

PRESSMATERIAL



Made in Copenhagen presents

# Mr. Graversen

A documentary by Michael Graversen



Photo credit: Michael Graversen

**World premiere at CPH:DOX on March 26<sup>th</sup> at 7:15 pm in Grand Teatret in Copenhagen. The whole Graversen family will be present.**

**Additional screening at CPH:DOX:**

March 30, 6:30 pm at Palads

March 31, 7:45 pm at Empire

Link to the film can be send already now by publicist Line Bilenberg. For interview appointments with participants and the director, please also contact **Line Bilenberg: 20710494, [line.bilenberg@gmail.com](mailto:line.bilenberg@gmail.com)**

**Trailer:** <https://vimeo.com/681302791>

Press photos etc. can be downloaded at: [www.madeincopenhagen.dk](http://www.madeincopenhagen.dk) – under “press”

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## INTRODUCTION

Each year around 380 Danish children and young people under the age of 25 are diagnosed with cancer. Today, 6 out of 7 survive.

That was not the case in the early '80s, when award-winning director Michael Graversen was a child. At the age of 4, he was diagnosed with Acute Leukaemia. Back then, there was a 50% chance of survival, making Michael a "1st generation survivor".

Five years of chemotherapy treatments, periods of isolation, and a constant fear that their child would die followed. It changed the two parents, Astrid and Svend-Aage. Astrid took on the role of caretaker. Svend-Aage isolated at home and started drinking. He lost his business and was prescribed strong nerve medication, which he became addicted to. Eventually, Astrid had enough and gives Svend-Aage an ultimatum – he has to quit now. He does. But the family trauma from back then lingers. Both in the now adult Michael, who still struggles with the psychological late effects - but also in the two parents, who lost the connection to each other somewhere along the way.

**Mr. Graversen** brings into focus the many families that live with the consequences of their child getting cancer. It is a universal story of finding each other again, of all that is left unsaid, of the fear of loss, but also of believing in the family bond, of believing in love.

Svend-Aage is determined to win back his wife, who seems mostly preoccupied with the family dog. But now that their house is for sale, it's time to tidy up in "the secret room" and that's when Michael Graversen turns on the camera and follows his parents' attempts at finding their way back

to love and to where they were - before Michael got sick.

The director Michael Graversen writes:

*The film is also a universal story about how a crisis affects a family and how we cope with the crisis. It is essential to talk about the family traumas and acknowledge the mistakes and failures – even if it's been many years and one believes that it belongs in the past.*

*The film is ultimately a love story about how tough it is to forgive after experiencing trauma and failure that has been ingrained over decades. Also, the film is a reminder that it is never too late to make a comeback in life or say sorry and admit your mistakes, even if you have entered the autumn of life.*

## **SYNOPSIS**

As Michael unannounced travel to his childhood home, he is met by a new version of his father. Free from years of substance abuse, Svend-Aage is now full of life and more energetic than ever – contrary to the absent father Michael experienced through his childhood. He's eager to talk about his glorious days as a clothing salesman and is determined to win back the love of his wife. But throughout the years, she has found comfort in her dog Lexus, and finds it hard to let her husband back into her life – despite of Svend-Aages numerous awkward attempts. As their home is put up for sale and a whole lifetime of memories are packed into boxes, the contours of a family trauma scratch the surface. As a 4-year-old, Michael was diagnosed with cancer and five years followed with chemotherapy, frequent isolation and the fear of dying. It changed the Graversens family pattern forever, but with the move, Svend-Aage seizes the chance to deal with his breach of trust and a new chance in life.

## **ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE FILM**

### **Svend-Aage Graversen**

Born in Ølgod in 1952. His father had a bicycle shop in Ølgod and his mother was a social worker. His father's brother was a farmer and Svend-Aage was supposed to take over the family farm.

Instead, Svend-Aage got an apprenticeship in the local clothing store, selling clothes, and quickly became successful in the trade. He became the manager of several stores and buyer for the chain of stores called "Mr." in Denmark.

In the early 80's he opened "Mr. Graversen" in Ølgod and became a member of the Round Table club for successful business people.

His son's cancer illness as well as fierce competition contributed to his clothing business going bankrupt in 1984. He was prescribed several different types of nerve medicine, which would later turn out to be a medication error as many of the pills were taken off the market because they were too addictive. In 2000, he was admitted to a psychiatric clinic in Hviding for anxiety and depression. In addition to the nerve medication, Svend-Aage also developed an alcohol addiction.

Without much success, Svend-Aage tried his hand at various other business ventures, a convenience store in Grindsted, a town to which the family moved, and as an insurance salesman, but he never really made it back. In his early 50s he became an early retiree.

He has since tapered off his use of nerve medication and come off his alcohol addiction.

He now lives with his wife Astrid in Jægerspris, where he is an active member of several social clubs.

### **Astrid Graversen**

Born in Gaarde in 1955. Has an older brother and sister.

Astrid grew up poor in a small town outside Ølgod. Her father worked at the local brickworks and her mother was ill, bedridden with a manic-depressive disorder for the majority of Astrid's childhood.

Astrid was the only one in her family who had the opportunity to continue her studies after primary school. After graduating, she trained as a legal secretary in Tønder, and in 1980 her and her husband, Svend-Aage, had their son Michael. When Michael became seriously ill, Astrid took a five year leave of absence in order to care for him.

She continued to work as a legal secretary in Varde, Esbjerg and Vejen before early retirement a few years ago. For many years now, she has been an active member of the local agility club, and in addition to participating in club activities, she practises agility competitively and has competed in the Danish Championships several times.

Astrid lost both her parents halfway through her son's cancer illness. Astrid now lives in Jægerspris, where she still practises agility, but not as often as she did in Grindsted.

### **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

*By Michael Graversen*

*"As a child, I remember my parents having a good life – they were happy, outgoing and social."*

*However, that changed abruptly in 1984. Like any other four-year-old child, I had the flu. But time passed, and the flu would not go away. My parents took me to the doctor, who later that day came to our house to tell us that it wasn't the common flu. We lived in Tønder, and I was rushed to department H2 at Odense University Hospital. After a few days, the verdict came; I was diagnosed with Acute Leukaemia. Only 150 out of 100,000 children get cancer each year, and I was one of them. At that time, only a few survived.*

*The following three years were about chemo cures, frequent isolation and a fear of dying. But after the three-year treatment, I still had some cancer in my one testicle. It was removed, and I had to*

*do two more years in an unbearable treadmill of vomiting, anaphylactic shocks, and exhaustion, where time was spent counting the dots in the ceiling until my numbers were good enough to go home.*

*My parents changed in those years. My mother took the role of my nurse. She was with me 24 hours a day. She buried her head in the sand and had a strong belief that everything would work out. In contrast, my father isolated himself at home. He started drinking, lost his business and was prescribed strong nerve medication, which he became addicted to. My mother gave me security, care and love, whilst my father was absent and at times pathetic and full of self-pity when he got drunk.*

*After five years, in 1989, I was declared healthy. But even though I was healthy, the disease didn't disappear. Instead, it had left deep scars in my family. My father's substance abuse continued in the years that followed, and he disappeared into the dark of pills and alcohol, while my mother's focus remained on me.*

*In the subsequent years after my recovery, anxiety, OCD, and being different from my peers was predominant. I was more knowledgeable about the fragile side of life. Perhaps I was more Adult. But also, more inexperienced. More careful and more thinking. When I moved out from my parents' home, I cultivated freedom and repressed my medical history. I developed intense emotions, partied a lot, drank loads of alcohol, mixed with drugs and cigarettes. First in Oslo and later in Copenhagen, until I met my wife Cecilie and had my first son Sophus, where I slowed down. Becoming a father was a miracle, as I was always told, that I could not become a father due to my chemotherapy.*

*The following years, after I became a father in my late 20's, the demons of the past reappeared. The anxiety returned more potent, and I had long periods where I didn't sleep and had an obsessive focus on health. It developed into severe anxiety and depression, and I had a breakdown, where I was admitted to Hvidovre psychiatric hospital in 2009. It was clear that my anxiety could be traced back to my childhood cancer. At the time, I had several traumatic experiences where I almost died. Finally, after a long and arduous battle with life, with help from good medicine and a year with a psychologist, a need arose to tell my story. I ended up pointing the camera at my parents, and an investigation emerged into how cancer and the traumas have set their mark in our family.*

*My parents had stayed together despite my father's abuse, which escalated over the years. Until one day, when my mom said she would leave him if he did nothing about it. But it wasn't easy for him to return after being absent for so many years, and I could feel how much my father's absence still affected my mother.*

*At the time when I had cancer, not many survived. I had a 50 percent chance of surviving, but many other children did not share the same destiny as me. The focus was on survival and not how the people came out on the other side and the illness's impact on the families. All things considered; the story is positive. I survived. My parents' son survived. But in reality, it's much more complicated. It can leave deep scars in families to go through what we did.*

*It wasn't until the '80s that children survived cancer, and I am a 1st generation survivor. Documentaries about child cancer have often been told from the parent's point of view. This is, to my knowledge, the first time a survivor of childhood cancer tells his own story in a documentary format.*

*I hope this film can start a conversation about childhood cancer and create a focus on the treatment of both children and families when they go through such trauma early in life. It is more relevant than ever to talk about the time after childhood cancer, as 85 percent of children today survive. Yet, glazing at my own family, the illness is still present 30 years after it should have disappeared, in the relationships, memories and present emotions.*

*The film is also a universal story about how a crisis affects a family and how we cope with the crisis. It is essential to talk about the family traumas and acknowledge the mistakes and failures – even if it's been many years and one believes that it belongs in the past.*

*The film is ultimately a love story about how tough it is to forgive after experiencing trauma and failure that has been ingrained over decades. Also, the film is a reminder that it is never too late to make a comeback in life or say sorry and admit your mistakes, even if you have entered the autumn of life.*

## **FACTS ABOUT CANCER IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS**

- Each year around 380 Danish children and young people under the age of 25 are diagnosed with cancer. (source: [cancer.dk](#))
- The two most common types of cancer in children aged 0-18 are leukaemia, also known as blood cancer, and brain cancer. Together, these two types of cancer account for more than half the cases. In addition, there are connective tissue cancer and kidney cancer. (source: [cancer.dk](#))
- Today, 6 out of 7 children diagnosed with cancer survive. (source: [cancer.dk](#))
- The survival rate has gone up from 40% in the 1970s to 87% today. (source: [cancer.dk](#))
- Treatment for children and adolescents is often very intensive, lasting between six months and 2.5 years, depending on the type of cancer. (source: [cancer.dk](#))
- More than 50% of childhood cancer survivors experience late effects as a consequence of their treatment. (source: [cancer.dk](#))
- Late effects can include problems with growth, development, organ function and fertility, other types of cancer as well as psychological effects. (source: [cancer.dk](#))

## **THE COURSE OF MICHAEL'S ILLNESS**

- In 1984, Michael fell ill with flu-like symptoms. When it wouldn't go away, Michael's parents took him to the doctor. Later that evening, the doctor showed up at the family residence in Tønder and informed them that Michael needed to be rushed to Odense University Hospital.
- At Odense University Hospital, Michael was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia.
- They got Michael started on chemotherapy, which would continue for five years.
- In the final tests, more cancer was found and he had to start a new course of treatment for an additional two years. A new German cure had been made available and it proved effective.
- While in treatment, Michael suffered two anaphylactic shocks during which he almost died as a reaction to the medication.
- He did not attend school for his entire grade 1 year and was subsequently home schooled for the duration of his illness.
- The chemotherapy treatment resulted in numerous and lengthy hospitalisations in isolation.
- Michael often had side effects from the treatment, which made him very ill.
- In the 1970s and 80s, the first patients began to survive the diagnosis and Michael is a 1st generation survivor. There was a 50% chance of survival.
- In 1989, Michael was declared healthy after five years of cancer illness.
- He continued to go in for check-ups until he was 18 years old – and then went to the clinic of late effects at Rigshospitalet until he turned 40.
- In the years following treatment, Michael developed a severe panic disorder and OCD. He was not treated for it but it led to several hospitalizations and social challenges.
- Despite being told that he could not have children due to chemotherapy, Michael had a son Sophus in 2006 and another in 2012, Cornelius.
- In 2009, the fear of death returned and after a long period of anxiety, health focus and sleep problems, Michael was admitted to a psychiatric clinic for anxiety and depression, following which he saw a psychologist for about a year.

## KEY FILMMAKER BIOS

**Director Michael Graversen** (b. 1980) is an award-winning documentary director and author. Since "No Man's Land" (2013), the portrait of a children's asylum centre, Graversen has worked extensively on migration and refugee issues - both as a public debater and a director. "No Man's Land" was selected for IDFA and won awards at festivals in Hamburg, Tehran and Belgrade. In "Dreaming of Denmark" (2016) Graversen follows a rejected asylum-seeker, an Afghan boy, and his under the radar life in Europe over a four year period. The film was selected for 30+ festivals, nominated for a FACT Award at CPH:DOX and won several awards including Best Feature Documentary at North America's largest film festival for children and young adults, Chicago International Children's Film Festival and the Amnesty International Award in Giffoni. In 2022, Graversen will release three new films. "Aya", "Ghosts of Moria" and "Mr. Graversen", which is the director's first personal film. Graversen graduated from the National Film School in Beaconsfield with an MA in Documentary Directing and a BA from the University of Copenhagen in Film, Media and Psychology. In addition to his work as a film director, Graversen has published the books "Moria in Memmoriam" and "De uledsagedes bog": for the latter he received the Benny Andersen Prize 2020.

**Producer Mathilde Hvid Lippmann** (b. 1976) comes from a background as a production designer in theatre plays and fiction films but fell in love with the documentary genre and changed her field of work. She has a BA in Film and Media Studies from the University of Copenhagen and has been associated with Made in Copenhagen as a producer since 2013. She often works with new talents and has won the Danish Film Academy award for best short documentary twice - both by debuting directors. Latest she produced "Dark Blossom" (2021, by Frigge Fri), which won the Politiken:Danish:Award, was nominated for the Nordic:Dox award at CPH:DOX and for the Danish Film Academy award.

#### **ABOUT MADE IN COPENHAGEN**

Danish production company Made in Copenhagen produces compelling stories from the real world for Danish and international audiences. They work with an acclaimed mix of experienced directors and new talents and have a solid foundation within an expanding network of Danish and international funds, broadcasters, co-producers and distributors. It was founded in 2010 by producer Helle Faber, who is also the CEO of the company. Previous productions include award-winning films such as "Dark Blossom" (2021), "Skál" (2021), "Follow You Home" (2021), "Long, Live, Love" (2020), "Q's Barbershop" (2019), "A Married Couple" (2019), "The Stranger" (2017), "Me and Dad – No Expectations of Applause." (2015), "Warriors From The North" (2014), and "Motley's Law" (2015).

#### **THE FILM IS FUNDED BY**

The film is funded by The Danish Film Institute by film consultant Cecilia Lidin, DR1 by Anders Thomsen and Børnecancerfonden (The Foundation of Child Cancer).