

Re-encountering 'Anna Karenina'

By [John Freedman](#)

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My colleague and editor Lena Smirnova wrote a fascinating [piece](#) last week on local reactions to the new screen adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina."

She began with a description of one of the first scenes, in which we see a shaggy monster of a train, looking rather like a cross between a Muppet and a wayward prop inundated with flocking from David Lean's famous film of "Doctor Zhivago." It caused giggles in the hall when she attended the film, Smirnova reported, clearly implying that the giggles were derisive.

I'll go further: My wife and I burst into laughter. Our laughter was joyous and admiring. Finally, I thought, someone had the nerve to pull that whole "reverential-classic-literature-realistic-cinematic-blockbuster-sweeping-melodrama-epic-costume-realistic-drama" nonsense down off its pedestal.

Director Joe Wright — who, significantly, grew up backstage in his parent's puppet theater — wreaks havoc on convention in this film. And what a joy that is to behold!

I will admit a few past sins here. There was a dark period in my biography when I taught "Anna Karenina" to college students. My classes generally had 10 to 15 people in them. I liked the book less than any of them. Which is not to say I didn't admire it. But I have my prejudices.

I'm a "War and Peace" fan. This is where Tolstoy is still fully in the grip of paradox, discovery and growth. When mixed with genius, which Tolstoy had like few have in history, it is a powerful concoction.

I think "Anna Karenina" is that first step, that first baby step, towards the boring, irritating moralist that Tolstoy occasionally became later in life. I can feel the threateningly judgmental, self-proclaimed prophet of works like "Resurrection," "The Devil," "The Kreutzer Sonata" beginning to push their way into Anna's story of moral decay.

Since I first read this novel — that would have been around 1972 or 1973 — I have said it wasn't Anna who threw herself under the train at the end. It was Tolstoy. He couldn't bear to look upon this strong, uncontrollable, fascinating woman any longer. I can feel it in the pages. I can feel the writer's own disgust at what he created.

Yes, Tolstoy fell in love with Anna as he painted in her biography and character with words. Everybody knows that. I'm sure there are plenty of quotes floating around the net to prove it. But that is precisely what destroyed Anna by the end of the novel. Tolstoy, infuriated at himself for loving such a splendid, free-thinking woman, had to do something to stop her.

He threw her under the train.

The point of my admittedly emotional and subjective digression is that I don't share the reverence many have for this Oprah Winfrey book-of-the-month club novel. I have always felt Tolstoy could use a little tweaking up there on his high moral horse and I saw Joe Wright do that in his film. Moreover, he did it with inventiveness, respect and talent. Which brings us back to the movie.

Wright did in his "Anna Karenina" what all good artists do when working with someone else's story. He made it his own. Tolstoy's characters, narratives and philosophy are present in this film. But they are presented through a prism of contemporary sensibilities, knowledge, styles and expectations. Strictly speaking this is not Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina," which you are welcome to pick up and read and appreciate any moment of your day; it is an "Anna Karenina" for the world we live in.

The process which Wright put Tolstoy's novel through is the very process that makes classic works of art classics. It is a test of sorts. A trial by fire. Burn away what can be burned away and present what suits the modern age, and then you will see if the work has survived or not.

I have heard some suggest that Wright's Vronsky is not Vronsky and his Anna is not Anna.

I am of the exact opposite opinion. I flat out reject the notion that when a novelist declares someone plump, tall or skinny, only an actor who fits the description physically can play her or him. Characters, like people, have souls. This is where the heart of the work lies.

I was taken almost immediately by Wright's characters precisely because they surprised me. They were new to me. They were not musty, pedantic copies of "what Tolstoy meant." They

live and they breathe freely and independently.

Some are upset that the characters are too British and not Russian enough. Do they really want to start that conversation? As if Russian filmmakers depict Brits and Americans with such astonishing veracity. Right. Pardon me while I wipe the tears of laughter from my eyes. Let's get over this one quickly: Joe Wright is British and he made a British film.

Far more important and substantial is that Wright found in Tolstoy's novel a story that concerns us in the second decade of the 21st century.

Aaron Taylor-Johnson's Vronsky is one of those absolutely maddening people — handsome, carefree, unthinking, rich and good at everything he does. What's there not to hate? Most of all he is young. This Vronsky is the epitome of unthinking youth — youth, beauty and perfect health. He is nature at its physical best. A marvelous specimen.

But a funny thing happens to this unthinking specimen. He encounters beauty. Depth. Emotion. Love. And as those things chip away at his protective armor, he is gradually thrown from his high-standing place of public worship. He is even thrown from his horse, for goodness' sake! What could be more humiliating for a social trawler?

And then Vronsky in a moment of emotional conciliation drops his head on the breast of his rival — Anna's husband Alexei Karenin — when the latter forgives Anna's and Vronsky's transgressions. He figuratively is brought to his knees.

And he is powerless, as nature is, to stop Anna's slide to ruin.

Domhnall Gleeson is utterly unlike anything I have imagined for Konstantin Levin, the hard-working, hard-thinking man who tries so hard to be good and to live in communion with nature. But he is funny-clumsy and endearing and utterly trustworthy — isn't that a portrait of Levin?

Did I hear someone complain that Keira Knightley's Anna is too thin? Spare me! Her performance of a spirited, intelligent woman caught unawares by the unexpected temptations of life is seamless. Beyond that, she beautifully maintains the dignity of a person who refuses to go against her heart, no matter what the consequences.

All of this, coming in special delivery from the heart of Tolstoy's novel, so to speak, is framed with tremendous wit, humor and intelligence by director Wright. It's not at all just that woolly-snowy train puffing into the station. It is the toy train later, running comically through the woods. Hollywood has long used toy trains that they mask as the real thing to save money. Wright pulled that little ruse out into the open — "Here you are," he seems to say, stifling a smile, "here's your toy train in a snowbound Russian forest!"

Wright actually sets the entire story in a theater. It is as if he takes Shakespeare as his inner motto — "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players" — and applies it to Tolstoy (who, for those who love paradoxes, detested Shakespeare.)

Wright's use of theater, his love of its potential for transformation and artificial beauty, is breathtaking.

How about that moment when Anna, in despair, sits down by a window in her house, tugs at a curtain and – voila! — is instantly sitting in a moving train car? How about the horse race taking place inside the theater, with Vronsky's fallen steed crashing over the floor lights at the spectators' feet? Or the ballet of bureaucrats stamping their bureaucratic papers in unison until they stand, change costumes before our eyes, and transform into waiters in a restaurant? Or, say, the interior door opening out onto a snowy plain or a flowery field? The theater ceiling opening up to reveal a fireworks display? Anna walking through the cluttered flies of a theater before ending up under a train?

These are drops in the bucket of the hundreds if not thousands of ways Wright leans on theatricality to renew the powers of cinema to transform reality before our eyes.

And I haven't yet said a word about Tom Stoppard's script, which is about as economical and muscular as they come. Knowing full well that Wright would answer for the visuals, Stoppard turned his attention to providing text that does two things brilliantly – moves things forward with speed and lays out Tolstoy's key philosophical themes clearly and bluntly.

I began by referencing an article by my colleague at this newspaper and I will conclude the same way. Her final paragraph quotes political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky as saying, "This is the best 'Anna Karenina' of all time, in my opinion. It surpasses any 'Anna Karenina' that we have ever seen... Now everyone will get mad at me."

Not I, Stanislav. Not I.

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