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## Nikolaj Arcel - Writer/Director of A Royal Affair

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**Danish cinema doesn't often do costume dramas but the magnificent A Royal Affair - the true story of Queen Caroline's illicit romance with her husband's enlightened German physician, Johann Struensee - could change that. Its writer-director, Nikolaj Arcel (co-writer of the Swedish The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo movie), talks about breaking new ground, politics, women in history, and David Fincher.**

### **What drove A Royal Affair?**

"Blind naivete. I always do this because my debut feature was a political thriller called King's Game and when I did that everybody in Denmark said, 'It can't be done. It's too boring and dull.' My next film was a big fantasy adventure with big special effects and they said, 'It can't be done.' I'm not saying I always succeed; I'm just saying I always want to try at least."

### **This is an iconic story in Denmark. How close do you stick to the facts?**

"I dramatised quite a lot but I also worked with historians who are very familiar with this story and have even written books about it. So I'm not diverging too much from history, but I'm also not keeping too tightly to the facts."

### **Although set in the 18th century, the story seems to have some contemporary political echoes. Was that what interested you?**

"First of all it's for me a love story. But as a sort of political guy who is into politics, I also have a visionary come to Denmark and try to change everything and reactionaries killing him. So I thought that was maybe not a metaphor for something that could just happen in Denmark but has become a metaphor for what's going on around the whole world."

### **Struensee tries to bring the Enlightenment to Denmark with only the Queen's help. Why doesn't he forge more alliances?**

"He was a political amateur. He didn't know about what you needed to stay in power and he did all the wrong things. He went to bed with the King's wife. He cut the military, which is the main thing you should not do. And he took the money away from the nobility and the rich. He felt he could implement all these grand ideas and thought, 'Of course everyone will love me for it because they can see that it's good for them.' He was a little bit like Obama."

### **Are idealists doomed to failure?**

"The optimist in me would love if they had a chance but idealists fail so often that probably that would be my feeling, yes."

### **How important is this story to Danes?**

"It's very important. It's part of a cultural identity. We learn about it in school, we read about it in books, we see the ballets, the plays. It's not only a politically interesting story but also a very soapy, melodramatic, saucy story. There's death and birth and forbidden love, so it's like a fairy tale somehow."

### **Lars von Trier is one of your executive producers. How involved was he?**

"He was not there on the set; that would have been horrible. Everybody would have been like: 'What does Lars think?' No, he was a consultant on the script so he would read various stages of the script and tell me what he thought and bring me some ideas. Then when I was editing the film he came into the editing room several times. So he was involved before and after actual shooting."

### **What were the traps you wanted to avoid?**

"A lot of directors who do these historical films fall in love with their own ability to show everything. You know, let's slowly move in on the castle for 10 minutes while I show you how big a director I am. I was always a little bored with these kinds of films and I thought I would really try to avoid that and just stay on the characters. But even though I had this dogma, obviously I do sometimes fall into the trap. You can't help yourself."

### **David Cronenberg's A Dangerous Method acknowledged the little-known role of a woman in the development of modern psychiatry, and here you show the Queen's role in the attempted modernisation of Denmark. Do you feel that women have often been erased from history?**

"Yes, I definitely think there has been a lot of erasure of female characters. In this story, and in real life, I think [the Danish statesman] Guldberg said to Caroline, 'We will not judge you too much because you only see through the eyes of the man that you love,' which is so typical of those days. When you read her texts, she is not only seeing through the eyes of him, she has her own eyes and her own brain. So yes, I think it's probably healthy to do this slight kind of revisionism and say, 'Okay, she was there and of course she had a huge influence on [Struensee].'"

### **Finally, were you surprised by the international success of The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, and what is your opinion of David Fincher's remake?**

"I wasn't surprised by it at all because of the book, which was a big hit, and because of Noomi [Rapace, who played Lisbeth Salander]. She is fantastic, the book was great, so we already had a good basis. I haven't seen the Fincher version. I am a big Fincher fan and I am scared, basically, of watching it, because I feel I will get a slap in the face saying, 'Look what we can do.'"

### **A Royal Affair opens June 15**

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