

Royally swept away by 'Mad Love'

An intimate story of heartbreak in a historical, costume drama



By Sheila Norman-Culp
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September 13, 2002 — Every historical film, it seems, has certain requirements: galloping horses, characters swathed in yards of tapestry fabric, demure yet treacherous ladies-in-waiting. “Mad Love” has all that and more — the passionate despair of a queen whose love for her husband goes unrequited.

PILAR LOPEZ DE AYALA smolders with desire and erupts with rage in director Vicente Aranda’s look at the life of Queen Joan of Castile — Joan the mad, a monarch who at age 28 was driven from the throne and cloistered in a monastery for the rest of her life.

Modern historians believe that Joan was not mad at all, that her overwhelming desire for her husband was simply socially unacceptable at the time. His philandering provoked her to fits of extreme jealousy, and the oddness she displayed was used by avaricious noblemen as a convenient excuse to usurp her power.

But in the beginning, how sweet a start to married life.

‘MARRIED FOR LOVE’

In August 1496, Princess Joan set sail for Flanders for an arranged marriage to Philip the Handsome (Daniele Liotti), an alliance between the Catholic monarchs and Maximilian, the German emperor.

“If anyone asks, say you married for love,” Queen Isabella (Susy Sanchez) tells her virgin daughter as she warns of the duty that lies ahead. “That’s what I said.”

But the two betrothed are immediately besotted, and Philip has no intention of waiting a full week for the formal wedding.

“Bless us now, father,” he commands — and the court titters as he sweeps Joan off her feet and into the royal bedroom.

Their early passion has a price: years of pregnancy for Joan and Philip’s cooling ardor.

Joan’s elder brother, sister and mother die in quick succession, leaving her the unexpected heir to the throne of Aragon. The royal couple travels back to Spain, where Philip’s advisers urge him to take Joan’s role as sovereign for himself.

The bickering Flemish and Castilian nobility feud and conspire, and Joan, still loved by her people, grows more despondent. Philip has brought his latest mistress (Manuela Arcuri) to the court, and Joan is determined to find out who she is.

BEST-ACTRESS AWARD

With her expressive brown eyes and uncontrolled fury, Lopez de Ayala steals the spotlight in a performance that won her best actress at the 2001 San Sebastian Film Festival.

The object of her passion is a cipher — it’s hard to tell whether Liotti is just eye candy or successfully reflecting an unthinking, wooden lout.

In supporting roles, the seductive Arcuri would capture any monarch’s eye with her belly dances. Long-time character actor Giuliano Gemma is wily and inscrutable as Philip’s trusted adviser.

Aranda, one of Spain’s most prolific directors, has taken on a difficult genre — historical films can easily sink under the weight of those costumes — and created an intimate story of heartbreak.

Leave the kids at home, this erotic tale is for adults only.

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