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A Royal Affair: one to remember

The court of Christian VII of Denmark was rocked by adultery, madness, and sado-masochism - but all they really cared about was who got to wear the trousers

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Pure, charming romance? Not likely ... Alicia Vikander and Mads Mikkelsen in A Royal affair

Director: Nikolaj Arcel

Entertainment grade: B+

History grade: B+

A Royal Affair (En Kongelig Affaere)

Production year:
2012

Countries: Denmark, Germany, Rest of the world, Sweden

Cert (UK): 15

Runtime: 128 mins

Directors: Nikolaj Arcel

Cast: Alicia Vikander, David Dencik, Mads Mikkelsen, Mikkel Boe Folsgaard, Trine Dyrholm

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Princess Caroline Matilda, sister of mad king George III of Great Britain, was married off to mad king Christian VII of Denmark at the age of 15. She later began an affair with his chief minister, Johann Struensee.

Marriage

Young Caroline Matilda (Alicia Vikander) meets her betrothed (Mikkel Følsgaard) at a crossroads, where he is relieving himself against a tree. According to historian P Nors, their real first meeting was "exceedingly romantic", to the point where 17-year-old Christian "committed a number of awful breaches of etiquette by embracing and kissing her repeatedly in the presence of the whole Court". The film is right, though, that he soon tired of her. Christian had suffered a brutally abusive upbringing at the hands of his guardian, Ditlev Reventlow: regular beatings had often left him writhing on the palace floor in agony. "He's been difficult since childhood," the film's Reventlow explains, "but I think most of his problems stem from excessive masturbation." The king's excesses also included drink, sado-masochism, handsome young men and

prostitutes, most famously Støvlet-Cathrine, or [Catherine-of-the-Boots](#). The Danish court considered it appallingly bourgeois to be in love with one's spouse.

Health



Christian's mental illness is soon so severe that a full-time physician must be engaged. Enter Johann Struensee (Mads Mikkelsen), who vigorously encourages the king's carousing and whoring. Christian and Struensee roll in late from a brothel excursion, earning a ticking-off from Caroline Matilda. "The world's full of princesses, and I got stuck with the grumpy one," Christian complains. Struensee expertly diagnoses that the queen is "in a bad mood". In fact, she had a serious illness at this point – one whose details have not been recorded, but which apparently nearly killed her. Court gossip plausibly suggested it was a venereal disease: probably an unwelcome gift from her husband.

Romance



In the film, Struensee and Caroline Matilda bond over a shared passion for Enlightenment ideas. Though Struensee was a free-thinker, there's scant evidence of intellectualism in Caroline Matilda's biographies. Furthermore, in trying to present Struensee's relationship with Caroline Matilda as a pure, charming romance, *A Royal Affair* delicately leaves out court gossip that he was also having an affair with her lady-in-waiting, Elisabeth von Eyden. It was said that he carried on with both women for quite some time, making them spittingly jealous of each other.

Scandal

"There is the devil to pay in Denmark," wrote Horace Walpole. "The Queen has got the ascendant, has turned out favourites and Ministers, and literally wears the breeches, actual buckskin." Sadly, the film does not show Caroline Matilda's famous penchant for transvestism, which outraged Copenhagen even more than her extramarital affair. She was often seen walking through the city arm in arm with Struensee, both of them wearing tight-fitting leather breeches and scarlet coats. The effect particularly alarmed her ladies-in-waiting, for the real Caroline was more sturdily built than the one in the movie. "If only she were well made, I could understand her walking about in that costume," wailed Mme von Gramm, "but just think of her hips, her – quarters!" Yes, her royal bum looked big in that.

Politics



Struensee rises to a position of almost dictatorial power at court. The film is right that many of the reforms he enacted were remarkably progressive. These included a decree

that aristocrats, who had previously been allowed to build up enormous debts without legal penalty, would henceforth be imprisoned for failing to pay back what they owed. Ninety per cent of them immediately scurried off into hiding. Viewers may find themselves feeling that modern Europe could do with a few Struensees to take on its bankers. Unsurprisingly, the ultra-conservative faction at court has it in for him. The film's depiction of what happens next is sadly accurate.

Verdict

A Royal Affair is a watchable and historically respectable retelling of Caroline Matilda's extraordinary story – but what a pity we didn't get to see her in drag.

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willco1

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