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Feature

Nikolaj Arcel

On A Royal Affair

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With the Jubilee capturing the hearts and imagination of the nation what better time to release a film called A Royal Affair. Based on a true story this Danish films tells of a Queen married to a mad King who starts a relationship with her husband's physician and together they change the nation. From the man behind Swedish The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo Danish writer director Nikolaj Arcel tells Filmjuice all about those romancing Royals.

What attracted you to this story?

Well mostly the attraction came from, sort of, just being a Dane. Because in Danish culture it is completely part of our DNA, I guess. We all know it, it's a very, very famous story, they teach it to us in school, we've heard about it, there has been several documentaries about it, there was a big ballet, its very popular, there's even been an opera, several best seller novels have been written on the subject and so its almost like why did nobody do it before? So to me as a filmmaker, I did three films before this, it was more like can I get this done before anybody else does because I love the story of it.

Do you think that the UK will engage in the film the way that Danes have?

Well to be honest, I really have no idea because I did make it for the Danish audience. But I think, at least when I wrote it and directed the film, I always thought of it as being a sort of British, Danish, German film because its about a British princess coming to Denmark and its almost like a fairy tale in the way that she comes to the backwards country of Denmark and marries a crazy King and then falls in love with this beautiful, handsome physician and all that, and that was sort of the British angle and then its Danish because of the King and German because of the physician. So I also felt it was quite pan-European.

How closely did you stick to the facts?

Quite closely, I mean I did do a lot of research. Obviously I felt great responsibility because, alright I could lie to you and tell you anything, but in Denmark everybody knows the story so well that if I told even a small lie people would be after me immediately, they all know it so well so I had to be thorough in the research and obviously I did dramatise some stuff and I deleted a couple of characters that seemed extraneous but mostly its pretty well, its what happened.

Mikkel Boe Følsgaard is a newcomer, why was he so right for the part of the King?

This is probably one of the biggest strokes of luck I've had in my career, Mikkel because he's in acting school still, he's not even graduated yet. We were casting around for him and I couldn't find anybody who could embody that character because I had such a specific idea about of what he was supposed to be and I think my casting director just said "lets go to the schools, lets see what's happening in the acting schools" and then he came up in the casting and I thought "but he's perfect, where did he come from?" He was completely unknown and just embarking on this sort of adventure with Mikkel was wonderful because to him it was like acting school in itself, it was a big, big chance for him, a big lesson, and Mads (Mikkelsen) was his big idol so he's working with him. It was just a great adventure for him and I thought that, I mean you can even see it in the film, he's just perfect, he embodies Christian physically and sort of mentally and thankfully he's not like that in real life. So going from sort of, a complete unknown in acting school to actually winning the best actor award at Berlin was quite a journey for Mikkel I would say. Actually in Berlin, Mike Leigh was one among the jury and they told Mikkel at the awards ceremony dinner that if he was crazy for real they wanted the award back which



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was quite funny, but he's a normal guy.

You wrote and directed A Royal Affair; did that make the process easier for you?

I think it actually just gave me twice the work but to be honest I love writing and I also write for other directors sometimes, and I love directing but I can't really direct anything I haven't written myself, at least so far because I think that it's so personal to tell a story, how do you tell it, what do the characters say, what do they feel at all times, I have my own idea and I'm a bit of a control freak that way and I think, "no, it can only be told this way." But it is quite hard. It takes a lot of time to write. It takes sometimes up to a year to write a good script I think and it doesn't take as long to direct one so I think it would be lovely to get some other peoples scripts sometimes, just take those and go out and do them.

You've written very varied screenplays in terms of subject matter; do you think there is a theme running through them at all?

Strong women, I would say is a big theme for me. Even with the first film I wrote, my sort of breakthrough was about a thirteen year old girl who was sort of climbing mountains and doing all sorts of stuff like a superhero. So strong women and strong girls is a big thing for me, I don't know why. I think its probably because I seem to be more fascinated by strong women than I am with strong men because all the men are always depicted as being very strong and I think that's why I also chose Dragon Tattoo to write, to adapt that because I felt so closely, that I identified with Lisbeth Salander, the main character, and thought that I could really write her well.

Do you think that the monarchy is important?

You know, I'm not a big supporter of monarchy but I'm definitely not anti either. I like them, they're doing no harm, I can't quite see what they are actually doing other than bringing a certain level of identity, I guess, to the countries. I think that's important and to many people visiting Denmark a big part of it is that we have a Queen and the royal princes and all that but I would love to see the monarchies, you know Great Britain, Denmark, get involved a little bit more you know, in the everyday goings on of normal peoples lives, that would be wonderful to see and maybe more politically active even though I know that they can't really do that.

How did working on A Royal Affair compare to The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo?

The main difference obviously was that I didn't direct Dragon Tattoo, but apart from that they were quite similar in certain levels because on Dragon Tattoo it was the first time I truly connected with characters as a writer and I felt that characters are even more important than plot. I came from a school of "let's do an exciting plot and lets have fun, action and humour" and so when I worked on Dragon Tattoo I fell much more in love with the characters, instead of with the plot, and I worked towards that and that became a sort of epiphany for me. It was so much more interesting to work with the characters and so this is what I brought with me on this one, I didn't, I wasn't that interested, obviously it has a great plot this film because there's so much going on, but I was much more interested in the characters you know, the king, the doctor and so I wrote almost to be seen from the point of view of any one of these three main characters so that was actually quite similar.

The opulence of the film doesn't distract from the story, is this something you were going for?

My director of photography was really brilliant and he shot some really beautiful images but we weren't ever going for the too sort of painter-esque feel, we actually wanted to make it look more real. I wanted to make it a bit ugly actually, a bit sort of inspired by the whole dogma wave of directors and we did a lot of handheld camera stuff as well trying to make it not so stiff, a little more character involved, instead of just taking in the scenery at all times. So we weren't exactly going for opulence but it is integral in the lives that they lived out the drama. We always had this sort of mantra on set, we should not be too interested in the surroundings and the, you know the horses and the extras and all that and the dressing, we will always be more interested in what's going on, the emotional lives of the characters, which was an interesting way to do a period film, because a lot of period films tend to be a lot more interested in big, epic you know, and I think that its an interesting way to make a film. You can probably go further than we went, probably if I ever do a period film again, I would probably go even further and make it almost documentary.

How did you keep the film so historically accurate?

To be fair I had a really great team, a great production side, a great costume designer, I mean I did a lot of research into the period and the history, what were they doing sort of, what were they doing? Were they always taking walks? Were they always playing cards? What were they actually doing? I did a lot of research into that and they were always taking walks and playing cards because there was not a lot to do. But my team around me were doing a lot of the sort of grunt work into finding out the colours and the costumes and the sort of look of it all and what kind of paintings would be on the wall so I had a great team really working with that and telling me what was right for the scenes.

What was your decision in casting Alicia Vikander?

She's going to take off now, I think her next role is in Anna Karenina and then she's just finished shooting The Seventh Son, which is a big action film with Jeff Bridges so I think she's taking off now but I was casting every single Danish actress there is for this part but I couldn't find a regal quality, the royal sort of quality that you guys seem to have a lot of British girls that have this sort of quality, plus the girls are classically trained, and I couldn't find it in Denmark, they were too sort of "street" and so I had to go outside and I went to Sweden and then I found Alicia in Sweden and of course she

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had to learn Danish. She had two months to learn the entire language which is great but the good thing is that in the film she is supposed to have an accent, as obviously she had come from England, so for the Danish audience it really works, she comes off as a foreigner which is great and to you guys you can't tell the difference, but it is there.

Was Mads Mikkelsen your first choice for the role of Struensee?

Well he hadn't done a Danish film in a long time, for four or five years he had been in America doing villain roles I guess. I think that he and I had always wanted to do a film together, we had a mutual respect and I was a big fan of his and so I wrote this part, and said "if anyone can bring him, back to Denmark it will be this part," not because of the quality of my work but because, I'm not that self-deluded, but because its like, like, asking Meryl Streep if she wants to play Margaret Thatcher, that kind of big, it's a big part and everybody knows who Streunsee was, we all know that he is the big romantic, the figure of the 18th century so yeah, I was lucky, I was right about that. I think he admires Struensee, I think we all do. Right after the tragic events that happened, he was depicted as a villain because, obviously you know the victors had taken hold, and now there's been a historical reassessment for the past 20 or 30 years and now there's the empathy for him that I think he deserves.

A Royal Affair is in cinemas from 15th June. Take a look at the exculsive clip below.

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