

Social Evolution with a Twist in ‘A Royal Affair’

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – European history is – in a sense – our history, especially as it relates to the “Age of Enlightenment,” the intellectual movement in the 1700s that anticipated the Declaration of Independence. One of the quirks in that timeline is passionately explored in the new Danish/French film, “A Royal Affair.”

The royal families of that era were just as screwed up as our modern versions, and in highlighting one of those courtly marriages gone wrong, director Nikolaj Arcel brings definition to that enlightenment age, where society seemed to change with each new idea or technology. The intense passion that the secret lovers of the king's court generate is the light toward the change, given their non-traditional rejection of marriage in its most symbolic form. Although the film moves at a slow pace, the narrative is one of intrigue and historic wealth, directed with a sure hand and period truth.

King Christian the VII of Denmark (Mikkel Boe Følsgaard) must take a wife, and Caroline Mathilde (Alicia Vikander) is a willing victim from the British royal court. Their pairing is difficult, as Christian is a flighty pansexual creature, more interested in playing king than being king. His oddness is so pronounced, that the royal government brings in a series of physicians, and when all are interviewed it is Johann (Mads Mikkelsen) – a intellectually pragmatic surgeon from the city – that favors the king's attention.



Mads Mikkelsen as Johann and Alicia Vikander as Caroline in ‘A Royal Affair’
Photo credit: Magnolia Films

As he becomes closer to the royal life, Johann realizes that he can bring his radical and people-progressive ideals straight to the government, and begins a series of programs that he gets the king to buy into. At the same time, he notices the queen, lonely and bereft as just a child bearer. Their friendship becomes an ardor, and their ardor becomes an affair. All is well when the liaison is conducted in secret, but the implications for finding out this secret means the king's opposition may have ammunition to quell the progressive legislation. It's that edge-of-the-knife circumstance that can collapse an entire regime.

The three lead actors are both period friendly and appropriately intense. Følsgaard is a wacky and off-kilter King Christian, weak-willed and aggressive at the same time. Vikander's Caroline is a delicate beauty, and her thirst for the knowledge of the age is part of her seductive appeal. The character of Johann, so important to the crumbling of the situation, is perfectly cast in Mads Mikkelsen, who has a perfect sorrow and courage for the role. This is not the typical royal parlor room period film, it is driven by the character evolution, and at the same time society's evolution.

Director Arcel keeps all the proceedings viable by a deliberate narrative (he co-wrote the script with Rasmus Heisterberg), relating the story bit-by-bit to show how corrupting powers conflict, both within the affair and also in the opposition to change. The first love scene between Johann and Caroline is appropriately incendiary, as if foretelling a future firestorm. Carnal canoodling was serious business in those days, and in that seriousness a true flame was lit between the queen and the good doctor.

The film look sumptuous, but at the same time conveys a bit of the conditions of late 18th century life. Before Dr. Johann joins the court, he deals with a viral plague that has "health clinics" so full that people are dying in the streets. King Christian is obviously bi-polar or has some other mental illness, but just has to live with the madness and the effects it has on the country with his actions. Women are second class citizens, even in royalty. With all the trappings that Caroline has, she can't help but feel trapped.



A Menage in Time: Johann, Caroline and King Christian VII (Mikkel Boe Gølsgaard) in 'A Royal Affair'

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

The story is absorbing, and moves at a pace that is a bit overlong. There is an inevitable result to the affair, but in its predictability there is a nice ray of hope. This is "Masterpiece Theater" style territory and it is subtitled, so if the titillating name of "A Royal Affair" brings you in – for example on a third date – then be prepared to have a discussion of Age of Enlightenment implications over post-theater cocktails.

The old adage "a ripple of water begins a wave of change" can even be inflicted by two lovers, given the right time, influential pedigree and softness of bed. Instead of birthing babies, it can result in a birth of a revolution.

"A Royal Affair" has a limited release, including Chicago, on November 9th. See local listings for theaters, show times. Featuring Alicia Vikander, Mads Mikkelsen and Mikkel Boe Gølsgaard. Screenplay by Nikolaj Arcel and Rasmus Heisterberg. Directed by Nikolaj Arcel. Rated "R"



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