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‘Anna Karenina’ the Musical Arrives on the Moscow Stage

By Ciara Haley

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Valeria Lanskaya in the role of Anna Karenina **Moscow Operetta Theater**

Wrapped up warm against the autumn chill, a line of expectant Muscovites stretches along Bolshaya Dmitrovka toward the entrance of the Moscow Operetta Theater. There’s a new adaptation of Anna Karenina in town — and this time it’s all singing, all dancing.

There were bound to be grumbles from theater critics and devout Tolstoyans about the transformation of one of Russia’s seminal novels into a two-hour musical spectacular, but if you can leave your apprehension at the door, you’ll find there’s more to the show than its extravagant production.

Anna Karenina is the third original musical to grace the Moscow Operetta Theater following the box office success of both “Count Orlov” and “Monte Cristo”. The show — which raised its curtain to Moscow audiences at the beginning of this month — is one of the biggest and

most challenging productions the theater has ever staged.

Featuring music from composer Roman Ignatyev, who wrote the score for the theater's two previous original musicals, and a new libretto by Yuly Kim, one of Russia's foremost contemporary songwriters, the sprawling novel is condensed into an intense, emotional journey which careers towards the tumultuous closing scene.

The staging of the new musical is indicative of the growing appetite for productions of this nature in the country. Both "Count Orlov" and "Monte Cristo" were sell-out shows and the same high hopes are pinned on the theater's latest offering. "The genre of the musical is growing more and more popular in Russia," said Alexei Bolonin, the show's producer, in an interview with The Moscow Times. "It is a fusion of pop music and high culture".

While elements of the original story have been omitted for the stage, the show admirably captures the essence of Tolstoy's epic novel. With its grand themes of love, family and heartbreak "Anna Karenina" is emotionally demanding of both the cast and the audience.

From a visual perspective, the show is a marvel. Sets and costumes evoke the lavish excess of the 19th century Russian aristocracy while Vyacheslav Okunev's design involves an impressive physical stage which is layered with projections and video mapping. The scenery seamlessly transitions from train station to concert hall to ice rink while lighting effects add to the dramatic dance sequences. The final scene, which features complicated props such as the turning cogs of a train, create a truly immersive musical experience worth the ticket for the world class production value alone.

The show's dynamic score is composed in the style of symphonic rock and played by a live orchestra under the direction of Konstantin Khvatinets. The music breathes a modern vitality into Tolstoy's story and offers a robust reimagining of the timeless classic.

The commendable cast navigates their way through a series of superb singing and dancing routines with apparent ease. The show is at its dynamic best during large ensemble scenes such as those in the train station or the wheat fields, where the cast and ballet combine complicated choreography with complicated vocals. Meanwhile the peerless Anna (Valeria Lanskaya), magnificently captures the tragic vulnerability of Tolstoy's heroine, achieving a luminous intensity at the musical's denouement.

Anna Karenina is a daring undertaking that seeks to reconceptualize a long established Russian cultural institution. While unconventional, it succeeds in bringing the grandiose themes of the original story to a modern Moscow audience. Bolonin summarized this succinctly when he spoke to The Moscow Times: "There is a saying in Russia 'If you don't take risks, you'll never drink champagne.'"

Moscow Operetta Theater. 6 Bolshaya Dmitrovka. Metro Teatralnaya, Okhotny Ryad. Tickets available at mosoperetta.ru

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