

The Hunt (Jagten) 2012 Vinterberg

P. Michell. June 2016

Synopsis:

A falsely accused innocent defies lynch-mob justice in Thomas Vinterberg's disarmingly entertaining black thriller.

Lucas is a Kindergarten teacher who takes great care of his students. Unfortunately for him, young Klara has a run-away imagination and concocts a lie about her teacher. Before Lucas is even able to understand the consequences, he has become the outcast of the town. The hunt is on to prove his innocence before it's taken from him for good.

Continuing our exploration of contemporary Scandinavian cinema.

Director: Thomas Vinterberg **Producers** Sisse Graum Jørgensen, Morten Kaufmann **Scriptwriters** Thomas Vinterberg, Tobias Lindholm **Director of Photography** Charlotte Bruus Christensen **Editors** Anne Østerud, Janus Billeskov Jansen **Production Designer** Torben Stig Nielsen **Composer** Nikolaj Egelund **Sound Designers** Kristian Selin, Eidnes Anderson, Thomas Jæger **Costumes** Stine Gudmundsen-Holmgreen

Cast: **Lucas** Mads Mikkelsen; **Theo** Thomas Bo Larsen; **Klara** Annika Wedderkopp; **Marcus** Lasse Fogelstrøm; **Grethe** Susse Wold; **Agnes** Anne Louise Hassing; **Bruun** Lars Ranthe; **Nadja** Alexandra Rapaport; **Torsten** Sebastian Bull Sarning; **Lars T** Steen Ordell Guldbrandsen; **Johan** Daniel Engstrup; **Bent** Troels Thorsen

Thomas Vinterberg

Back in his homeland (Denmark), Thomas Vinterberg nevertheless sticks to the English language. His [Dear Wendy](#) (2004), written by [Lars von Trier](#), is a fierce attack against America's obsession with weapons. In 2007, Vinterberg returns to Danish with [When a Man Comes Home](#) (2007) whose subject (a singer comes home to the town he left behind) is appropriate to the circumstances. Vinterberg strikes hard with his next two works, [Submarino](#) (2010), the gloomy story of two brothers who try to cope with their depressing everyday lives and [The Hunt](#) (2012), the shocking tale of a man who falls prey to a madding crowd. It will surprise nobody that Thomas Vinterberg's next project is a new adaptation of [Thomas Hardy's 'Far from the Madding Crowd](#) (2015)'.

Mad Mikelson (Lucas)

Mads Mikkelsen is a synonym to the great success the Danish film industry has had since the mid-1990s. He was born in Østerbro, Copenhagen, to Bente Christiansen, a

nurse, and Henning Mikkelsen, a banker. Starting out as a low-life pusher/junkie in the 1996 success [Pusher](#) (1996), he slowly grew to become one of Denmark's biggest movie actors. The success in his home country includes [Flickering Lights](#) (2000), [Shake It](#) (2001) and the Emmy-winning police series [Unit 1](#) (2000). Brothers Lars is also an actor.

Quotes:

On the fact that he is voted "the sexiest man in Denmark" over and over: "I'd rather be voted 'the sexiest man in Denmark' than 'the ugliest man in Denmark'."

"I take my work enormously seriously. When I do something it has to feel right. Everything has to be right. I'm not ambitious about my career, but I am ambitious with each job. I can be fairly annoying to work with. No compromises. Let's put it this way: compromises are from hell."

"I ask a million questions, and I insist on having answers. I think that is what we have to do. I have to know what the director wants. Some are very much in their head, and I need to force it out of them. I just can't play around for eight hours and see if something happens."

Thomas Bo Larsen (Theo)

Appears in current TV show – 'Follow the Money'.

Mascot of Vinterberg, appearing in most of his films.

Reviews

The Guardian, Phillip French, 2012

The Danish film-maker [Thomas Vinterberg](#) made his name in 1998 with *Festen* (aka *The Celebration*), one of those family reunion dramas that culminate in savage blood-letting. In that case, an embittered son reveals that he and his twin sister were abused by his wealthy, overbearing father whose 60th birthday the dysfunctional clan has gathered to celebrate. The movie was made in that deliberately ugly style embraced by [Dogme 95](#), the self-publicising faction formed by Vinterberg and Lars von Trier to purify a corrupt cinema and committed to eschewing special effects, artificial lighting, makeup, incidental music, cutting within a sequence, specially built sets and tripods.

The group's creators have moved on from the austere conditions they originally proposed, Vinterberg to traditional realism, von Trier to increased stylisation. But in his outstanding new film, *The Hunt*, Vinterberg has chosen to revisit *Festen*. Back in 1999, a Danish child psychologist visited him with a proposal for a movie taking a radically different approach to the problems at the centre of the film. But Vinterberg

was apparently attempting to escape the oppressive corner he'd driven himself into and set aside the material his visitor had given him. A decade later a depressed Vinterberg had cause to consult this same psychologist and before doing so took a look at the file he'd left. So impressed was he that he decided to make this his next project.

Like *Festen*, *The Hunt* (scripted by Vinterberg and Tobias Lindholm) is set in idyllic rural Denmark, in a small tight-knit, lower middle-class community, rather than a haut-bourgeois family, but child abuse and the effect of its revelation is still the key issue. But in this case the alleged perpetrator is shown from the start to be innocent. In John Patrick Shanley's marvellous 2008 film *Doubt*, we are never absolutely certain whether Philip Seymour Hoffman's popular, humane New York priest is a paedophile or Meryl Streep's vindictive nun is merely motivated by envy. This creates suspense by inviting observers to examine the evidence drawn on by the accuser and the accused's defenders. Vinterberg eschews such ambiguity. His embattled hero, Lucas (Mads Mikkelsen), is a victim both of something awry in complacent Danish society (in this it resembles and echoes Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*) and the dangerous little lies told by an innocent child.

As superbly registered by Charlotte Bruus Christensen's excellent photography, the time is late autumn, the nights are drawing in, there are both falling leaves and a few odd snowflakes in the air. Lucas is going cheerfully about his temporary job at a small nursery school, despite having lost his proper teaching post as a result of economy measures and fighting a bitter battle with his ex-wife over the custody of their teenage son. Things seem to be looking up when he acquires as a lover a well-educated woman from eastern Europe doing domestic work locally. But then a little girl, Klara, daughter of Lucas's best friend Theo, misconstrues Lucas's refusal of a gift, and seeks a little revenge by putting together some clues randomly and persuasively snatched from the air. Seemingly rationalising her peevishness, Klara tells the middle-aged school administrator, Grethe, that Lucas has exposed himself to her. Grethe, sympathetically sensitised to such things, calls in a child psychologist, who plies the child with leading questions. He decides the police must be informed, she thinks the issue should be raised at an imminent parents' meeting and that Lucas's son could be in need of protection. First slowly, then rapidly, Lucas is buried in an avalanche of suspicion, the very weight of which turns accusation into conviction and transforms the victim's existing doubts into paranoia.

Lucas, the decent man marginalised by social change, is transformed into an object, a threat to the community, someone to be ganged up against, a dangerous figure who helps those around him discover a new sense of angry unity. Shops refuse him service. A butcher provokes a fight with him and Lucas retaliates. A shot is fired through his window and his dog is killed. He withdraws into himself and the delicate fortress of his home. Only his son and the boy's godfather stand beside him. Meanwhile, the child who has caused it all stands uncomprehendingly by, passing on to other things and other stories. It's a frightening and all too convincing story that has its parallels in current events in Britain, where deep waters are being plumbed

and disturbing ripples created by the Jimmy Savile affair.

Eventually the movie comes to a climax during a Christmas Eve service in the local church, where the whole community is confronted by Lucas and they are forced to confront themselves. The result is immensely powerful in its invocation of the true meaning of Christian charity and its symbolism. Another significant symbol is that of the hunt – for scapegoats, witches, victims, and for innocent animals, whom Lucas hunts in the woods, a manly pastime he ironically initiates his own son into.

At the centre of *The Hunt*, rarely out of the frame, is Mads Mikkelsen, one of the finest actors at work today. In recent years he's played the most frightening of Bond's enemies (Le Chiffre, the villain with bleeding eyes in *Casino Royale*); Stravinsky in *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*; a reckless Resistance leader in Nazi-occupied Denmark in *Flame and Citron*; a petty Copenhagen criminal in the first two parts of the Pusher trilogy; a charismatic 18th-century physician in *A Royal Affair*; a medieval prisoner of Norse warriors in *Valhalla Rising*. He's played every kind of man and everyman and given each real individuality.

BFI – Geoffrey MacNab, 2014

The first point to make about [Thomas Vinterberg's](#) *The Hunt* is that its main character, who is accused of child abuse, is innocent. This isn't giving away the ending – Lucas ([Mads Mikkelsen](#)) is as falsely accused as Spencer Tracy's character in Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936). Vinterberg isn't trying to make a nuanced and ambiguous drama in which the behaviour of the adult towards the kid is open to interpretation. The victim here is the man, not the child.

Scripted by Vinterberg with [Tobias Lindholm](#), *The Hunt* is bravura filmmaking – lean, intense and very well acted. Even so, the plotting is a little crude: Vinterberg depicts a close-knit rural community in which the adults seemingly can't accept that a child is telling them lies, and in next to no time they are turning viciously against one of their own. Lucas has no means of defending himself, with former friends ready to shoot or lynch him.

After his international projects [It's All About Love](#) (2003) and [Dear Wendy](#) (2004), Vinterberg re-embraced his local roots with the comedy [A Man Comes Home](#) (2008) and the drama [Submarino](#) (2010). *The Hunt* is again a pared-down story rooted in family life in a small Danish community. In spite of a blast of Van Morrison's 'Moondance' in the opening scenes (old friends swimming naked in the wilds), the film is made largely without music. And as in [Festen](#) (1998), Vinterberg uses handheld camera and natural light.

Thankfully, despite its very dark subject-matter, the film is also leavened with plenty of gallows humour. This approach is summed up in one scene in which Lucas

is returning to a friend's house after his arrest; he embraces his traumatised teenage son, who has stuck by him, and the friend yells out of the window, "Hey! If you fondle your kid, you'll go back to jail." This ability to introduce irony at even the film's most climactic moments ensures that Vinterberg steers clear of the sermonising which often blights issue-based movies.

Although *The Hunt* may seem like realist drama, the filmmakers also borrow from other genres, in particular horror and vigilante-style revenge thrillers. It's easy to be reminded of old [Frankenstein](#) movies in which pitchfork-wielding peasants chase the monster through forests, or even Sam Peckinpah's [Straw Dogs](#) (1971), with its scenes of a mild-mannered academic caught up in a primal life-or-death battle against psychopathic Cornish villagers.

The casting is astute. Mikkelsen – the Bond villain crying blood in [Casino Royale](#), the Viking warrior in [Valhalla Rising](#) and the doctor engaged in an illicit relationship with a queen in *A Royal Affair* – customarily plays the alpha-male type. Here he's a kindergarten teacher, a divorcee with a messy private life and low self-esteem – but at the same time, as played by Mikkelsen, he retains a sense of defiance and even a certain swagger. We root for him when he takes violent retribution against a supermarket worker who has been persecuting him, or when he stumbles into church for the Christmas Eve service. He has no doubts about his own innocence. Nor, however battered or isolated he is, does he fall prey to self-pity.

The film continually highlights how easily the seemingly civilised, rational inhabitants of the small town lose their moral bearings – and how irrational their behaviour is. They look and behave like social-democratic types, convinced of their own reason and common sense – but it takes very little to turn them into vigilantes. Almost as disturbing as the ease with which they use violence is the way they snap back into their old bourgeois habits afterwards. There's a wonderful moment when a character is headbutted; immediately after committing this act of violence, the aggressor punctiliously counts out the money to pay for his groceries. Scenes of domesticity are deliberately juxtaposed with far more primal and disturbing imagery – the very title of the film hints at an underlying savagery. And even before Lucas is accused of abuse, we see male bonding rituals (the naked swimming, the drinking, the hunting) that seem to belong to an older, more primitive world.

In interviews, Vinterberg has claimed (seemingly only partially tongue-in-cheek) that the film reflects a crisis in Scandinavian masculinity. There is certainly a gulf between the Lucas we see off duty, carousing with friends or hunting, and the browbeaten kindergarten worker helping the children in their toilet duties and being scolded by the headteacher. On one warped level, the accusations can be seen as benefiting him, since they give him an excuse to fight back. In his defiance, he reclaims his identity and becomes ever more macho, confronting his tormentors in the church and demanding that they look in his eyes (the inference is that they will find no guilt there). In these scenes, Mikkelsen is playing the part in the same fatalistic way that he tackled the role of the warrior in *Valhalla Rising*.

The Hunt will inevitably be seen as a companion piece – or riposte – to the equally focused *Festen* (1998). In that film, a family patriarch is exposed as having sexually abused his children, and the drama hinges on his misbehaviour, for so long concealed, finally being brought out into the open at a family celebration. In *The Hunt*, the structure is reversed: there is no attempt by the community to conceal the alleged abuse, which is out in the open very early on, and the drama revolves instead around the hero's attempts to rebut the allegations.

We are told several times that Klara, the child who has accused Lucas, never lies, and the screenplay is deliberately noncommittal about her motives – she has seen a fleeting image of sex on an iPad. She's no villain and yet her behaviour is perplexing, and so is that of the adults around her, the experts and teachers who believe everything she tells them. Her father Theo ([Thomas Bo Larsen](#)) is Lucas's best friend but doesn't take very much convincing of his guilt. The ties in the community where Lucas lives seem at first to be extremely strong – the men have grown up together, they drink together, they go hunting together – yet on the basis of just a few words from a young girl, old loyalties are very quickly severed.

It is one of the paradoxes of recent Danish cinema that so many directors who made their names in the Dogme period in the late 1990s have turned out to have such mainstream sensibilities. Even when he was working under Dogme constraints, Vinterberg was the most accessible of directors. With *The Hunt*, he has taken very dark material and yet the tone, if not exactly breezy, isn't dour either. The style is disarming – after all, abuse of a child is one of the ultimate taboos – and the subject-matter alone is likely to put off some viewers.

Others may take against Vinterberg's stance, in particular his insistence that the child isn't always innocent. The man falsely charged with child abuse is the modern equivalent of those wrongly accused witches in films and dramas such as [The Crucible](#) or [Day of Wrath](#). The difference is that he fights back – and he has a sense of humour about his plight. Vinterberg tells Lucas's story with intensity and grim irony, and even throws in his trademark references to Bergman's [Fanny and Alexander](#). The result is a film that, in spite of its ambivalent coda, is far more uplifting than you would ever expect.