'authors', not producers.

Although there is a narrative text in this feature which recounts the main steps in the hunt for evidence, almost all the encounters are presented like scenes in a play.

The listeners are there when Lisbeth meets Allan or Thomas Vinterberg or both of them. She has us participate in the action, and makes the narrator the inner voice of her alter ego. While visiting Allan in his lonesome place in the countryside of south Denmark, the inner voice of the female narrator reveals her uncertainty about Allan's story.

But the most interesting aspect of this fascinating multi-layered story is how Lisbeth tells the story – the dramaturgy. Even if Lisbeth-the-author sometimes knows more than both Lisbeth-the-journalist and Lisbeth-the-narrator, she nevertheless structures the feature very cleverly so as to let us in on her thoughts on the events. The first doubts about Allan's story surface very subtly, and only after the feature has been running for twelve minutes.

Extract:

Allan: There was my twin-sister, who is called Pernille, and then there was ... I had a sister, who was a little younger. And then about a year later we had the climax. And, well, it was always pleasant ehh., and we were a real family, even though we were only half-sisters and brothers ..eh with the two youngest, and though it was not our real father... eh then it went rather well ... until .. well until we were about eight-ten years old or there about, ehh.. when he started ... abusing us. I think it is hard...

Lisbeth: (from the background) ... to tell..

Allan: Well, no but it is because...

Lisbeth: I think you are doing OK.

Allan: Well, it is because it annoys me, you know, suddenly:
Was I eight or was I ten, I mean....

Lisbeth: ...eh. OK forget it, but ...

Allan: But it is also because I haven't heard Koplev's...

Lisbeth: No, ...no... no...

Narrator: I am a bit surprised that Allan just doesn't tell about his
childhood as it was, but refers to what he once told in
Koplev's Lounge.

The doubt raised is just a niggling one, with hardly any bearing on the development, and the listener is tempted to ignore it. We are entirely back again with Allan and his story, believing him just as we believe other real people. And yet the undercurrent of doubt remains.

Other people also believe Allan - Thomas Vinterberg, the filmmaker, as well as Kjeld Koplev, the radio presenter. For this reason, Lisbeth Jessen produces this as a classic three-act drama, an intimate piece of theatre with just four protagonists: Allan, Thomas Vinterberg, Kjeld Koplev and herself as the journalist with a quest but also as the reflecting narrator, talking to the audience. It is this concentration on the essential that makes this feature so strong and impressive. And this, indeed, with an apparent lightness of touch which conceals the true effort behind it. It goes without saying that comprehensive research was also a part of this feature.

Lisbeth did a lot of research to check the facts Allan had told her. First of all she tried to find the hotel in which the 60th birthday of the father was celebrated. Denmark is a small country, and the rural area in which Allan lived as a child has only so many hotels. Lisbeth tried to locate the grave of his twin sister who committed suicide, but it is not to be found in any cemetery. When she is looking for Allan's home as a child, she finds an old lady, who had been living next door. Finally she meets Allan's uncle. None of this was recorded. The listener only knows about the results as a few facts mentioned in her narration.

Extract:

Narrator: On the day prior to Thomas' meeting with Allan I go to the cemetery in the neighbouring town, where Pernille according to Allan is buried. I talk with some of the cemetery office staff and with the sextons. We search and search for Pernille's grave, but we do not find it.

....

Narrator: There is something in Allan's story that I cannot make out. I found the hotel – Fjordhotellet – which Allan's parents leased, and where the party took place. But the hotel does not exist any more. It has been demolished after a fire. Everybody in the neighbourhood knows the movie *The Celebration*, but nobody remembers a big birthday party at the hotel, where the son made a speech.

A reporter would probably have recorded all interviews and used the speakers as witnesses in the feature. Lisbeth Jessen, however, doesn't believe in eye-witnesses - at least not in her feature. They are not part of the play and in a way it is not even relevant what they say. As a narrator she is in search of truth,

but as an author she believes in the power of narrative. This story is about family secrets, about a childhood trauma and its psychological effects. She believes every narrative follows its own logic and most of all - it is already an interpretation of reality. So she is using the facts she researched as her own bits and pieces to carefully create a picture and to guide the listener through the story.

Another guiding element in this feature is the music, which was not only brilliantly selected, but also used in a very effective way. The *leitmotif* (recurring musical phrase) is a waltz, which pretends a lightness with its spring-in-its-step, four-four time rhythm. It pushes the story forward with an even flow to move the listener along - a great contrast to the distressing story of Allan's life and its surprising end.

Of course I don't want to break the tension by giving away the ending. All I can say is – there is no investigative journalistic triumph. The successful search for the truth doesn't lead to a satisfactory conclusion in a faithful and detailed reconstruction of the events. It ends as it began, with Allan's story, which leaves many questions unanswered, and which holds a mirror up to us.

Which role do we play in this – as listeners? And what is the role of the author? Which story do we want to hear and how much is it manipulated in order to get the story we want (Koplev/Vinterberg)? Furthermore, *After the Celebration* is a parable about family secrets, about the search for truth (albeit a subjective one), and also about narratives in the media, which can be very effective. Above all, it is a great example of the power of a good story.

LESLIE ROSIN:

After studying Media in Berlin and London, Leslie embarked on a career as Radio Drama and Feature Director for the ARD, German Public Broadcasting Stations. In 1999 she was invited by "1 Live", the West German Radio Program for young people, to change direction and become a dramaturge in their Radio Drama Department. Since 2003 she has worked for the Radio Feature Department at WDR, producing programs ranging from investigative journalism to cultural topics and on to more 'arty' and fictional pieces on the crossover to radio drama. Some of these productions won prizes: in 2011, for example, the CNN Journalist Award and the German Radio Prize in the category 'Best Program' and in 2013 the Robert-Geisendörfer-Award for 'The Hacker Syndrome'.

