



## Film Review: A Royal Affair

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Nikolaj Arcel's *En Kongelig Affære* (*A Royal Affair*), a costume drama based on the true story of King Christian VII of Denmark (Mikkel Følsgaard), is a studious, competently-made period piece, but it struggles to differentiate itself from many similar films, and ultimately lacks real bite.

At its heart is a good performance by Alicia Vikander as Caroline Matilda, a British Royal shipped off to marry the Danish king. She picks up the language quickly, but her dream of marrying a handsome, scholarly king is swiftly tarnished. Christian, it seems, is suffering under some mental condition, and his primary attitudes towards her are variously scorn or disinterest. Instead, she finds comfort, and eventually love, in the charismatic presence of Johann Struensee (Mads Mikkelsen), the king's newly appointed physician, whose penchant for Enlightenment thinking and revolutionary political ideas are happily in tune with her own.

Christian has little power in matters of state; his counsellors are all too aware of, and willing to exploit, his deficiencies. But when Johann realises that the king's affection for him has inadvertently given him influence over the whole country, he begins to find ways to get Christian to act on his behalf, and to instigate the kind of reform he'd only previously dreamed of. This creates an interesting mechanic in the narrative as Christian is manipulated at every turn, on the one hand by his conservative advisors, and on the other by his friend, whom he trusts implicitly, as a child does his parents.

Meanwhile, there is a love story going on between Johann and Caroline, which further complicates matters. As it happens, the chemistry between the two leads simmers charmingly rather than ever really burning, and so the most affecting relationship is the one between the king and his deceptive confidant. No real background is given for the King's condition, and while this is plausible given the time period, a hint at the abuse he reputedly suffered in his childhood might have given the character some more depth. In the event, he serves mainly as a figure to be variously pitied, laughed at and despised. Likewise, the concentration on the central relationships does somewhat dilute the film's political background – montages of newspaper headlines tantalise, but don't quite cut it – though that isn't too much of an issue in what is, first and foremost, a romance.

The film is nicely shot, and has an effective, undulating score by Gabriel Yared and Cyrille Aufort. It's rather solemn, drags on a little too long and doesn't quite earn the emotional payoff it aims for in the final act, but it gets by primarily on good central performances from Vikander and Mikkelsen. It's unremarkable, but it tells an interesting story many people might not know, and is not without flashes of real quality.

★★★★★

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