

Truth is a Guest at ‘Henry Gamble’s Birthday Party’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 26, 2016 - 6:20pm

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – There always seems to be a moment or event in our lives where everything happens. Writer/director Stephen Cone places that context into a celebration, that reveals necessary truths to its participants. It’s going to be a enlightening time at “Henry Gamble’s Birthday Party.”

The strength of the film is that it mixes a Christian outlook – Henry is the son of a evangelical pastor – with the human elements surrounding the air of religiosity. Everyone, it seems, is faced with a transition at this party, and follows through cosmically and with an evolving determination. Cone has a delicate touch with his own material, and his filmmaking technique is original and self assured. This work is a fabulous example of great independent filmmaking, using poised actors, tight storytelling and authentic emotion. Accept the invitation to this party, and make sure you RSVP.

Henry Gamble (Cole Doman) begins his birthday in bed, with his best friend Aaron (Tyler Ross). There is something particular about the way they start their day, but the pool party is set, and the friends are coming. Henry’s parents are Pastor Bob (Pat Healy) – the minister of an evangelical Christian church – and his wife Kat (Elizabeth Laidlaw). Also Henry’s sister Autumn (Nina Ganet) is home from college to help celebrate.



Happy Birthday Sweet 17: Cole Doman in ‘Henry Gamble’s Birthday Party’

Photo credit: Wolfe Releasing

The party is on, but everybody seems to be in the midst of a crisis. Henry is the center of attention, and it is revealed that he struggles with his sexual orientation. His parents Bob and Kat are acting strangely too, and sister Autumn seems to be drifting from her Christian roots. It all comes down to confronting the next phase of all their lives, which includes Henry's attention toward Logan (Daniel Kyri).

Stephen Cone's script is the foundation for making the story work. He establishes many characters quickly, but uses enough exposition to give each a sense of their situations. Most effective is the opening bedroom scene, as many of the potential guests are introduced, and Pastor Bob and his wife fill in the rest as everyone comes to breakfast. There is interesting symbolism (baptism, wine) plus fluid scene work featuring sure reaction and expression, which adds up to a showcase for Cone's original cinema style.

Also impressive was the casting. Each of the actors took their assignment and ran with them, especially Cole Doman as Henry – never overreaching with a very specific path in the story – and Elizabeth Laidlaw as Henry's mother Kat, who possesses a very guilty secret. They each had internal issues that were slowly and effectively revealed, and they knew just when and how to release the dynamic tension of their characters.

This is a strong ensemble piece, as the characters represent approving and opposing views of ardent Christianity. Most interesting are the souls stuck in the middle, including Pastor Bob, wife Kat, and the congregation guests who are not as intense in the holier-than-thou attitudes, especially a nervous gay congregant (Patrick Andrews) around Henry's age that was "caught in the shower" at camp, and agonizes in the burden of his perceived sin.



Pastor Bob (Pat Healy) in 'Henry Gamble's Birthday Party'

Photo credit: Wolfe Releasing

Writer/director Cone's point-of-view is definitely "be who you are," and in that sense has his foot a bit too much on the gas pedal of Christian evangelical criticism. It's not that these types don't deserve it, but it's much easier to highlight the dread of it when the characters who represent that side are less formed. The persons stuck in the evangelical loop are the least interesting, and I felt a certain negativity in the presentation of their characters.

But It's mighty fine to see a up-and-coming director with a wonderful storytelling touch, and Stephen Cone – a ten year veteran with several independent features – has presented his breakthrough film with "Henry," thus joining his characters on the other side of where they all need to be.

"Henry Gamble's Birthday Party" continues its limited release in Chicago – at the Gene Siskel Film Center, 164 North State Street – through March 3rd, 2016. [Click here](#) [15] for details. Featuring Cole Doman, Pat Healy, Elizabeth Laidlaw, Nina Ganet, Daniel Kyri and Tyler Ross. Written and directed by Stephen Cone. Not Rated.



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Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 24 2024 - 3:50am*):

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