

MADS MIKKELSEN

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DANISH REVOLUTION

From Bond villain to 16th Century adulterer Mads
Mikkelsen is Danish acting royalty...

Whether it's as a criminal mastermind walloping James Bond's bollocks with a length of rope, hammering away at the ivories as a Russian composer or crushing skulls as a mute Viking gladiator, Denmark's Mads Mikkelsen is always watchable. And while some actors get stuck in a rut playing different versions of the same character, Mikkelsen has made variety his *raison d'être*.

Difficult to pin down, he made his feature film debut as a drug dealer's sidekick in 1996's *Pusher*, directed by Nicolas Winding Refn (*Bronson*, *Drive*). His character got badly beaten with a baseball bat, but returned eight years later as the focus of the first of two sequels. The *Pusher* movies were set in modern-day Copenhagen, but 46-year-old Mikkelsen's CV reveals someone who is as at home in the past (he played Stravinsky in *Coco Chanel* and the Nordic warlord One Eye in *Valhalla Rising*), or even in the realm of fantasy, as he is in the present – he was by far and away the best thing in the *Clash of The Titans* remake (although a robotic owl would have stolen that movie).

The spread of Mikkelsen's work is all the more impressive for the fact that he didn't make *Pusher* until he was 30. Before that, he, like his equally high-cheekboned American counterpart, Christopher Walken, was a dancer. He hoofed professionally for eight years before entering Denmark's state-sponsored theater academy, at one point studying in New York at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance, and living in “the Village” with “Dancers, artists, and an ex-'Nam guy”.

In 2010, Mikkelsen was knighted by Denmark's Queen Margrethe II. A detail which lends a touch of irony to his casting as Johann Friedrich Struensee, in the period drama *A Royal Affair* out this month. Drawn from true events that are well known in Denmark but less so abroad, writer-director Nikolaj Arcel's film tells the fascinating story of a German physician (Mikkelsen) who is hired to accompany the apparently mad King Christian VII (newcomer Mikkel Boes Foelsgaard) on a tour of Europe. When they return to Court, Struensee strikes up an alliance with the Queen (Swedish rising star Alicia Vikander), whom he learns is, like him, sympathetic to the liberal Enlightenment

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thinking sweeping across Europe, but that hasn't yet reached the King's council. Fiercely anti-change, they jealously guard the interests of the rich and powerful. Sidelining the King, Struensee and the Queen embark on a radical programme of reform, and an affair that threatens to destroy them both.

Q Had you already been knighted when you made *A Royal Affair*?

A I had. They might take it back from me now [laughs]. We'll see.

Q Do you have any strong feelings about whether or not Denmark should still have a monarchy?

A I think Denmark is a very interesting place, because the most left-winged people do have a certain respect for our royalties. Some people say, 'Oh, they're too expensive, let's get rid of it.' But if you do the simple math, the amount of Danish films they sell in Asia is probably ten times as much. So looking on a business plan, it works. And I think even though they have no power, they do represent something of the modern Denmark and the older Denmark united.

Q Are you a monarchist then?

A I am not. But I am definitely for that they should stay, and stay for a long time. I enjoy them. And the whole nation gathers on New Year's Eve to hear the speech, which must say something about their popularity. We do not want to get rid of our democracy and we do want to keep them.

Q Struensee is a national icon in Denmark so everyone must have their own idea about who he was. Was that a challenge?

A This is satisfyingly a long time ago, so people have not met this character. We did another period film, *Flame and Citron*, about the resistance during the Second World War, and that was closer in people's minds and they had strong opinions about how the characters looked, how they walked, blah, blah, blah. We do not have the same opinion about these characters because everything is based on people writing about them, and what people write has a tendency to be influenced by what political party they're writing for. So if you are against Struensee you will have one cross-reference, and you will find another book that had a different portrayal of him. And the same with the King: you have people talking about him being totally stark raving nuts and other people saying he's the most cultured, most educated, nice rounded man.

**THEY
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THE OTHER
LEG. AND THEN
THEY TOOK
OFF THE PENIS**

Q Struensee is an idealist who becomes corrupted by power, isn't he?

A Like all good idealists you can only go so far before idealism turns into your own corruption, and he becomes the exact same thing as he was fighting a year before, without seeing it. I guess that every good dictator, every good demagogue, starts out with idealism. But the corruption is



always underneath and it's too late for him. He also makes another mistake in that he's changing a solid community overnight. He's too naïve. He's a very bad politician. He could have done this in six or seven years. Overnight, that's a big bummer.



Q You can't attack the rich as quickly and as hard as he does.

A Even the mob don't get it. And that, I think, is one of the very beautiful things about this story. He's a broken man in the end when he dies, and for different reasons. He's going to die, he's going to lose the love of his life, but most of all, I think, when he gets up on the scaffold, he sees that it's not 50 people spitting at him, it's 20,000 people who hate him."

Q His execution in real life was pretty brutal. It's been toned down in the film, right?

A Oh yes, it was very elaborate. They chopped off an arm, and let him lie there in pain. Then they took the head, but they missed two times. So there was three tries. The other arm. The other leg. And then they

took off the penis, held it up, and threw it out to the crowd and the dogs.

Q Why do you think people didn't notice that their lives were getting better?

A I have to be careful saying what I'm going to say now, but a big mass of people, if they have not been adequately educated themselves to believe in something, if things go too fast and over their heads, they don't see what it is. And if you change everything at once, it's chaos. But, obviously, the Enlightenment had to come. He just couldn't wait. The question is, how do you control the world? And how do you make the world think exactly what you want them to think?

Q You often get referred to as "James Bond villain Mads Mikkelsen". Do you mind still being identified in that way?

A I think it's got to be a passing phase. For 10 years I was the Sexiest Man in Denmark, even though that's 15 years ago, and that has gradually stopped. So it will stop with the James Bond villain as well. Time will take its toll. I don't mind, it's fine. A lot of people have seen other things, but it's an easy way to put a label on me.

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Q Did you get a lot of work offers off the back of *Casino Royale*?

A I got some bad guys offers, but they all looked the same. They looked quite boring. And then I got some offers from Europe that were much more interesting. If it had been something in Hollywood that was very interesting, I would have said yes. But it just didn't happen back then.

Q Is there one role that is special to you?

A For various reasons I would say this film was very special for us. We did have a feeling that we were stepping into a universe that's very romantic, and we had never done anything like that. I've also got to mention the second *Pusher* film. That was a milestone in terms of going a creative way with a film and a character that you don't like. I'm very proud of that.

Q *Pusher* has just been remade in the UK.

A It has? I didn't know.

Q Nicolas is involved at some level.

A Of course, yeah. If there's money in it, he's there [laughs].

Q What is it that attracts you to a film?

A Basically it's the script. It's a gut feeling and it's different from time to time. It can be just a family film like *The Three Musketeers*, or it can be something too deep for anyone to watch and I might be fascinated by that. I never know what it's going to be, so I go back and forth. I think we all need that in order not to become totally depressed.

Q You once said *Taxi Driver* had influenced all your roles.

A It was the way of telling a story about a man we disliked, and then we liked him, and then we

disliked him, and then we liked him – it just made me go out of the movie theatre with a gut feeling of having no idea what was hitting me. I was used to seeing films where that's the good guy and that's the bad guy, and the film gives you the answer, but this film gave me the questions. Whoah! It's a big thing for a film to do that. So, in my little humble way, I am trying to find that in every film.

Q Do you sometimes have to bring that yourself, in the way you play a character, or is it usually there in the script?

A I'm definitely not trying to be Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver*. But the dualism of that character is always there. And what I do believe is right is that drama is always something about the character, the person, who is looking in the mirror and what he sees is not what we see. He believes that he is one thing, but he might not be. I think that's super-dramatic and very human.

Q Are there any parts you'd have liked to play?

A Yeah, there are some films that are so fantastic I really wish I was in them. But why? They did a really good job already, so there's no reason. There's *Taxi Driver*, of course, and *Apocalypse Now*, *Indiana Jones*, some of the old horror movies. Having a fight with Bruce Lee, that would've been great.

Q Who'd have won in a fight between you and Bruce Lee?

A I hope I would have lost. If not I'd be, like, crying.

Q You also recently teamed up with your Danish compatriot, the former Dogme co-founder, Thomas Vinterberg, for *The Hunt*.

A Yeah, it's a beautiful story and, again, it's a very radical story. I have seen all of Thomas's works and

known Thomas since he was out of school. We never worked together and this was an opportunity.

Q What can you say about your character?

A Let's put it this way: there is a rumour in a town that I did something I was not supposed to do, and this town implodes with fear, guilt and hate.

Q Would you like to work with Lars von Trier?

He would push you to extremes.

A Yeah, I would. But I'm not interested in the crazy limits. If I was, I would just climb Mt. Everest. I do like when people have a vision and I can feel that's something they want, that they're burning for. But let's be boring if that's the good version of the film; I don't mind doing that. If there's no inspiration and they go, 'It's going to be fun and we'll make some money,' I'll go, 'See you later.' It's nice making money, but not if there's nothing else.

Q *The Hunt* is another Danish film. Is there a difference between the set of a homegrown movie and a Hollywood one?

A Obviously it's my language [on a Danish set] and we can skip the chit-chat. American sets, apart from having 500 people you have to say good morning to, it's not that different. Even if it's a huge set, the focus is the same. You concentrate the same way. But the surroundings are very different. We might be a little more efficient in Scandinavia than they are in America. They have a sloppy relationship with money where we would not be able to afford it back home.

Q And your wages?

A Not the same. But they will be.

A ROYAL AFFAIR IS OUT IN THE UK ON JUNE 15TH.

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WORDS STEPHEN APPLEBAUM