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A Royal Affair – Review

June 5, 2012 By Mairéad Roche Leave a Comment

Based on true events in the Danish court of the late 1700s, **A Royal Affair** charts the rise of Johan Friedrich Struensee (Mads Mikkelsen) as he strives to bring Denmark out of its medieval feudal system and into ideals of the Age of Enlightenment.

The young Danish King, Christian VII (Mikkel Boe Følsgaard), is mentally unstable, preferring to play out childish impulses than be king. His English bride Caroline (Alicia Vikander) provides the kingdom with an heir but is trapped in an unhappy marriage and due to Danish censorship is unable to access the works of the Enlightened writers she so admires.

Mikkelsen's Struensee and Vikander as Caroline are portraits of characters who would excel in the world of the 21st Century but who are hemmed in by their social positions and circumstances in the 18th Century. Used to living behind their own individual masked contempt, in finding each other they begin to play dangerously along the edges of happiness and Enlightened hope.

Christian is masterfully played by Følsgaard, in his first screen role. His performance is both unnerving and allows the audience to be sympathetic for a person who by birth has been trapped within a royal

golden cage and entirely ill-equipped to handle the world around him.

Director Nikolaj Arcel teamed up with his fellow Girl with a Dragon Tattoo (Swedish original version) co-writer Rasmus Heisterberg to create a film not hampered by the need to show every minute detail of fabric within the late 18th Century setting.

Instead the film plays not as a period piece but as a political drama that happens to be set in the world of late 18th Century Denmark. The benefits and corruptible nature of power is explored as we see the characters wrestle with materialising their ideals but needing to do so in a less than ideal human environment.

Large political aspirations are kept intimate and affecting by the film's concentration on the love triangle between Johan, Caroline and Christian. They become a loving group though Christian is unaware of his status within this newly established family. He calls his wife 'Mother' and Johan acts like the warm kind father/brother that Johan has obviously been missing in his life. The adulterous couple care for Christian as if he was the very ailing state that they are trying to bring to full health in Denmark. The belligerent forces around them are not portrayed as mindless naysayers. Rather as the film develops, power is shown to place people on either side of its coin.

Steering clear of pageantry the film feels grounded and the evolution of the characters and story are realised and realistic. There are no grand speeches. Instead we have introspection and internalised thoughts and emotions that prove disastrous when not kept masked in plain sight.

However, director Arcel does not luxuriate in A Royal Affair's setting but rather on the fleeting expressions of thought and emotions that pass across Mikkelsen's face as Johan manipulates his position to bring about a greater good that might well be his own moral undoing. Narrated through Caroline's retrospective letters we are given an ideal version of events which brings out the sadness of the opportunities missed for these noble characters.

Film Rating: ★★★★☆

UK Release Date: 15th June

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