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## A Royal Affair

**Helmer Nikolaj Arcel reaches back to 18th-century Denmark to spin a real-life tale of intrigue, power, money, sex, love and betrayal in the handsome, character-driven historical drama "A Royal Affair."**

By ALISSA SIMON

**Helmer Nikolaj Arcel reaches back to 18th-century Denmark to spin a real-life tale of intrigue, power, money, sex, love and betrayal in the handsome, character-driven historical drama "A Royal Affair." Taking the perspective of unhappy Queen Caroline Mathilda, the British princess who cuckolded mad King Christian VII with his German physician, Johann Friedrich Struensee, the film stretches credibility and historical fact in suggesting that she was the driving force behind the enlightened reforms of the short-lived "Struensee era." No matter; TrustNordisk presold most territories on star Mads Mikkelsen's name and a steamy teaser, although this is no potboiler.**

Framed by the letter that the ailing Caroline (Alicia Vikander) writes to her children in 1775, the action flashes back to show her arrival at the Danish court in 1766 as a naive teen, crushed to discover that Christian (terrific newcomer Mikkel Boe Folsgaard) is mentally unstable and not attracted to her in the least. Nevertheless, to the disappointment of wily Dowager Queen Juliane (a fearsome Trine Dyrholm) and the king's ambitious, manipulative tutor, Guldberg (David Dencik), Caroline manages to produce an heir.

When scheming nobles Rantzau (Thomas Gabrielsson) and Brandt (Cyron Melville) encourage the appointment of Struensee (Mikkelsen), a German intellectual from the Danish colony of Altoona, as doctor to the pious court, his rationalist ways soothe the troubled king, who makes him his confidant and, eventually, chief minister. Caroline, too, warms to the visionary doctor who loans her his treasured volumes of Rousseau and Holberg. Soon they're sharing more than a library -- and rapidly proposing reforms that benefit peasants and serfs at the expense of the nobles, who are asked to pay back taxes and give up sinecures.

Although the royal affair outrages the court, the idealistic Struensee fails to see that it is his challenge to entrenched interests that will spell his downfall. Goading the nobles (who are unwilling to give up their privileges), the military (which opposes demobilization) and the general populace (which fears foreign influence), Guldberg and the Dowager use every means possible to seize power.

Surprisingly the first fiction film to treat this subject, "A Royal Affair" (as scripted by Arcel and Rasmus Heisterberg) try but don't always succeed in balancing this epic love story with political thriller elements as they pack more than five years' worth of momentous events into slightly more than two hours. The intrigues of the court and escapades of mad King Christian tend to trump the weak chemistry between Mikkelsen and Vikander for interest; although both thespians look their parts, they are at their best in separate scenes, in particular as they reflect on the ends of their lives.

Splendid locations in the Czech Republic effectively stand in for the streets, houses and castles of 18th-century Denmark, although numerous processions through the countryside by carriage or on

horseback might be trimmed a bit for a pacier running time. Lenser Rasmus Videbaek uses a gloomy palette that evokes the lighting conditions of the era, but allows the screen to bloom with color during the final summer of the lovers' affair. Weak link in the quality tech package is the generic score by Gabriel Yared and Cyrille Aufort.

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