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## **SYNOPSIS – the story**

*by Eva Sommestad Holten*

Who could have anticipated that a German physician would pay a visit to the vacuum of power?

### **ACT I**

King Frederik 5 lies inebriated on his deathbed. He calls for his son Christian, and only just manages to bless him before dying.

The Royal Court hails the new King Christian 7. But his troubled soul is evident to all, and Court Official Guldberg suggests replacing Christian's teacher Reverdil with a physician. Count Rantzau recommends his friend from Altona, Johann Friedrich Struensee.

Rantzau finds Struensee working among the poor. He persuades his reluctant friend by suggesting that as a royal physician he would have the power to heal the nation.

The 17-year-old Christian is to wed the 15-year-old Caroline Mathilde. The ceremony takes place in Roskilde. Christian is assisted by Guldberg, who is accompanied by Christian's stepmother, Queen Dowager Juliane Marie. Paraded on stage, the two petrified teenagers stand face to face for the very first time. That evening, lady-in-waiting Louise von Plessen leaves Caroline Mathilde alone in the cold, unfamiliar castle.

Struensee is instated as Christian's helper and patron. The Queen Dowager criticizes Struensee for his views of the Enlightenment and for usurping political power. She predicts that the wrath of God will befall him and that he will be interrogated.

Caroline Mathilde is frustrated by Christian's absence. But at the court she catches everyone's eye and kindles their desires - also those of Guldberg. At the ball she meets Struensee in a first hesitant flirt.

When Christian is too fearful to approach Carline Mathilde's bed, the *maître de plaisir* Enevold Brandt and his helper call on Støvlet-Katrine (Bootee-Caterine) to initiate Christian into the world of eroticism. She dismisses the two courtiers and she becomes the queen and ruler of Christian's fantasy universe.

Caroline Mathilde corners Struensee in a passage and seductively inquires about the riding lessons he has promised her.

Christian dissolves the Royal Council (Rigsrådet) and asks Struensee to always remain at his side and take care of Caroline Mathilde. Struensee eyes a narrow passage of historical opportunity. But does he dare pursue it?

His friend Rantzau remarks bluntly that Johann Friedrich Struensee, a German physician, now has absolute power in Denmark. But Rantzau is angered by Struensee's political naivety and his ambition of opening Christian's eyes to reality. Struensee maintains that he will let Christian in disguise see a poor boy being punished on a wooden horse. When Christian witnesses the punishment he breaks down, and the crowd turns on the strangers with an air of vengeance.

## ACT II

The Ascheberg estate near Altona is a place of folly, freedom and flute music. Struensee reads the words of Ludvig Holberg aloud to Caroline Mathilde: We are most inclined to the forbidden\|. Soon they slip into the realm of that which is most forbidden of all.

The scandal explodes. Caroline Mathilde is carrying Struensee's child! In the King's Garden the rabble play games of 'The Queen and Struensee' behind the bushes while the higher levels of society are appalled. The Queen Dowager and Guldberg agree that this hornet's nest of sin must be quashed. Bootee-Caterine is apprehended and retained, and soon the barrel is pointed at Caroline Mathilde, the harlot on the Danish throne.

At Hirschholm Castle, Struensee, Caroline Mathilde and their child lead a simple life. Brandt is to nurse the ailing Christian but in a fit of anger he bites the King in the finger, which will later prove a fateful incident. Struensee becomes more hesitant while Caroline Mathilde takes the initiative.

Rantzau realises that a rebellion is brewing in Copenhagen, supported by Guld-berg. He hastens to warn that the sailors are marching from the naval harbour towards Hirschholm Castle. It is time to take sides. Rantzau leaves while Brandt remains. Struensee considers escaping but Caroline Mathilde is unperturbed. She confronts the sailors and wins them over with a disarming speech.

Back in Copenhagen, Christian's birthday is celebrated at the Royal Court - Theatre where the Queen Dowager signals for the seizure of power. Christian signs the arrest warrant to remand Struensee and Caroline Mathilde.

In town the events give rise to a ragtag rebellion and arson attacks, which light the skies as far away as Kronborg where Caroline Mathilde lingers in despair in her incarceration. Enchained at Kastellet, Struensee fears the impending interrogation. Guldberg triumphs as the victor: God sides with the meek and scorned. God's grace befalls Christian and him, Guldberg!

Caroline Mathilde is sentenced to exile and loses custody of her child. Struensee is convicted of high treason and Brandt of having assaulted the King's person. Brandt is executed. Struensee peers out at the crowds for whose sake he once ventured down a narrow passage in history. The axe drops. The life of the Royal Physician is over. But what about the hornet's nest of sin?

## **About the music in *The Visit of the Royal Physician***

*by Bo Holten*

As a rule the composers of earlier times used many different stylistic features in their music. Bach, for example, often used a Renaissance-like *antico* side by side with a modern *galant* style, followed immediately afterwards by the new-style Italian- or French-inspired music. We have just heard the music so often, and it has become so much a part of the past, that we no longer hear the radical stylistic departures. This is just as true of Mozart, and in fact of most other composers of the past.

In the same way, in *The Visit of the Royal Physician*, I have made use of the music type which, in each case, served the dramatic and emotional purpose in the most impactful way. My primary aim has been to tell the story in music in the way that is most gripping and convincing for me. In Act One there are some musicians on the stage, playing a silly little march that accompanies Christian 7's first meeting with his coming queen. The ineffectual text that Guldberg has written for the occasion demands just that kind of music. When the court dances in Act One it is of course to a minuet of the 18th-century type, while when the court dances in Act Two, where we are at a quite different, much more sombre point in the unfolding of the drama, they dance to a melancholy C minor waltz that could have dated from 1890. Everybody still wears a Rococo costume - but inside they have changed.

Clarity has always been my guiding principle in the musical work on *The Visit of the Royal Physician*. The music is very simple and clear in expression, but

not without nuances, I hope. I have taken great pains with the enunciation of the text, so it should be possible to grasp what is being sung. I have often placed the most important textual details in the middle registers of the singers, and also often in the ordinary rhythms of speech, for the sake of understanding.

Now that I have been so fortunate in this production as to have a stage director who is profoundly faithful to what the work has to say, and who also has a very imaginative approach to the material, it is wonderful to see how music, libretto and directing go hand in hand in the realization of a dramatic development in the clearest and subtlest way possible.