



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Babette's Feast

Towards the end of Isak Dinesen's story, when the two Puritan sisters realise that the magnificent meal they have just been seduced into enjoying has cost the unheard of sum of 10,000 francs, that their housekeeper has squandered her all on a final triumphant demonstration of her art, one of them recalls with a shudder a story told by a friend of her father's. A missionary in Africa, 'He had saved the life of an old chief's favourite wife, and to show his gratitude the chief had treated him to a rich meal. Only long afterwards the missionary learned from his own black servant that what he had partaken of was a small fat grandchild of the chiefs, cooked in honour of the great Christian medicine man.' Just because this is Dinesen (or Karen Blixen), there is no need to make too much of the African connection. But the story summarises how *Babette's Feast* delivers a series of spiritual surprises and epiphanies through a similar series of cultural shocks: between the buttoned-up world of a Norwegian fjord and the heady rumours of Parisian decadence; between Lutheran and Catholic; even, in terms of the local culture, between Lorens Löwenhielm's sensible choice of a military career and his fear of a family 'curse' of mysticism, second sight and association with a 'Huldre', one of the female spirits of the mountains.

It might be unfair and unreasonable to accuse Gabriel Axel's film of having skimped this when it has batted so closely on to Dinesen's story, reproducing its every scene and as much dialogue as it contains. In many ways, it demonstrates in a minor key what *The Dead* does in a grander, that the movie adaptation which expands on the mood of a short story is more powerful than the one that compresses the detail of a novel. What is conspicuously expanded here is the feast itself – the preparation, presentation and eating of which has become a set-piece comparable to those in a Hollywood spectacular (the sequence took a fortnight to shoot and employed one of Copenhagen's top chefs, Jan Pedersen of La Cocotte, as a gastronomic consultant). All the film's ironies gravitate towards this sequence: the final release of some feelings of brotherhood (and sisterhood) in the ecclesiastic Brotherhood, under the influence of the food which they refuse to acknowledge they are eating; Babette's ultimate act of self-sacrifice which is also her most autocratic assertion of self, using the occasion of the celebratory dinner to reveal herself as a 'great artist'. And this, the most persistent of Dinesen themes, is splendidly served by the brisk yet haunted culinary competence of Stéphane Audran, almost as well qualified in this sphere as maestro Pedersen.

In its succinct visualisation – the desiccated aunt with whom Lorens is sent to stay to mend his ways – the film occasionally surpasses its source. It even manages to follow the halting, anecdotal structure of the original without any loss of narrative purpose or drive. But what is inevitably lost here is one of the secrets of Dinesen's craft, which also becomes part of her meaning: the way the larger story emerges out of a succession of smaller ones (like the African reminiscence), producing their own shock of cultural contradiction and spiritual revelation. *Anecdotes of Destiny* was the title of the collection in which 'Babette's Feast' appeared, and this story itself seems to contain several such anecdotes, the turnings of chance and choice by which Babette,

the Puritan sisters and Lorens Löwenhielm come to their respective destinies. In his care for capturing and locating the story so exactly, Axel has also centralised and homogenised it, enfolding it in the little village huddled on the Jutland coast (returning it as well to Denmark from Dinesen's slightly more fanciful Norway).

In the end, his ironic and finely judged portrait of a community invaded by a 'foreign' element, overturned and then returned to a fuller sense of itself, is closer to, say, Henry James than Dinesen. It does full justice to Babette while missing the 'magic' element of the native contingent, the asocial, mystical strain in Löwenhielm's family legend that scares him into a military career away from the bright butterflies of his dreams, but leaves him, on the night of the feast, 'wishing that one little dream would come his way, and a grey moth of dusk look him up before nightfall.'

**Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1988**

### **Gabriel Axel on 'Babette's Feast'**

*Tell me something about the religious backdrop of the story. Is it important?*

I was asked recently if I was a believer, if I thought the Church has a role. All I can say is that in *Babette's Feast* there's a minister, but it's not a film about religion. There's a general, but it's not a film about the army. There's a cook, but it's not a film about cooking. It's a fairy tale, and if you try to over-explain it, you destroy it. If you wish, it's a film about the vagaries of fate and a film about art because Babette is an artist. She creates the greatest masterpiece of her life and gives it to the two old maids. The moment you start to dissect the film it becomes symbolic, and I resist that. It's the love of her work and her knowledge of it which affects people.

*I thought I detected a certain nostalgia for France in the film?*

Perhaps, yes. My father lived in France. I was born in Denmark but when I was two months old I came to France and I went to school in France, so French is almost my first language. Even so, I've never felt very French since I was brought up in a Danish household. But in a film studio, I feel more at home in Paris than in Copenhagen. It may be that I was drawn to the story because it's about an activity that seems typically French. Nevertheless, Karen Blixen makes some mistakes. For example, she refers to Veuve Clicquot 1860. Now the story takes place in 1885 and champagne doesn't keep that long. After eight years it begins to deteriorate.

*The meal seemed pretty expensive. How much did Babette win in today's terms?*

200,000 francs. £20,000. Between 12 people. And don't forget she bought the silver and the dinner service and the linen as well. Any great chef will tell you that 50 per cent of a meal is the presentation.

*So the meal is an end in itself?*

Not at all. The young lieutenant was unable to explain why he was leaving. After the meal, we repeat the exact same shot but this time the general finds the words he ought to have said when he was young: 'Every day that remains in my life I shall be with you.' And he realises that he has wasted his life. So it's Babette's meal and her art which liberates their minds and gives them all the strength to be themselves. It's a film about right and wrong choices in life too.

*Let me ask the question I'm sure everyone asks. Are you a disciple of Dreyer? Some scenes in Babette's Feast might recall Ordet, for example.*

I admire Dreyer for his sense of composition and his rigour. But my real master is Louis Jouvét, whom I admire as a man of the theatre, for his simplicity and total refinement. I worked for four years as a spear-carrier in Jouvét's company in Paris. I find a similar quality in certain painters, such as Braque or Vermeer. Nothing extraneous, only the essential. In a film, what I look for is the actor's face. Nothing should detract from the actor's eyes, in which everything can be read, whether in long-shot or in close-up. In *Babette* there's hardly a story. It's just a series of portraits. And that's my ultimate aim.

**Interview by Jill Forbes, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1988**

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#### **BABETTE'S FEAST (BABETTES GAESTEBUD)**

*Director:* Gabriel Axel

*Production Companies:* Panorama Film International, Nordisk Film, Det Danske Filminstitut

*Executive Producer:* Claes Kastholm Hansen

*Producers:* Just Betzer, Bo Christensen

*Unit Manager:* Karen Bentzon

*Production Manager:* Lene Nielsen

*Assistant Director:* Tom Hedegaard

*Screenplay:* Gabriel Axel

*Based on the novella by:* Karen Blixen

*Director of Photography:* Henning Kristiansen

*B Photography:* Birger Bohm

*2nd Unit Photography:* Peter Klitgaard

*Editor:* Finn Henriksen

*Production Designer:* Sven Wichmann

*Costumes:* Annelise Hauberg

*Make-up:* Lydia Pujols, Bente Møller, Elisabeth Bukkehave, Birthe Lyngsøe Sørensen, Sanne Dandanell, Grethe Holleufer, Åse Tarp

*Opticals:* Poul Kristensen

*Music:* Per Nørgård

*Sound Recording:* Michael Dela, John Nielsen, Bjarne Risbjerg, Nalle

*Mixer:* Hans Erik Ahrn

*Sound Re-recording:* Film Teknik

*Gastronomic Consultant:* Jan Pedersen

#### **Cast:**

Stéphane Audran (*Babette Hersant*)

Bodil Kjer (*old Filippa*)

Birgitte Federspiel (*old Martine*)

Jarl Kulle (*old Lorens Löwenhielm*)

Jean-Philippe Lafont (*Achille Papin*)

Bibi Andersson (*lady from the Court of Sweden*)

Asta Esper Andersen (*Anna*)

Thomas Antoni (*Swedish lieutenant*)

Gert Bastian (*poor man*)

Viggo Bentzon (*fisherman in rowing boat*)

Vibeke Hastrup (*young Martine*)

Therese Højgaard Christensen (*Martha*)

Pouel Kern (*priest*)

Cay Kristiansen (*Poul*)

Lars Lohmann (*fisherman*)

Tine Miehe-Renard (*Loren's wife*)

Lisbeth Movin (*widow*)

Finn Nielsen (*grocer*)

Holger Perfort (*Karlsen*)

Else Petersen (*Solveig*)

Erik Petersen (*young Erik*)

Ebbe Rode (*Christopher*)

Bendt Rothe (*old Nielsen*)

Preben Lerdorff Rye (*captain*)

Hanne Stensgaard (*young Filippa*)

Axel Strøbye (*coachman*)

Ebba With (*Loren's aunt*)

Gudmar Wivesson (*young Lorens Löwenhielm*)

Denmark 1987©

103 mins

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