



CAUGHT IN THE ACT! This is what it looks like when Mads Mikkelsen and Alicia Vikander act out the most famous affair in the history of Denmark. On screen it looks elegant and perhaps even erotic but on set it is a multi-dimensional craft which has to come together to form the final product.

When the Danish motion picture “A Royal Affair” premieres today a great deal of credit for the look of the film is owed to Danish production designer Niels Sejer. Not many people know this, as his job is one of the most overlooked of the industry but he’s fine with that - because the best production design is that which you do not notice.

INTERVIEW

It became an affair of historic proportions when King Christian VII’s physician, Struensee, opened the door to Queen Caroline Mathilde’s bedchamber. An affair carved into our collective memories in all its scandal and juicy detail. So how do you make it credible for an actor like Mads Mikkelsen to jump, tanned, out of an airline commercial, and into the sheets of sin at Christiansborg in the year 1776? How do you make us forget the prominent jaw and washboard abs and accept the ponytail and knee high socks? You do so by teaming up with a very good production designer, as it is



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called today: the kind of person who builds war sailing ships, turns particle boards into castle walls covered in patterned wallpaper and blows smoke across the cobbles to make the streets look like Copenhagen during the Age of Enlightenment.

Niels Sejer is that kind of guy, and he is the one behind the revival of the Danish capitol to the time when the streets were full of dirty dresses and folklore, and the court reeked of powder and wigs. In close collaboration with director Nikolaj Arcel and cinematographer Rasmus Videbæk, he has created one of the greatest period pieces in Danish film history with “A Royal Affair” which premieres today.

The space helps tell the story

Production design has long stood in the shadow of the director’s and cinematographer’s work in spite of the very visible imprint that a production designer leaves on a film. You might even say that without the production designer, there would be nothing left to shoot other than a couple of actors in an empty space.

“Obscurity has always followed my craft

but that’s okay - it’s not a line of work you choose in order to become famous”, says Niels Sejer and laughs on the phone all the way from Philadelphia, where he is about to shoot Niels Arden Oplev’s new movie, which he and the director describe as an action-thriller with “an arthouse heart”.

And he has progressively been the obscure element in an impressive number of films, such as Henrik Ruben Genz’s ‘Frygtelig Lykkelig’ and ‘Kinamand’, Søren Kragh-Jacobsen’s ‘What No One Knows’, Niels Arden Oplev’s ‘The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo’, Nikolaj Arcel’s ‘Kings game’, as well as television series “Forbrydelsen” [later remade in English as the ‘The Killing’] and “Broen”: works which are all characterized by a predominant sense of space and a thoughtful visual universe, which significantly help narrate the stories. And precisely the space as a narrating element was what drew Niels Sejer in as he began his career as a production designer.

“It is interesting for me to see how the setting interacts with or counteracts the story; how a space can complicate or simplify things, like the effect of people placed in a frame that doesn’t match them, or when emotion is shown through surroundings, such as solitude illustrated by placing someone in a crowd, in short; bringing emotions into a space”, he says. “Space is everything. Some people find that production design is about design, good taste or smartness, and I think that style is incredibly interesting because it addresses how we stage ourselves, but my job is about many other things: it’s a sense, a gut feeling and is very much about fascination and a subjective perspective on the world, about knowing how things connect and when something has an edge”.

The childhood wonderland

Subjective outlook and self-created worlds existed early on in Niels Sejer’s life. As a child he was always the one



Foto: Jasper Spanning

NIELS SEJER

Danish production designer. Born 1963 in Vesthimmerland.

Trained architect from the Danish Royal Academy of Arts in 1992. Studied Theatre Design/Technology at State University of New York and worked as an assistant in New York for 1 1/2 years.

Has done production design on films such as:

Møv og Funder

(Niels Gråbøl, 1991)

Det bli'r i familien

(Susanne Bier, 1993)

Ørnens øje

(Peter Flinth, 1997)

Bornholms stemme

(Lotte Svendsen, 1999)

Kongekabale

(Nikolaj Arcel, 2004)

Kinamand

(Henrik Ruben Genz, 2005)

Nynne

(Jonas Elmer, 2005)

De fortabte sjæles ø

(Nikolaj Arcel, 2007)

Frygtelig lykkelig

(Henrik Ruben Genz, 2008)

Det som ingen ved

(Søren Kragh-Jakobsen, 2008)

Mænd der hader kvinder

(Niels Arden Oplev, 2009)

Samt tv-serierne:

Forbrydelsen (2007) og

Broen (2011).

who envisioned worlds before they were built with boards and blankets. And then there was *Kludderland*, a world invented with a friend, which included a special language and certain rules and terms for those involved. *Kludderland* [in English, roughly “Muddleland”] had intricate decor and existed only in the heads of Niels and his friend, as it was an invisible world which no one else had access to.

However, it wasn’t until he began studying at the school of architecture that the path to a career as a creator of spaces became apparent to him. After a week-long course on architecture in film, where the students watched “Blade Runner” and “Taxi Driver” amongst others, something clicked.

“There was something about the combination of the spatial element and having a story to tell which drew me in”, Niels Sejer says, and laughs as we talk about his childhood *Kludderland*. “But it is so incredibly essential! It’s so much fun to create a world from scratch. It’s childish as hell and all adults know it. I never get sick of walking through a door and entering some sort of funky new place. I can stand around in my jeans with a coke in my hand but when I enter that door it’s the year 1776. It’s basically the closest I will ever get to being a time traveler. It’s damn exciting in a very childish way.”

The art of recreating old Copenhagen

Anyone who has seen ‘A Royal Affair’ knows that the spaces are anything but inconsequential to the overall effect of the film, which takes place in Copenhagen in the 1760’s. “The fact that it takes place somewhere which no longer exists, but is still at the back of our minds, was a challenge” says Niels Sejer, who was already involved in the making of the film before the manuscript had even been written.

“The entire challenge of the film was to achieve the balance between the historical authenticity, the emotional credibility and the audience’s preconceived mental images. The first thing I did was a great amount of research in art history. I collected images and created a slideshow series with drawings, paintings and photographs which showed the visual flow

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Continued on page 10

Sejer’s Sense of Space



RESEARCH Niels Sejer’s work begins long before scriptwriters and directors agree on a final concept. On “A Royal Affair” He has researched archives og found atmospheres on Stormbroen from paintings, interiors and exteriors of old Christiansborg by looking at old silverware and many other old documents. Foto: Niels Sejer



Sejer's Sense of ...

Continued from page 9

of the film. I traveled and visited castles all over Europe and collected material from France, England, Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland. In the early rough-sketch process I imagined the film as a flow, beginning with Denmark as a darkened place, Caroline Mathilde entering as the light, and darkness falling again afterwards."

Niels Sejer's wording of his own work doesn't sound nearly as technical and clinical as one would imagine. He speaks much more of emotions and gut feelings than of technical drawings and coordination work, even though he was responsible for 50 employees on "A Royal Affair". But if you ask the film's director Nikolaj Arcel, his production designer was also the most reflective man on set. "In the planning phase Niels is the most imaginative and intellectual of us. He draws on wide-ranging references to visual

arts, philosophy and history and says so many inspiring things in that phase, because he is a thinking man who excels in big thoughts while the process is still unfocused and abstract," Arcel says, and adds: "in that sense we complement each other wonderfully because I have to act the practical general and that's why it is so great that Niels keeps us focused on the mental superstructure."

Niels Sejer himself says that his job is like a puzzle: "I create a world in order to make a visual concept that people can believe in. You long for those moments where you show the audience what driving across *Højbro Plads* in a carriage in 1766 looked like".

The sense of credibility

So surely with all its horse-drawn carriages, swords and royal ballrooms a historic drama like 'A Royal Affair' must be very close to a production designer's wet dream?

"No, not as such. But it's something you kind of have to try - like earning your stripes. Yes, I did period, I did action", he laughs. "It has something to do with testing the job; it's an infinite source of desire. I love the feeling, which sometimes comes with sitting in a movie theatre, of being invited to a place that you would never otherwise be able to go to. And it can refer to both places and people. Like the other night as I watched 'The Iron Lady' and with my own eyes had the feeling of experiencing Margaret Thatcher in the 1980's. Or as in this project where we invite moviegoers back in time to Copenhagen anno 1776", he says.

"Actually, both Nikolaj Arcel and I were uncomfortable with Danish historical films, and I have no interest in gold, silk or embroidery, as it can get in the way of identifying with the people that the story is truly about. Having an sense of historical accuracy is both important and unimportant, as it can of course turn out sloppy and incorrect but at the same time, it can become pedantic in its accuracy. Both break the illusion and that simply shouldn't happen", Niels Sejer says.

WHERE IS COPENHAGEN? Niels Sejer (right) and Nikolaj Arcel worked in close collaboration during the entire process. Seen here are the streets of Prague, which were transformed into Copenhagen anno 1766. Foto: Jasper Spanning og Sejer

PRODUCTION DESIGNER

A **production designer** creates a film's overall visual concept while working alongside the producer and director

The production designer has **artistic responsibility** for the visual concept throughout the entire development and production process along with the director, photographer, sound- and light designers, costume designers, set decorators and all of the craftsmen who are responsible for manufacturing the design.

The title was invented by William Cameron Menzies during his work as production designer on the film "Gone with the Wind" in 1939.





“The secret to successful production design is in the detail. If the curtains have a certain color it creates a certain atmosphere. If the space is ambiguous, and the objects lost in shadows, it creates a feeling of indecision. In ‘Forbrydelsen’ I was constantly building rooms with many doors, for the simple reason that it would cause people to think: Where does that door lead? It suited a project where nobody really knew where the story would end up. It was a vibe and nothing logical, and the interesting thing about film design is that if colors and surfaces are right, things can at the same time be put together in all the wrong ways without breaking the illusion. You can get away with the most insane things if the sense of material is right”,

Niels Sejer says and ponders the question of what makes a good production designer. “My work is not complete until the film *feels* right. I have to make it feel alive, intense and subjective and for god’s sake not museological or encyclopedic. I’d rather have it scatter and feel slightly illogical, because the primary thing should not be to relate to it on an intellectual level. That is what museums are for. The art of it is to make sure everything is there, and then to stop caring about it. It was my job to create a credible Copenhagen, in order for Nikolaj to concentrate on creating a believable situation with the actors.

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FROM FLOORBOARDS TO FIREPLACES. More than 50 people are involved when you build the setting of one single scene in a royal livingroom. The chambers of Christiansborg were reconstructed room by room in Prague. Foto: Niels Sejer