

The Favourite (15)

Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos



'18 Ireland | UK | USA 1hr 59mins

Tue 1 Jan for at least one week

Yorgos Lanthimos (*The Lobster*, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*) returns with his latest absurdly entertaining farce - a darkly funny court comedy starring Emma Stone and Rachel Weisz as rivals vying for the affection of Queen Anne (Olivia Colman).

It's the early 18th century, England is at war with France and Queen Anne's (Colman in the performance of her career) poor health finds her relying on her doting friend Lady Sarah (Weisz). When Abigail (Stone) arrives at the palace, her charm soon wins Anne's attention and Sarah and Abigail become fierce rivals for for the Queen's affections in a wickedly funny game of one-up-womanship.

Filthy and outrageous - expect racing ducks and lobsters, 17 pet bunnies, and great silly dancing in extravagant parties - a conventional royal drama this is not. Grounded in a trio of fabulous performances by its leading ladies, with the men in supporting roles only (Nicholas Hoult and Mark Gatiss are preening, air-headed fops), *The Favourite* is a film where women rule - what a delight to spend 120 minutes in their company.

This interview by Alissa Wilkinson with director Yorgos Lanthimos originally appeared on vox.com on 21 Nov 2018

Alissa Wilkinson: You often write your own screenplays, and they're often noted for being bleak and darkly comedic, with distinctive deadpan dialogue. But you didn't start out as a writer on this screenplay. What drew you to the project?

Yorgos Lanthimos: I came across the existing screenplay and I felt that it was a very interesting story, with very interesting characters. It was about three women, which is something you see rarely on film. It was a period film, and I was intrigued to make something like that, which I haven't made before. I knew that I was going to develop it and become very involved with the writing of the screenplay, and make something that would feel mine the same way that I've made my other films.

AW: Where in the writing process did you come in?

YL: There was an original script by Deborah Davis, who had done tons of research. It's a very interesting, complex story. But that script concentrated on very elaborately representing the politics and the actual, [historical] story in minute detail. I felt that I wanted more to focus on these three women, to simplify the politics and the specifics of it so that we would work through the prism of the characters, the relationships between

these women. So I worked with Deborah initially in order to create a structure that was more focused on the women and simplified the politics.

Then I knew that I was looking for a very specific tone for this film. We started looking for a writer who could bring that kind of voice. We read hundreds of screenplays and plays from English writers, American writers, and an Australian, who ended up being the voice that we were looking for. It was very evident from the beginning, as soon as I read Tony [McNamara]'s work, that it was what I was looking for. It was very easy to start working on it. We didn't have to explain much to each other. He seemed to understand. I was very confident by reading his work that he had the voice that we were looking for.

AW: The politics of *The Favourite* are especially funny — a war is happening somewhere, but it doesn't seem all that consequential to anyone, except in how it relates to the chess game of power that's happening inside the palace. Those power dynamics in little groups of people feel like something you've always been interested in, in your movies. In *The Favourite* in particular, the men are almost totally off to the side, being useless, while the women are running things entirely.

YL: That was one of the things that I was interested in. It seemed like at that point in time, there were these women, especially Sarah, who had this power. Queen Anne had been through a lot, and had some weaknesses, and was trying to figure out her way. It was so tiring, seeing all these films about men and politics and people that run things. So it just felt like a fresh thing to do.

In paintings and drawings from the period, women were portrayed as simple and natural, the way they were dressed, and their hair, and their make-up. But you'd see all these men being dressed up with wigs, and make-up, and breeches, and high heels and all that, it all just felt like things we needed to pick up on and enhance to create this world. It's an enhanced version of that world. But it felt interesting to show that contradiction. It's different from what we're used to seeing.

AW: The world you created inside the palace is kind of surreal. There are all these rabbits and ducks running around. The men play strange games. The dancing is definitely not accurate to the period. What was your approach in designing it all?

YL: We knew early on that we wanted to use various elements that would make the film feel more contemporary, in a sense — more relevant to today. We tried to use language that felt

contemporary, and we didn't try to imitate the way we thought people spoke at the time. For costumes, we kept the shapes of the period, but we used a lot of contemporary materials. We used everything from denim to leather to plastic fabrics and laser-cut fabrics. The music was the same. We used music from the period, but also very contemporary music as well.

Physicality was also something that I felt it needn't be what we're used to seeing in period films, as if people in the past were more poised and walked in a certain way and spoke in a certain way. I wanted to do something different with that. I felt that physicality would play an important part of it, from violence to dancing to choreographing all that activity.

It's a common thing, in my approach, to think, like, Why is it like that? and Why can't we do it differently? and Why can't we have people dancing like that? and Who said? If we're making a fictional film, and we're creating a world, why can't we have our own rules about this world? That's what we tried to do.

AW: Some filmmakers have tried a similar approach; while watching *The Favourite*, I thought about Sofia Coppola's film *Marie Antoinette*. Were there any specific films that you used as a touch point, or watched during production?

YL: We were inspired by great filmmakers, and we certainly never tried to imitate things. But we watched things to be inspired by the freedom that certain filmmakers had in creating very unique work.

Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* centers on three women in a house. Its color palette is very limited; they only wear black and white. Of course, it's in red rooms mostly, which wasn't the case with ours. And it's a very dark and dramatic film — there's that aspect of drama in our film as well, but we were mostly making it a comedy with a tragedy interweaved in some parts of it.

Peter Greenaway's *Draughtsman's Contract* was very striking visually, and there I think they used a lot of simpler fabrics while retaining the shape of the period. They used fabrics that weren't that elaborate. The way that they used the wigs was maybe an exaggeration, but maybe not so much, because as we were researching we discovered that there were versions of peoples' wigs that were so extravagant.

AW: You're also taking this historical story and changing it up to make it your own as well. Were you trying to say anything in particular with it?

YL: I never try to say anything with the films that I do. I think that's not my thing to do.

For some reason, we all get interested in certain stories. I think it's because they make us start thinking about things —

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especially when it's a historical, period story, you start seeing parallels between the story and what's happening today, and you realize maybe that things haven't changed so much.

With films, I want to expose certain situations, ask questions, and have people engage with those stories in order to think for themselves, according to their sensibilities and background and culture.

I want them to understand the film in their own way. It's not something that you [as filmmaker] can control anyway. Cultures and people are so different. You can only go by how you understand what you make and then put it out into the world. You hope that there's going to be all these different views and interpretations of it.

AW: When you watch the finished film, is there something that you particularly see in it?

YL: I don't watch it. I've watched it enough when I was making it. I try to not watch it. What I do is maybe watch my films like 10, 15 years later and just see things.

AW: I can't say I particularly agree with this criticism, but I've heard people say that your films have a very low view of humans, or that there's not—

YL: Is that a criticism, though?

AW: For me it's not! But would you say your movies have tenderness toward the characters?

YL: Not at all. I think the reason why we're making it is the love of these people. And the hatred. And all of it. It's only human that we feel all these different things about these people.

AW: In *The Favourite* in particular, because it's women, and they're pretty complicated women, were you kind of—

YL: Complex, instead of complicated. Though they are complicated as well, that's true.

AW: We're seeing them be good, and be bad, and also just kind of disintegrate in front of us. How do you approach characters like that?

YL: Well, it was very important for me from the beginning to create these characters so that they wouldn't be able to be figured out in a second or in a scene. You can't go, "Okay, so this person is like that and the other person is like this, she's bad and she's good." It was very important to create the characters so that they go through a journey in different times during the film.

As you understand their lives, you see that they would react in different ways. Sometimes you could sympathize with one of them, and then you could sympathize with the other one. Even if they did terrible things, you could kind of understand why they're making those decisions and those actions. It was important that they are complex, as you say — and of course they are complicated as well.

I think that's the only way to show people in a film, and it didn't make any difference to me that it was women. It was just exciting, because you haven't really seen it a lot. You don't need to make films about women just idealizing them. They're human beings, and there are all kinds of women, as there are all kinds of men. There are horrible women. There are women who have terrible moments, and wonderful moments — like every human being. That is, I think, the only way to represent people in films. Not black or white.