

## **The perfect mix between passion and power**

Just like the revolutionary doctor in *A Royal Affair* director Nikolaj Arcel beat the others to it. Arcel now presents the first feature film about the 18<sup>th</sup> century events of a small town doctor, who became the queen's lover, the king's friend and started a revolution.

*How did the idea for this film come about?*

"I was always quite fascinated by the big epic Hollywood movies of the 40s and 50s, even at an age where I should normally be more interested in action films. Still, I was very excited by all these pictures, even films like *Gone With the Wind*, and I was very interested in doing a film in that genre. After my second feature film in Denmark I was looking for material that could handle that epic feel. I didn't have to dig very deep. In Denmark we have this really popular historical event which is the story of *A Royal Affair*. As soon as I thought of it, I knew this had to be my next film. People had been trying to do it for 30 years and I knew it had to be done now. If I didn't do it somebody else would. I then started writing the script."

*How did it become possible to make the film for the screen now?*

"Basically there are no rights to this story because it's historical and many people were trying at the same time as us to get this film going. I know there were at least two other scripts being sent around Europe at the time; an English language film and another smaller Danish film. I sort of settled on my own take on the story because the difficult thing about this story is that it's a big epic love story but also a political thriller – and how do you mix these two genres without getting confused? We worked very hard on the script for maybe 8 months until we had the story that I wanted to tell. And even more importantly, what we felt was a really good mix between passion and power."

*What kinds of challenges are there in turning historical material into a film?*

"The greatest challenge in doing this kind of film in Denmark with a Danish budget is of course that a Danish budget is not enough to do this kind of epic film. Therefore, I had to be very practical and very precise about what I wanted to achieve. Of course I wanted to make a really big film in Danish terms, and I wanted to make an epic film. In terms of it being Danish I knew I couldn't make *Gone With the Wind* or *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Still, I think the main challenge for us creatively was to try and update the Scandinavian historical film. For many years the historical film has been a bit slow and leaning too much on historical facts. It's simply not modern enough. So what we really wanted to do was to bring the historical Scandinavian film into the new Millennium. The way we did this was by not just focusing on showing the historical age, the dresses or beautiful buildings. We were much more interested in primarily characters and situations and we wanted to tell the story as if it had happened today. That was very important to us and a big challenge, because sometimes when you write this kind of story you tend to fall for some of the genre clichés, like we need to see a big wedding between the Queen and the King. I think we avoided most of those clichés. "

*You still have some historical facts in the story?*

"Because it's such a popular story in Danish history we of course needed to stay as true to the real story as possible without being too heavy handed about it. So what we did was that we really became familiar with the actual events and what happened between the characters and at the court in this revolutionary time in Danish history. Then we went away from some events and put other events together and changed a little bit to some of the peripheral characters. Still, I think we stayed very true to the actual events. We didn't invent something completely new or say that somebody did something he couldn't possibly have done. So we were quite true to the story but we of course took some dramaturgical liberties from time to time."

*Is it different doing a film about a well-known story in terms of expectations?*

"I never think in terms of expectations. I couldn't really do a film if I was seriously thinking about how the audience would perceive it. Basically I can only do a film I really want to see myself, and this was definitely the case with this story. It was such a great story and quite amazing characters. I was so fascinated that I thought "if I'm this interested hopefully a lot of other people will be as well". So I didn't really think about expectations. Still, now that the film is finished and I'm ready to present it to the general population I of course start feeling

nervous. Did I get it right? Hopefully most people will love it and see the story that they know and love presented on screen in an interesting and dramatic way. But I'm sure some people will think: "That's not the way I think it happened or he or she was". But there's bound to be different opinions when you make something based on historical facts."

*Why Mads Mikkelsen, Alicia Vikander and Mikkel Boe Følsgaard for doctor Struensee, the Queen and the King?*

"The moment we started financing the film and I knew it was going to be a Danish language film, I thought of Mads as Johann Struensee. He was my first choice and perfect for this character; he's intelligent and has a sort of dark mysterious way about him. He is also just right for a love story, a handsome guy - but most of all a really great actor. When you have someone like Mads you don't really need any other stars, but I was luckily enough to cast Alicia. I'd been searching for someone to play the queen for many months among the Danish actresses. They were all talented but I couldn't find my version of Queen Caroline Mathilde. At one point I was very stressed out and asked if we could go to Sweden or Norway. I thought it would be logic to try since the character is a foreigner and has to speak Danish with an accent. When we saw the Swedish castings I immediately noticed Alicia. She has this special quality about her and burns through the screen. We knew she would be perfect for the Queen. I'm very lucky to have her. She is amazing and luckily we got her right before she took off overseas. As for Mikkel Følsgaard I had some other actors in mind for King Christian for a long time. I knew Christian was such an important part but I felt I had to find someone totally new to play it. That's really a hard thing to do because King Christian is a difficult part to play. Who is he...a little bit crazy, funny, dark? He has all these sides to him. But then my caster showed me a tape she'd done with Mikkel. As we speak he is still in theatre school in Denmark, so it was risky but definitely paid off. He really stepped up to the plate and gave it all he could. For me he will forever be King Christian the Seventh. He is perfect for the part."

*You shot the film in the Czech Republic. How did these surroundings become Denmark in the 18<sup>th</sup> century?*

"It was a logical choice for us to shoot in the Czech Republic. In Denmark the castles have been strongly renovated and look modern. So we had to go outside Denmark to shoot it. Both outside and in Prague and we found the perfect locations; streets, castles and houses that were perfect for representing Copenhagen in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Also, it was a really good way of travelling together with the production team and working with Sirena film. I felt supported by these people. This is the biggest production I've done so far and when we got to Prague and arrived at the first day of shooting, I saw 10-20 trailers, cars, vans and 130 people ready to work on this film. I was excited. In Denmark this never happens. We have much smaller crews and not this excess of gear ect. But for this type of film it's absolutely necessary to have this big production unit. So I was very happy to be there. The Czech crew was amazing and I had a really good time working with them. They are deeply professional and I'm not sure we could have had the same level of hard work if we'd stayed in Denmark."

*The film got an Oscar winning composer on board. How did you manage that?*

"I'd been thinking and worrying about the soundtrack and score for this film. It's really hard to make a good epic film score and we don't have that many sort of melodramatic, romantically inclined composers in Denmark or even in Sweden or Norway. Whenever I was presented with a composer I always told my producers I wanted it to sound more like Gabriel Yared. He is the composer of *The English Patient* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* whose music I really love and in fact listened to when I was writing the script. So I kept saying "it has to sound more like Gabriel". Then at one point they got enough and said "okay, we'll call Gabriel." So they managed to get a hold of him and I wrote him a very long gushing e-mail about how much I loved his music and he was touched by that. I think I was lucky enough that he thought: "Okay, I'll read this weird e-mail from this Dane". So I went to Paris and met with him. I told him about the story and the ambitions. He then accepted to write the main theme for the film. I was extremely happy and lucky. Now that the score is finished I'm honoured by what he has done together with his co-composer Cyrille Aufort. They have done an amazing job."

*What is this the main theme in this story?*

“The interesting thing about this film is that in a small pocket of time during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century some really big things happened in Denmark. The small town doctor Johann Struensee came to court, he became the queen’s lover, the king’s best friend and gradually he took over. He took power at the court and almost became the king for a year or so. In this period of time he changed everything. He modernised the Danish court and the Danish country. He was a revolutionary and started a non-violent revolution within a very short time. Sadly everything ended horribly and tragically. Still, in this late 1760s he did something amazing, that was also happening throughout Europe, based on the whole enlightenment movement – but Johann Struensee was almost there first.”

*What can we learn from this story of enlightenment today?*

“What I get inspired by in the story is that Johann Struensee was a true visionary of his time. I think that’s something we sometimes lack in modern politics. We lack people who really want to change things instead of always listening to the voters and looking at exit polls. He was a very simple man, a small town doctor and he looked at the world and said: “Something is wrong. Epidemics, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer”. Because he then got power he decided to change everything at once, only it was probably a bit too fast for the times. But I like the thought of visionaries – and hopefully good ones – turning up at different points in history and changing the world for the better.