

The history behind *A Royal Affair*

7-9 minutes

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Note from the monkey: A criminally truncated version of this story appears in today's MovieStyle section of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

A Royal Affair (Mads Mikkelsen and Alicia Vikand...



By Piers Marchant for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* and BDA

Throughout Europe — if not everywhere in the world — Americans have the unfortunate reputation of being almost entirely ignorant of the history of other countries. In the same vein that the “ugly American” stereotype perpetuates the idea of our intolerance and disinterest in cultures other than our own, we’re known as being almost comically myopic.

So it comes as little or no surprise to the creative team behind the Danish historical film *A Royal Affair* that few of us in this country know anything about the factual story behind it. But at least we aren’t alone.

“It’s a hugely popular and famous story in Denmark. But nobody outside of Denmark knows about it,” explains director Nikolaj Arcel.

“Not even Germany,” says screenwriter Rasmus Heisterberg with a laugh. “It’s about the one good German in history, but no one will claim it.”

The film concerns a misbegotten 1766 marriage between Caroline Mathilde (played in the film by the luminescent Alicia Vikander), a young British princess, to Christian VII (Mikkel Boe Folsgaard), a half-mad king so wrapped up in his romantic entanglements and partying ways, he barely acknowledges her presence. That is, until the king befriends a sage German doctor named Johann Friedrich Struensee (Mads Mikkelsen) and invites him to the royal court. Once there, Struensee quickly becomes the friend and confidant to the queen, who is thrilled to have someone of intellectual heft to talk to, a situation that soon enough becomes romantic.

The doctor, a student of the burgeoning Enlightenment, has all kinds of progressive ideas for how the country should be run, and suddenly, with the sympathetic queen at his side, and a king who wants nothing more than to be told what to do, the doctor has the ability to enact far-ranging laws to give the downtrodden citizens of Denmark a sense of entitlement and power.

Down goes censorship, along with torture, the slave trade and noble privileges. In fact, so many laws are suddenly passed in so quick a time that the country roils in confusion. In short order, the formerly dark-aged country becomes the most enlightened and progressive of its time, so much so that the doctor receives a congratulatory letter from Voltaire, declaring the experiment an unprecedented success.

Naturally, many of these things do not sit well with the former governing body, which takes to the broadly effective method of negative propaganda and crude outsider stereotypes to turn the countrymen against the very proponents of their new-found freedom and empowerment.

If any of this is starting to sound familiar, that is entirely by design of the filmmakers.

“I was looking at a map of the U.S. yesterday, with the red and blue states,” says Heisterberg. “So, you know, you have the Republican Party fighting for the rich, but if you look at the rich states on the East Coast and West Coast, they’re blue. If you look at all the poor states, who should be voting Democrat, they’re red. It’s just backwards. It’s so interesting how propaganda works and how people think.”

“I think people are voting against their own interest, but it’s more about big business,” adds Arcel. “Big business — and this even happens in Denmark — is so controlling now, who will be elected and what people will be brainwashed to think, because they have endless amounts of money to do that kind of propaganda.”

So, we have the effects of propaganda and the big business agenda on display, yet the filmmakers insist they weren’t attempting to wed everything together in order to force a statement on modern politics. At least, that wasn’t their immediate intention.

“We didn’t have a specific political statement that we wanted to make,” says Arcel. “We wanted to tell something about politics and human nature, and the discussions we’re having today even happened back in the 1760s, and it hasn’t changed a lot. I don’t think we’re all suddenly going to change for the universally better: There’s always going to be that discussion in terms of do our leaders lead us towards helping others or ourselves?”

As for the film, as you can imagine, casting played a huge part in getting the story right. The good doctor was relatively simple — the highly decorated and charismatic Mikkelsen is one of Denmark’s most celebrated actors — but for the other two principals, there was a great deal of work to be done.

“Mikkel [Boe Folsgaard] was in acting school when we found him,” says Arcel. “He didn’t come as a fully formed actor, he came with an open mind. But he had a very big amount of talent and guts. That was very good for this part, his rawness and guts. I coaxed him, but he came up with the funniest things — the laugh and mannerisms, which he based on his research — so it was a little bit of a mix.”

As for the beautiful, tragic princess Caroline, Arcel had to perform the surprisingly difficult task of casting for royalty. As a measure of just how difficult it was, he ended up having to look outside his country.

“In Denmark, I looked at 60 women between 18-30 and not one possessed the regal quality that I was looking for,” he says. “So I actually had to go to Sweden, our neighbor country, and found Alicia [Vikander]. She had been a ballet dancer and she had been classically trained, so she’s very controlled in her moves and her actions and her eyes, without thinking about it. Even on set, I was a little intimidated by her. But it was really an eye-opener how difficult it was to cast royalty.”

With that in mind, just how accurate is the history the film portrays? It’s a question you get the sense they’ve had to answer many, many times, and for good reason: The truth in this case is indeed every bit as dramatic and telling as fiction.

“The best way to put it is Danish historians are universally really happy with the film,” says Heisterberg. “They think this is the closest thing we’ve got so far.”

“It’s far more accurate than you might expect,” adds Arcel. “Stuff has been dramatized, it’s not a documentary, but there were so many details about the way he did things and about the love affair that were just brilliant and dramatic and we used that.”

In the year and a half that Caroline and Struensee were in power together, they managed to enact more than 2,000 laws — a mind-boggling total by any measure — the vast majority of which were created to help liberate a chronically underprivileged and downtrodden population. Yet none of that was enough to earn the people’s grace in the face of the nobility’s personal attacks.

For Heisterberg, the entire incident suggests a simple and obvious truth: “It all comes down to education. That’s why it was so important for us to do a film about the Age of Enlightenment, and how it came to Denmark. If you enlighten people you can change. That’s where all the change comes from. The choice is always obvious if you know what’s right and what’s wrong. It also proves that progressiveness isn’t something that just happens, you have to fight for it.”

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