

'A Royal Affair': History served sumptuously

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4-5 minutes

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Political intrigue and secret passions combine with idealism to edify and entertain about a unique period in European history.

A Royal Affair covers plenty of stately ground, all in good time.

History buffs and fans of romantic costume dramas will be captivated by this handsomely mounted and engrossing 18th-century drama that chronicles the rise of a revolution, but also finds time for some bodice-ripping.

In *A Royal Affair* (**½ out of four; rated R; opening Friday in select cities), writer/director Nikolaj Arcel — who wrote the Swedish screenplay for *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* — takes a fascinating chapter in Danish history, little-known to general audiences, and presents it engagingly.

The story traces how Denmark went from a backward country to one of the most progressive via the efforts of a German-born physician and his relationships with a mentally unstable king and his lonely, intelligent queen.

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The story is told through the eyes of Queen Caroline (Alicia Vikander), who as a young girl left her British home for Denmark without ever having met the king she was to wed.

Caroline had dreamed all her life of becoming queen of an exotic country. Her dreams didn't include a petulant clown for a spouse and a mounting sense of cloistered isolation within the palace walls.

Young and innocent, Caroline is an avid reader with a hungry intelligence. But when she arrives at the new court, her books are taken away as part of the country's practice of censorship. A kind lady-in-waiting helps her become acclimated, but the mentally unhinged King Christian VII (Mikkel Boe Følsgaard) publicly humiliates his new bride. When Caroline becomes pregnant after one of Christian's rare visits to her chambers, she feels her duties to him are complete. He spends most nights in the company of prostitutes while she languishes in resigned unhappiness.

Things change dramatically after Christian appoints a local doctor as his royal physician and confidante. Johann Friedrich Struensee (Mads Mikkelsen) is no ordinary caregiver. He's a learned man of principles who believes fervently in the Age of Enlightenment, which has begun to take hold in parts of Europe.

Caroline and Johann share ideas and banned books, and their interactions progress from long walks during discussions of Rousseau to secret nightly trysts. They are well-matched idealists, eventually risking everything in their passion and commitment to freedom.

It's an odd love triangle: The flighty Christian wants Struensee as his constant companion for fun and games, and Caroline and Struensee want each other and a more open Denmark.

But for a time all three are on the same page in issuing enlightened decrees. Christian's corrupt Cabinet had usurped power from a king who found matters of court and governance tedious. But Struensee inspires Christian to take back his dominion, persuading him to sign bills to improve the lot of the repressed citizenry and reduce the entitlements of the nobility.

Mikkelsen's expressive face and coiled ferocity bring his character to vivid life. He is well-matched by Vikander's nuanced performance.

An effective framing device takes the form of a poignant letter from Queen Caroline to her children. Living in banishment, she writes that following the brief period of enlightened rule, "Denmark has regressed to the Middle Ages while the rest of Europe blossoms. ... You are Denmark's best hope for a brighter future. I know you will make me proud."

The film's inspiring conclusion shows that her lesson did not fall on deaf ears.

The sumptuously rendered and well-acted *A Royal Affair* deftly blends political intrigue, philosophical idealism and sexual passion. It's a rare film that edifies and entertains in equal parts.

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