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A Royal Affair review ★★★★★



Review by Jenny Priestley

Stars Mads Mikkelsen, Alicia Vikander, Mikkel Boe Følsgaard, David Dencik, Trine Dyrholm, Thomas W Gabrielsson, Cyron Bjørn Melville, William Jøhnk Nielsen, Laura Bro

Written by Rasmus Histerberg & Nikolaj Arcel

Certification UK 15 | Sweden 11

Runtime 137 minutes

Directed by Nikolaj Arcel

Set in the late 18th century, A Royal Affair is a romantic drama of sumptuous proportions. While including all the intrigue of Court, the story is really about three people caught in a love affair which has a huge impact on their country.

The story follows 15-year-old Caroline Mathilde who is married in absentia to Christian VII, King of Denmark. Expecting her new husband to be all she's been led to believe, Caroline soon discovers Christian isn't quite 'all there'. After doing their Royal duty and conceiving a son, Christian takes his leave of his new wife and embarks on a year-long tour of Europe. However, it soon becomes clear Christian needs help and two recently exiled Noblemen conspire to install their own man as the King's doctor. German-born Johann Struensee is a freethinker who gains the King's trust by quoting Shakespeare with him. Struensee soon becomes the King's right-hand man, even managing to dissolve the governing Council and become co-head of state. He also begins an illicit affair with the Queen which of course eventually leads to their downfall.

I'm not really giving too much away there, the film begins with Caroline writing a letter to her children to explain the reasons as to why they do not know their mother. I almost wish Arcel had chosen to begin his film at the start of the story. It takes a little of the dramatic tension away when the audience has a pretty good idea where the story is headed.

As I said, at the heart of this story is the love affair, not just between Caroline and Struensee but also between Christian and doctor – the King begins to look at Struensee as a father figure. And while the doctor is able to manipulate the King to his way of thinking, it's never done with malice but with a conviction that what he is doing is for the good of Denmark.

All three of the leads are on excellent form. Mikkelsen of course is known to Western audiences and Vikander will be seen in Joe Wright's forthcoming Anna Karenina. For me, the revelation is Følsgaard as Christian. You're never quite sure how much the King knows – does he realise what's going on around him or is he really mad?

It's a hugely enjoyable film with fantastic production values – if there's any justice, the costume designers will get some kudos come awards season. Whilst it is a little to guess where the story is going the film is still utterly absorbing and is well worth its two-hour plus runtime.

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