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Visually beautiful palace intrigue in 'Favourite'

We eagerly consume the biopics of the great queens of England — Elizabeth I, Victoria, Elizabeth II, Freddie Mercury.

Yet the life of Queen Anne, who reigned from 1702 to 1714, was anything but great. Poorly schooled, crippling insecure and of chronically poor health, Anne died childless at age 49 having suffered 17 miscarriages and stillbirths.

In "The Favourite," director Yorgos Lanthimos ("The Lobster") imagines a carnal, psychological and political competition between Lady Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough (Rachel Weisz) and her disgraced cousin, Abigail Masham (Emma Stone), for the favor and control of the erratic and unhappy queen (Olivia Colman).

Colman, soon to star as Queen Elizabeth II in Season 3 of the Netflix series "The Crown," gained 25 pounds to play the gout-stricken, corpulent Queen Anne. She pushes physical and dramatic boundaries with her performance, portraying the power and piteousness, the longing and isolation of a lonely, childlike monarch. Colman is all but guaranteed an Oscar nod in January.

Yet as the imperious Sarah, Weisz's performance is as sublime as Colman's is histrionic. Like Weisz herself, Sarah's beauty and confidence are her superpowers. She wields them without thought of moderation or fear of overreaching, until a rival appears on the scene.

Stone's freckled, underdog earnestness permeates her Abigail, who, through flattery and strategy, ascends from scullery maid to displace Sarah as the



**REBECCA
L. FORD**

Rebecca L. Ford is counsel to Scharf Banks Marmor LLC, and concentrates her practice on complex litigation, compliance, board governance and specialized employment issues. She is the former executive vice president for litigation and intellectual property at MGM. She can be reached at rford@scharfbanks.com.

queen's constant companion and erotic accessory.

We root for Abigail until we realize that cunning is no indicator of competence, and we're shocked when she devolves into desultory cruelty, squishing underfoot one of the fluffy bunnies Anne caches in her room as stand-ins for her lost children.

With comic audacity, Lanthimos integrates absurdist surprises into what is otherwise a full-on costume drama.

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In one scene, Sarah and the future Baron Masham (Joe Alwyn) dance to entertain the queen. They carry on with a modern jitterbug until Masham spins off into a solo lifted from the "Soul Train" dance lines of the 1970s.

The film's male characters, with their painted-doll faces, flamboyant wigs of Cowardly Lion curls,

and games of nude dodgeball played with red fruits, are ridiculous fops. The most voluminous wig and heavily plastered white-face belong to the outrageous Tory leader Lord Harley (Nicholas Hoult), not friend so much as co-conspirator to Abigail.

The women, by contrast, never have a moment of pleasure or frivolity. Sex, drinking and dancing are all occasions to further court intrigue. Every move in the chess game between Sarah and Abigail leaves a winner and a loser in its wake. The two continue thus until, in the final checkmate, everyone loses.

Costume designer Sandy Powell, who also fashioned "Mary Poppins Returns," takes dazzling risks, mixing modern fabrics — laser cut leathers, denim, African prints — with true-to-period silhouettes for the women's dresses.

Powell has already won three Academy Awards for Best Costume Design and is likely to nominated for one or both of her 2018 releases.

Shot in 35 mm, "The Favourite" is visually beautiful, almost tactile. Lanthimos and cinematographer Robbie Ryan make frequent use of fisheye lenses and up-from-below camera angles. These unusual choices add a squeezing claustrophobia to the film's overall feel of edgy instability.

With his surrealist sensibility, Lanthimos has carved out a cinematic lane that is his alone. "The Favourite" is an 18th century "All About Eve" with an O. Henry ending.

With its rich look and many fine performances, it is a film that deservedly is highly praised. Yet I am obliged to admit, it was not my favorite.