

Nikolaj Arcel Interview

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By: [Cassam Looch](#)

Royal fever might be gripping the UK at the moment, but the Danish film 'A Royal Affair' is a very different beast from the typical period piece we were expecting. We were lucky enough to talk to co-writer/director Nikolaj Arcel about his brilliant movie, that charts the madness of a King, his young Queen and a physician who comes between them.

We started by asking him about the reception the film has been receiving so far.

We were in Berlin, and got some awards there. In Denmark it's been huge, but that was almost a given because it's a big, very famous story over there. What's interesting is how the film will do now. How will this Danish period film open in the UK.

It doesn't feel like the typical "stuffy" period film though

Well I hope not. That will come down to people seeing it and telling others that. I actually like period films and epic films a lot. I really like the great ones from the 40's and the 50's, so I wanted to do my own – albeit small – epic. It's still a Danish budget after all! I've wanted to do a film like this for years, and I was very happy about that.



And how did that opportunity come about?

I think it was just random actually. Me and my co-writer were just talking about what we were going to do next, we had just come of two fairly big films and though "what can we conquer now?"

We started talking about this story, and wondered why it hadn't been made into a film before. We started reading about it and doing research and though "we have to do it".

We then ended up in a battle as three production companies were trying to get a film made about this subject, but luckily we got there first.

Was there anything new that you found out whilst researching?

Millions of things! I was completely surprised, I had no idea what was really going. Things like the manipulation of the press at the time and the way that the 'bad guys' were using the media to cause the downfall of the royals. I was very intrigued.

I fell in love with the characters. I read some letters that they had written to one another. I was very excited to see that they were like we are now. The letters felt alive.

We had to go to certain museums to get access, but that was granted quite easily. There have also been several books in which these letters have been published.

How about for the look of the film, how did you go about getting that right?

I usually have a big graphic book with my director of photography and the designers where we can all put in various images from magazines and paintings. It ends up being like a wall of images and we can then organically work out of that.

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Given your previous success [writing the original 'Girl with the Dragon Tattoo' script] was there a possibility of going to Hollywood, or even making a version of this film in Hollywood?

There was, not Hollywood but actually in the UK. We couldn't originally finance it with Danish money as it was too big, so we came here to do it. We had a British version of the script which related a lot more to Caroline and what was happening to her before she travelled to Denmark. But in the end, we raised the money at home and that made sense as it is a story so ingrained in the psyche. Danes would feel cheated.

I did think about going to Hollywood myself a couple of times, but it seems to me that the most success I have had is with not trying to make it big like some people will in Hollywood. Like writing 'The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo', I don't think I would have gotten an assignment like that if I went over to Hollywood, where I would basically have to start from scratch. I'm quite happy working where I am, but I would definitely do an English language film.

The cast you have assembled is excellent. How did you go about getting the right people for the roles?

The obvious choice for Struensee [the physician] is Mads Mikkelsen and as I was writing I was thinking about him. He hasn't done a Danish film for a few years now, so when I asked him and he accepted I was obviously very happy. When you have him as a lead things go a lot easier in terms of the financing and so on.



The most interesting thing with the cast is the guy who we got for the king had never done anything before. Mikkel Boe Følsgaard was in acting school, and so that was a big part and probably the most difficult. The character is manic depressive and slightly insane, so using an acting school guy was a risk, but he was so convincing. So I thought "lets just go for it and hoe he doesn't get too nervous".

Was there pressure to cast a more high-profile 'name'?

Yeah, always. They want known actors, but you have to push that away and just go for the right actors.

I thought the eccentricities of the King were wonderfully handled in the film. Again was there any point where you thought about making those more elaborate?

I think that the decision with the character we made with the editing. When we were filming I allowed him to go both bigger and more subtle with it. It speaks of his talent actually, that Mikkel was filming it 5 or 6 times in different ways. The idea was that you never really know where he is in his head. We then fine tuned it bit by bit, and I didn't want it to be too funny or anything like that. I think we made the right decision on this.

You've mentioned editing, writing and directing. Is that the way you normally work, and is that your preference?

That's how it is for me. I am a little bit of a control freak, and I think it can annoy a little bit, but not in too much of a bad way. My collaborators sometimes say "do you have to do EVERYTHING?" I have a hard time letting go of the storytelling elements. My designers and director of photography are very good at what they do, so I certainly don't interfere there.

How do you think the film will do internationally?

It's sold in the US. It will open in October, and I think that will depend somewhat on how it does in the UK. They will look over here to see how it goes. I don't think a Danish film will make a huge splash in America, but I hope people will like it.

And what about what's next for you?

I'm writing a crime trilogy. I'm writing those scripts and they will come out every Christmas for three years. The book was called 'Mercy' in the UK. And then I will figure out what to do next. I will have the space and time to write these scripts and then direct. It's quite freeing doing a trilogy because you can contain yourself and have ideas you can use sparingly.

So was there anything you left out of 'A Royal Affair'?

Not really, but there were some styling issues that I would like to play with in the future. The next, if I do a period film again, I have some new ideas. It's already a long film, and it's not a fast-paced action film so I think I have it all in here.

I'm sort of a fun loving guy, and I hope from the film that you can get that I don't take myself too seriously.



'A Royal Affair' is released nationwide on 15 June



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