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For the love of a Danish queen

EVAN WILLIAMS THE AUSTRALIAN JUNE 23, 2012 12:00AM



Mads Mikkelsen and Alicia Vikander get to know each other in *A Royal Affair*. Source: Supplied

HERE we have a fine, meaty, handsomely mounted and bracingly intelligent period drama about illicit passion and political intrigue in the royal court of Denmark.

Shakespeare, it will be remembered, covered similar ground in the best known of his plays, though there was some doubt in *Hamlet* whether the young prince was mad or feigning madness for his own purposes. There is some doubt, too, in *A Royal Affair* whether Christian VII, the young king of Denmark, is mad or simply a poor, deluded and deeply unhappy young man who proves disastrously inadequate in the job. It is part of the film's charm that we can never be quite sure.

All the history books I've consulted assure me that Christian was a "mental defective" (to use an old-fashioned term) - so much so that his powers were usurped by his German physician, Johann Struensee, who effectively ruled Denmark for a year or so while carrying on a secret love affair with the Danish queen. I have often thought that one of the advantages of a monarchy is that such stories can be made to seem not only plausible but in some ways familiar, and while the dialogue in *A Royal Affair* never quite rises to Shakespearean heights the story has the great advantage of being true.

But just how true, exactly? This is a Danish-Swedish-Czech co-production, directed by Nikolaj Arcel. The screenplay, by Arcel and Rasmus Heisterberg, is based on an erotic novel by Bodil Steensen-Leth, which told the story of the royal affair from the queen's point of view. It seems the producers were also influenced by a 1999 novel, *The Visit of the Royal Physician*, by Per Olof Enquist, which put a different slant on things and portrayed Struensee as an idealistic social reformer. At one stage Enquist was asked by the filmmakers to clarify which parts of his story were invented and which were based on documented events.

But I don't want to sound carping or suspicious. This is wonderful entertainment from start to finish. Arcel begins the story in late 18th-century England, where Caroline Mathilde (Alicia Vikander), sister of the Prince of Wales, is setting out for Denmark to become Christian's bride. Their first encounter is far from reassuring. The king (Mikkel Folsgaard) comes across as a mincing, dithering twit who treats her with contempt while lavishing affection on his favourite dog. When Caroline plays the piano at a banquet for the royal court, he taunts her with crude insults. Caroline is left in no doubt, however, about her primary duties. In the words of the dowager queen (a splendidly forbidding Trine Dyrholm): "If you get the king to visit your bedchamber on the first evening it will

be considered a great success." For Caroline, of course, it proves to be a dreadful humiliation.

The film's depiction of Christian is subtle and affecting. There are no black-and-white characters in *A Royal Affair*, and the king is never made out to be a heartless dolt. Følsgaard portrays him as pathetic, credulous, eccentric and hopelessly incompetent rather than deranged. He became attached to Struensee after a tour of France, Germany and England in 1768, finding him a source of guidance and companionship. As Mads Mikkelsen plays him, Struensee was no Svengali-like plotter but a man of rare learning and compassion. In the face of a hostile royal court, he wins the king's trust and goes some way to restoring his self-confidence and pride.

It is hardly surprising that the unhappy queen should have been drawn to the cultivated and charismatic Struensee. Imbued with the spirit of the Enlightenment, steeped in the writings of Locke, Rousseau and Voltaire, Struensee embodies the new age of progress and reform. The two begin a passionate (and well-authenticated) relationship that the film treats with restraint. Struensee, meanwhile, is consolidating his influence within the court. A crucial test comes during a smallpox epidemic, when he insists that the crown prince (Caroline's firstborn) should be inoculated. The principles of inoculation are not well understood and royal hangers-on are worried, but Struensee's will prevails.

I have seen no period drama in which the intricacies of power play and the contending social forces of the time have been more vividly conveyed. *A Royal Affair* is as much a political drama as a romantic one and the two strands are beautifully combined. The scenes where the timorous, tongue-tied king is emboldened to defy his court advisers and assert his royal authority for the first time are thrillingly good. He begins by dismissing the reactionary Bernsdorff (Bent Mejding) as head of the council of ministers and installing Struensee, who proceeds to implement a comprehensive program of social reform: better conditions for the peasantry, wider access to university education, protection for orphans, the abolition of harsh laws against unmarried mothers. Censorship laws are relaxed (and we remember that early in the film Caroline discovers some of her own books, brought from Britain, have been impounded by the Danish censors). It is strange to think that Denmark, widely seen as a model democracy, was once among the most oppressed and backward countries in Europe, where a peasant worker could be tortured to death for displeasing his employer.

Mikkelsen dominates the film with his magnificent portrait of the brave and decent Struensee. But his power was to last no more than a couple of years before he was outmanoeuvred and overthrown by the scheming dowager queen and the implacable Ove Hoegh-Guldberg (David Dencik), who put an end to most of Struensee's reforms. My history book tells me that Hoegh-Guldberg once declared that "the yoke of the peasant would not be removed without Denmark shaking and quivering to its foundation". On January 17, 1772, Struensee and his closest supporters were arrested. He defended himself before a commission of inquiry but finally confessed to being the queen's lover. He was beheaded and his body quartered at Copenhagen on April 28, 1772. Caroline, exiled and divorced, died in Germany in 1775, aged 24.

Perhaps the best comparison is with *The Madness of King George*, Nicholas Hytner's film about George III, whose drastic episode of mental instability was treated by another trusted physician (and it's worth remembering that Caroline Mathilde was George III's daughter). Vikander is supremely touching in the role, combining strength of will and vulnerability in a finely nuanced performance. And she has strong support.

A Royal Affair (M)

4 ½ stars

Limited release