



## 'Corsage' Review: Vicky Krieps Shines as Austria-Hungary's Empress Elisabeth in Fiery Revisionist History

Cannes: Marie Kreutzer's *Un Certain Regard* offering is part revisionism, part correction, and an entirely wonderful showing for star Krieps.



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### "Corsage"

Cannes

"There is an air of quiet death in this house, and I do not like the way it smells," Reynolds Woodcock announces over breakfast in "Phantom Thread." Empress Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary ("Phantom Thread" co-star [Vicky Krieps](#)) appears to feel the same way about Vienna's Schönbrunn Palace, the difference being she has finally got used to its odor. It doesn't help that, by Christmas 1887, a quiet death is exactly what "Elise," the now-40-year-old spouse of ruler and busybody Franz Joseph (Florian Teichtmeister), seems destined for.

ance. In the hands of Krieps and Austrian director Marie Kreutzer (who directed the



insatiable desire to determine her own future. Having helped establish the doomed Joint Monarchy and reigned in Vienna for longer than any ruler's wife, Elise certainly occupies a special place in the hearts and minds of Austrians.

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She had been portrayed in no fewer than four movies before the late-1940s, including a 1921 Austrian short and "The King Steps Out" (1936), a Columbia Pictures comedy directed by Josef von Sternberg. Operas, ballets, and plays began to zero in on her refreshing and futuristic candidness while she was still alive. To call her an Austrian Princess Diana might be an exaggeration, but it's not a mile off. The "Portrayal of Elisabeth in the arts" section of her Wikipedia entry is, in case that's any indication, substantial.

What writer-director Kreutzer sets out to do with her "Corsage" is part revisionism, part correcting the record. Krieps' Elise is introduced in the bath before she is seen attending to her children. She visits the city's asylum before any dour state dinners. These are all attempts to portray a different kind of Elisabeth after more than a century of suffocated (and suffocatingly) helpless women. Almost all Kreutzer's endeavours to this end are successful. During one trip to the psychiatric "hospital," Elise reunites with a "paralytic imbecile" suffering secondary effects of syphilis. Unsurprisingly, he has no idea who she is. "Last time you told me I was beautiful," Elise says, part wistfully, part aggrieved that he didn't say it again.

Meanwhile, The Empress's lovely (yet seemingly fictional) friendship with Father of Cinematography Louis Le Prince, the first person to shoot moving images on celluloid, provides a pair of wonderful opportunities for Krieps to explore Elise the Entertainer. The Luxembourgian actress, who has largely chosen odder roles in smaller movies than her star-making turn in "Phantom Thread" might have allowed her, grabs the opportunity both hands. Her Elise is a born performer who ends the show as soon as she sees eyes on the audience.



scenes with Louis Le Prince, however, which contain the most electric and beautifully reit moments in “Corsage.” Crucially, they also let Kreutzer (and us) nerd out about film history. To filmmakers: more, please.

But there are a couple of frustrating, didactic exceptions to Kreutzer’s affecting subtlety. One is the film’s title. In case you’re not familiar with Habsburg-era hallmarks, a corsage is both a spray of flowers held on the wrist and the sometimes-oppressive upper section of a dress. The second scene in the film is Elise being fitted with an obscenely tight corset for a state occasion. Even still, her role as just a stylish accompaniment, a flower, to Franz Joseph is already clear without the extra image.

Still, her estranged emperor husband and the angsty Crown Prince Rudolf (Aaron Friesz) are portrayed well, even as Kreutzer is abundantly confident this isn’t their movie. (Of course, she’s right.) Joseph, a po-faced politician who’d probably take his duties a little less seriously if he knew was the last peacetime ruler of Austria-Hungary, is joyously impish and still damningly handsome. Crown Prince Rudolf, whose sensational murder-suicide rocked Europe and sold millions of newspapers in 1889, barely gets a mention. Presumably this is to counterbalance the immense weight put on the Mayerling Incident by all the other Elisabeth portrayals in history.

Then there’s Bay Middleton (Colin Morgan), a dashing thirty-something horseman with the tone and temperament of Benedict Cumberbatch, and even better looks. Middleton was alleged to have had more than platonic feelings for Elise; “Corsage” turns those rumors into fiery fact. Yet the lives of these men are all side quests for Elise, as are mutterings of a troubled Sarajevo and the empire’s endless internal strains, which provide a masterclass in foreshadowing and a handy illustration for the futility of those men’s busy lives. You can see why Prince Rudolf had enough.

And, without giving too much away, it’s a mournful note on which we leave Elise, too. Her true fate is tweaked, “Once Upon a Time in Hollywood”-style, enabling the empress to grab a hold on her narrative as she was never able to. At the conclusion of “Corsage,” Kreutzer reveals that to be the primary intention of the film all along. It’s an undeniably noble one, even if the execution of Elise’s legacy reclamation leaves a somewhat bitter taste.

Spanning the birth of Mozart in 1756 to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the First World War, the golden age of Vienna was — to paraphrase Darlene Brown — an important and exciting time. Yet the Empress Elisabeth of “Corsage”



...died a decade before her birth, "Für Elise" sure hits different when it accompanies one of Elisabeth's breakdowns. Although "Corsage" makes a worthy attempt to recast Elisabeth as independent of her constraints, its final note leaves it feeling a little too much like its own sort of requiem.

## Grade: B

*"Corsage" premiered at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival. It is currently seeking U.S. distribution.*

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