

# THE BEST ONE-SHOTS IN THE WORLD: THE DANISH SCENARIO TRADITION

*by Kristoffer Apollo*

If you as a foreigner get a look at some of the scenarios presented at Fastaval, one thought may well spring to mind: That the writers are using an awful lot of words to give detailed instructions for a single roleplaying experience, at best lasting perhaps four or five hours' playing time. This is probably the one thing which set the Danish scenario tradition apart from most of the roleplaying world, and nowhere is that style as refined as at the convention which is the focus of this article: Fastaval.

The Danish convention style of play focuses on dramatic structure, little or no formal rules framework, story development, immersion in character, and character interaction within the story, and it has many similarities to the freeform styles developed in the rest of Scandinavia. However, the peculiar Danish trait is that this version of freeform was developed from tabletop roleplaying, whereas LARPerS seem to have been at the forefront of experimental roleplaying in the rest of the world. In Denmark, it's the other way around.

The main reason for this can be summed up in two words: Peer recognition. In the shape of a golden penguin which is handed out every year at Fastaval.

After RPGs hit Denmark in the early 80s, Danish roleplayers quickly began organizing gaming conventions where they could meet up with other gamers. The first Danish gaming con was held in the capital of Copenhagen in 1982, and Viking-Con remains one of our largest events to this date. But it was Fastaval, the other big Danish convention which in 1985 opened in the city of Aarhus, that would become a creative juggernaut in the years to follow.

Like at any other RPG convention in the world, players brought their own scenarios to Fastaval. And one important tradition was already established back then: The con organizers tried to make the scenarios available to as many players as possible. Consequently, the scenarios had to be written down so they could be gamemastered and played by complete strangers. In just a few years, this developed into a strong tradition of putting hours and hours into writing and graphic design.

In the early years, the scenarios were typically written for popular systems like Dungeons & Dragons, Call of Cthulhu or Rolemaster. The Call of Cthulhu scenarios, especially, obtained a special status. I believe it was the challenge of creating a coherent plot and investigative flow that led to them being regarded as top of class back then – and this also started the Danish community's focus on the scenario writer, as it became an honor to write a con's featured Call of Cthulhu scenario. And of course, Danes started to build their own systems as well. Around 1990, there was a (last) major push towards creating a multifaceted Danish roleplaying system, with

publishing in mind. The project only partly survived in the near-future noir detective system Fusion, the most successful Danish RPG system ever. But when the large-scale system project failed, the conventions benefited.

One who now directed his creative energy at the cons was Troels Christian Jakobsen who took over as General of Fastaval for the 1992 version. Where earlier organizers had mainly developed the organizational skills necessary to host the con, Troels came with a creative vision. The symbol of that vision were to be a golden penguin called Otto, instituted in 1992 as Fastaval's award and presented to the con's best scenarios at a gala dinner. Originally a bit of a joke, playing on the Oscar, the Otto Awards soon documented the amazing power of peer recognition. Within a couple of years, the golden penguin became the thing to strive for if you wanted to be at the forefront of Danish tabletop roleplaying, and this focused a lot of energy and creativity into scenario writing. From the outset, the Ottos have been awarded by a jury who read and compare all contributed scenarios, based on the idea of awarding the best potential roleplaying experiences, and handing out the awards in categories like Best Scenario or Best Roles. Later, other cons introduced their own awards, but the Otto is the Danish roleplaying award by virtue of credibility and continuity.

Along with the incitement to write outstanding scenarios, the awards established another important thing: An ongoing discussion of what's good roleplaying and what's not. This was reflected in the construction of theory on scenario writing in a convention's one-shot context. Initially, these theories were often built on ideas brought in from other areas – for example, I contributed with the earliest theory on how to write down a scenario, based on my background in journalism. And the aforementioned Troels Christian Jakobsen drew upon his background in drama to introduce the structure inherent in most Western storytelling to scenarios. If you have studied drama, literature or even journalism, you will know the structure of Exposition, Conflict, Point of No Return, Climax, Denouement. The scenario version of this theory became known as the Fastawood model.

A noticeable consequence of this theorizing was that Danish con roleplaying quickly ditched systems in the traditional sense. In the mid-90s a wave seemed to sweep over the land and turn everything into "systemless" scenarios. Powered by the argument that if we knew how to structure the scenarios dramatically, what do we need dice and skill checks for? Especially when you're playing in a short time slot and don't want to waste time on rules discussions. Instead, the gamemaster became the sole arbiter of what you could and couldn't do in a scenario – turning the gamemaster into more of a director, less of a referee.

But the gamemaster was still only responsible for the actual play, not the framework. Because at this point, we basically handed over responsibility for everything except the actual play to the scenario writer, including things that had traditionally been in the domain of the gamemaster or player. A Danish scenario writer would typically provide the background, plot, scenes, handouts, non-player characters and player characters as well. The idea was that by controlling everything, you could integrate every element, all for the better playing experience. Player characters would

have detailed backstories, often several pages of reading, that included plot details or thematic references to be explored in actual play.

The mid-90s period is sometimes referred to as the Golden Age of Fastaval. It produced a number of scenarios that are still considered classics of the tradition, including romantic vampire story *Isabelle* (Lars Andresen, 1994), fantasy epic *The Ritual of Time* (Lars Andresen, 1995) and neo-noir thriller *The Hunt* (Ask Agger, 1996). In many ways, that period in Fastaval's history can be said to peak with *The Ark* (Alex Uth, 1997), a story moving between two layers of reality as it exposes the players' roles to be fragments of a man's personality.

Almost instantly, though, the importance attributed to character writing also created the first scenario subgenre. As writers now designed detailed characters with many story elements incorporated in the characters themselves, they soon realized that the characters could make up the entire scenario. And so, the intrigue scenario was born – scenarios where the characters are pitted against each other, often in a closed setting. Classics of this subgenre include the Kafkaesque drama *Locked Doors* (Thomas Munkholt, 1994), ghost story *Oculus Tertius* (Jacob Schmidt-Madsen, 1996) and theatrical drama *Monogamy* (Morten Jaeger, 1999).

With these developments, the con scenario also became a roleplaying discipline in itself. Like in other countries, only a part of the Danish roleplaying population attends conventions, so the focused style of the one-shot convention scenario was (and is) not experienced by all Danish roleplayers. And in the mid-90s, tabletoppers and LARPerS parted ways as well. The Danish conventions were based on tabletop roleplaying while Danish LARPerS back then mostly focused on creating huge fantasy game events that would not fit into the convention format. So even if the two were aware of each other, and quite a lot of players were (and are) playing both, the two styles went their separate ways.

But here, I should point out that the traditional distinction between tabletop and LARP really doesn't really apply anyway. Because even as the LARPerS departed for the woods and meadows needed to create big-scale events, the tabletoppers of Fastaval in the late 90s began to develop a "semi-live" playing style. Meaning that you may start by playing at a table, but very often, players will get up and act "live" once a scene has been set. Touching and improvised prop use are very common – and therefore, what we label as tabletop scenarios is nowadays often called LARPs by foreigners visiting Fastaval.

Also in the late 90s, another scenario subgenre appeared as a reaction to the extreme degree of writer control introduced with the Fastawood model. With storytelling scenarios, the writers gave responsibility for the story back to the players, instead opting to provide only a framework from which to improvise the story. An approach somewhat similar to what would be coined Story Now in American roleplaying theory a few years later. The storytelling style was introduced simultaneously in samurai drama *Jisei* (by yours truly, 1997) and shepherd tale *Dreams* by the Campfire (Jacob Schmidt-Madsen, 1997). The genre was further developed in scenarios like fantasy tale *The Half Kingdom* (Tobias D. Bindstlet, 2005) but has also merged with other styles to become a tool as well as a subgenre. Nowadays, many Fastaval writers use the technique as

flashbacks, in-game commentaries or epilogues rather than building a whole scenario around storytelling.

Around the Millennium, the creative agenda at Fastaval became much influenced by a handful of writers from the remote island of Bornholm. Calling themselves the Natural Born-Holmers, they became the Danish community's first prolific writers' group, and their work at Fastaval and the smaller, now defunct, Orkon convention produced more new styles.

With psychological drama *Ave Adam* (Dennis Gade Kofod, 2000), extras roleplaying was introduced – a style that tore down the notion of one player, one character and instead had players act out the story's supporting cast as appropriate in each scene. Extras roleplaying is effective in stories with only one true leading role, like noir drama *Manuscript of Remembrances* (Brian Rasmussen, 2003), or the style can be expanded to completely abandon leading roles and instead have all players act out minor roles, done to great effect in rural comedy *Farmers and Beekeepers* (Frederik Berg Østergaard, 2002). But even more significantly, the technique of extras roleplaying was quickly adapted as a tool, like the storytelling style. It is probably the technique that has had the biggest impact on Fastaval scenarios in the last decade. Incidentally, extras roleplaying moves the gamemaster into even more of a director role because the players now are playing what would traditionally be played as NPCs by the gamemaster.

At the 2002 version of Orkon, the Natural Born-Holmers debuted yet another idea: Short story roleplaying. Based on the literary concept of the short story, they introduced a scenario type intended for less than 2 hours' playing time, and typically focused on only one theme or idea. The compact style of short story roleplaying lends itself well to convention play, and over the years it has been used in both scenarios made up of connected short stories, as well as collections of short story scenarios with a common theme, like the highly successful *The Empire* (2009), a collection of short story scenarios based on the Warhammer world published by Games Workshop.

A third major contribution from the Born-Holmers came in their initial work with breaking down the barrier between player and role – what would later be dubbed “bleed”, the transferral of emotions and thoughts from role to player, or vice versa. In Danish, this school of thought first appeared clearly in what the Natural Born-Holmers called experience scenarios, notably in *The Dark Side* (Michael Sonne, 2000), a scenario that emphasizes how outrages described in roleplaying are the product of the players' own imaginations. Like in other parts of the world, bleed techniques have been a controversial issue in Denmark, with a still ongoing debate on how much manipulation you can subject your players to and how to make sure you don't exceed their personal limits. In recent years, the most controversial has probably been *Fat Man Down* (Frederik Berg Østergaard, 2009), a scenario which explores obesity and prejudice by using a central mechanic that depends on players being unaware of it.

You will probably know that “bleed” was added to the roleplaying vocabulary by Swedish writers' group Vi Åker Jeep, famous in the roleplaying world for their Jeepform style of playing and roleplaying theory. Vi Åker Jeep first visited Fastaval in 2004, and there instantly recognized a lot

of similarities between the Fastaval scenario style and what the Jeepers themselves had been doing. Vi Åker Jeep have been regular contributors to Fastaval ever since, and in that way, Jeepform became the first major foreign influence on the Fastaval style, with the Fastaval community influencing Jeepform as well (the aforementioned Frederik Berg Østergaard is both a Born-Holmer and a Jeoper, for example). Apart from Fat Man Down, prominent Jeepform presentations at Fastaval have been love drama Doubt (Fredrik Åkerlind & Tobias Wrigstad, 2007), Technical Difficulties (2008), a collection of short story scenarios with mature subjects, and horrific survivalist tale The Journey (Fredrik Åkerlind, 2010).

Speaking of mature subjects, another characteristic of the last decade's Fastaval scenarios has been a move away from roleplaying's roots in fantasy, horror and mystery, towards more mature subjects, often treated in stories with realistic settings. Vi Åker Jeep and Natural Born-Holmers have been prominent influences in this development but are not its sole proponents. For example, the same trend is present in the works of Mikkel Bækgaard, from teenage suicide drama The Diary of Janne (2001) to the understated tale of child abuse The Vase which won the Best Scenario award at Fastaval 2010.

Another recent outside influence on Fastaval has been the American wave of indie roleplaying. In the American context, the indie games represent a move away from traditional RPG systems, but in Denmark, the indie style actually brought about a new wave of system thinking. Not system as in Dungeons & Dragons but system mechanics designed to fit the specific scenario. Even before the indie theories found their ways to Denmark, some Fastaval writers had been tinkering with boardgame elements in their scenarios – examples are psychological drama Track Change (Michael Erik Næsby, 2002) and A Romantic Comedy (2003), the latter presented by the Absurth group who would take over from Natural Born-Holmers as Fastaval's most prolific writers' group. Their ideas merged with the indie influences to create a new awareness about the importance of system mechanics. And this resulted in both indie-style story games like historical drama Montsegur 1244 (Frederik J. Jensen, 2008) and scenarios drawing more firmly on the Fastaval tradition and merging it with system mechanics, like Medieval drama Joust (Anders Frost Bertelsen, Kristoffer Rudkjær, Morten Hougaard, 2009), another Absurth presentation. Joust is also an example of another subgenre, the ensemble scenario where each player controls several leading roles (typically three or four). The ensemble scenario can be said to be a mutation of extras roleplaying, but on the other hand the idea of giving each player multiple roles had been around since the 90s. However, no-one really managed to make it work until Mikkel Bækgaard perfected the style in everyday drama A Day in the Life (2005).

Other recent developments have been scenarios that abandon the gamemaster and leave everything to the players, or scenarios that does the opposite and appoint a couple of players to be assistant gamemasters who are responsible for some scenes and the supporting cast while the other players concentrate on the story's leading roles. Romantic war drama Guernica (Klaus Meier Olsen, 2006) was the first example of the latter. The last decade has also seen a revitalization of the convention LARP at Fastaval. Even if others may consider next to all Fastaval scenarios to beLARPs, only a few scenarios are actually labelledLARPs by Fastaval, mostly defined by having a larger number of players than other scenarios. Among the most

prominent Fastaval LARPs have been sci-fi society drama *Persona* (Maya Krone, Ryan Rohde Hansen, 2005), and *Memoratorium: The Nice Place* (Monica Hjort Traxl, Morten Greis Petersen, 2007), an exploration of the concept of literary synesthesia which managed to make grown men weep by letting them stare into a wall. Seriously.

In this way, the Fastaval style of scenario writing continues to evolve. Being at Fastaval always gives you the impression that an incredible amount of creativity is present, with brand new ideas popping up or older ideas being remixed with newer ones to create new takes on the convention scenario. I know for sure that this short summary does not cover all the brilliant and strange thoughts that have been presented at Fastaval, and there are most probably new ideas and trends coming up that I haven't mentioned here because I'm unable to spot them just yet. What we have done in the last couple of decades is to focus an amazing amount of creative energy into the one-shot experience of a few hours' roleplaying, and the result is scenarios which seem to be quite unlike anything you'll find anywhere else in the world. I hope you will enjoy some of them at the unique gaming and partying experience that is Fastaval.

*This article was adapted from an essay written for a Finnish book of selected Fastaval scenarios which will be published in the summer of 2011.*