

the words of co-editor Mandelker, "the collective wisdom of our field."

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Anna in the Tropics. A play in two acts, by
Nilo Cruz.

In his Pulitzer prize-winning drama, *Anna in the Tropics*, American playwright, Nilo Cruz, heats up the debates of *Anna Karenina* by relocating the novel to the subtropical zone of Tampa Bay, the site of Cubo-American cultural fusion. The play is set in a cigar factory outside Tampa, Florida, in 1929, where the lector hired by the cigar-workers selects Tolstoy's novel to read aloud. As we learn in the course of the play, a tradition of the cigar factory is that a lector is hired at the workers' expense to read aloud to the cigar rollers:

I don't ever remember seeing a tobacco factory without a lector. As a child I remember sitting in the back and listening to the stories. That has always been our pride. Some of us cigar workers might not be able to read or write, but we can recite lines from *Don Quixote* or *Jane Eyre*.

The action of the play is punctuated with readings from the novel, in an atmosphere redolent with tobacco leaves and smoke, evoking the cigarette factory setting of the opera, *Carmen*. As the drama unfolds, key passages from *Anna Karenina* are read aloud, analyzed, quoted, and discussed by the men and women in the cigar factory, who use their interpretations as the means for construing their own relationships and their understanding of gender issues.

In the recent production (now headed for Broadway) which opened the new Berlioz Theater at Princeton's McCarter Theater, Jimmy Smits performed the role of the lector in impeccable pressed white linen suits with an understated air of seductiveness. However, the brilliant performances turned in by the supporting cast were undermined

by the mispronunciation of the name, Anna Karenina. Although the emphasis on the penultimate syllable suggests a Latino reinvention of the heroine, the end result is to undermine the play's assertion of the workers' cultural understanding and insight. A more effective, visual creole is the result of the unveiling of the image on the cigar label for the "Anna Karenina" cigar: the heroine poses in black furs against a backdrop of palm trees, sun and beaches. For the student of Russian literature, that particular juxtaposition evokes Chekhov's Yalta setting for the most famous of his Anna stories, "Lady with a Dog." Further, the reframing of *Anna Karenina* adds one more image to the gallery of paintings inside the novel, where Anna is repeatedly framed and viewed. For the general audience, these details are probably as evanescent as the tobacco smoke which suffuses the stage in each act.

The play opens with three women, a mother and her two daughters, one married, one single, who anticipate the arrival of their new lector. The previous lector had departed with the wife of the factory manager, Chester, who is now bitterly opposed to the idea of a lector, of reading, and of love; his rejection of the lector tradition is underscored by his vision for a highly mechanized cigar factory. The first stage of his plan for modernization is to wrest control of the factory from the owner by gambling on cock-fights.

The reading and interpretation of the novel exposes the frayed relationships in the factory owner's family. The men of the factory, in a surfeit of machismo, assert that they hear a different novel than the women do, and in fact, most of the passages quoted refer to Karenin's suffering as a result of his wife's infidelity and his reflections about challenging her lover to a duel. The mechanism that tends to the destruction of the factory and the lector tradition is fuelled by the manager's personal tragedy, the loss of his wife who had eloped with the previous lector. His suffering reprises Karenin's unarticulated grief and humiliation. How to respond to the infidelity of a wife is debated noisily by the husbands in the play with the consensus being to shoot to kill, a restyling in machismo of Dumas fils's challenge "Tue-le! Tue-la."

If the novel poses this conundrum for the men in the drama—"What would be the sense of killing a man in order to define one's own relations with a woman..."—the argument among the women in the factory circles around the question of whether Anna is ecstatically happy or in agony.

A Freudian critic would have a field day with the persistent brandishing of cigars by the characters on the stage, while the constant, intentional perfuming of the stage with cigar smoke from the wings is reminiscent of the actions of a censer in a cathedral. And finally, the creation of the label for a new ten cent cigar named the "Anna Karenina," evokes the lines of e. e. cummings: "a woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke." In the words of one of the play's characters,

Men marry their cigars, my dear, and the white smoke becomes the veil of their brides. My mother used to say, "When a man marries, he marries two women, his bride and his cigar."

Similarly, the leaves of tobacco are kissed by the lector as he comments on the tradition of reading in the cigar factory. And in another scene, one of the rollers is accused of licking the leaves of tobacco as if they were a mustache on a young man's face. Although the reading of the novel, *Anna Karenina*, acts as a catalyst in the lives of the play's characters, in fact, the play itself has more in common with Chekhov's tragic comedies than with Tolstoy's novel. The younger sister's frequently stated desire, "I want to go to Russia!" recalls the three sisters' yearning for Moscow, while the failures in communication and the love affair between the married sister and the lector reprise similar family configurations in *Uncle Vanya*; the family's loss of the cigar factory to an interloper "from up North" who intends to rebuild it for profit and modernization evokes *The Cherry Orchard*.

Despite the fact that the central event of the play is an adulterous relationship carried on between a married woman and a single younger man, this is no Anna and Vronsky affair. Instead, Conchita is desperately in love with her philandering husband and is impressed by the novel's account of Karenin's jealousy. She determines to cut

her hair and take a lover and in doing so, win back her husband's love. Cruz uses the quotations from the novel to articulate the distance and lack of communication between men and women. In the adultery scene, the lector opens *Anna Karenina* at random and determines to place Conchita's hair inside the leaves of the novel; he even kisses her hair as he had earlier kissed the tobacco leaves. Yet the quotation, referring to Anna's self-deception, as is often the case throughout the play, strains the context of its derivation.

At first, the novel seems to drive a violent wedge between the husbands and wives who are listening to it, as one husband rages, "This book will be the end of us!" But by the play's conclusion, the words of the book become the only means by which husbands and wives can communicate with each other, yet, again, the quotation that closes the final act—Karenin's musings over his letter to Anna, which in the novel reflect his unemotional, bureaucratic ideas about their situation—is transformed by the reading given them by Conchita's husband into a husband's yearning desire to speak to his wife. Similarly, the love affair between Conchita is witnessed by the husband, who then begs his wife to teach him what she has learned in the course of this affair, as if the lector—possessing the book—has conveyed ordinary knowledge to his mistress in the course of the adultery.

By the last act, there is no dead, female, suicide—instead, it is the lector who is shot. The play makes an almost amusing use of Chekhov's dramatic principal that if a gun appears on stage, it must go off in the following act. In *Anna in the Tropics*, we first hear gunshots off stage (fired in celebration of the new cigar) while the gun itself appears only later. In a similar reverse causality, the quotations from the novel appear in backwards chronology as well.

The first and most important quotation from the novel given in the play concerns the idea of murder, the dead body, and the reaction towards this dead body. And the playwright picks up a key word from the quotation and revisits it in the course of the play in a manner that is extremely significant.

The quotation is one which readers of *Anna Karenina* will immediately recall as one of Tolstoy's most notable uses of sustained metaphor comparing the act of adultery to a murder:

That which for Vronsky had been almost a whole year the one absorbing desire of his life, replacing all his old desires; that which for Anna had been an impossible, terrible, and even for that reason more entrancing dream of bliss, that desire had been fulfilled. . . She felt so sinful, so guilty, that nothing was left her but to humiliate herself and beg forgiveness. . . Looking at him, she had a physical sense of her humiliation, and she could say nothing more. He felt what a murderer must feel, when he sees the body he has robbed of life. That body, robbed by him of life, was their love, the first stage of their love. . . But in spite of all the murderer's horror before the body of his victim, he must hack it to pieces, hide the body, must use what he has gained by his murder. And with fury, as it were with passion, the murderer falls on the body, and drags it and hacks at it; so he covered her face and shoulder with kisses.

In the translation read in the play, "hacks" was altered to "cuts," and the idea of cuts and cutting—of leaves of the book, of hair, of time, of tobacco, of cigars—becomes the main trope of the drama.

The characters in *Anna in the Tropics* analyze this passage correctly, as follows:

MARELA What was that last line? "And, as with fury and passion the killer throws himself upon..."

CONCHITA "Upon the body," he said, "And drags it and cuts it, he covered her face and her shoulders with kisses."

MARELA Does it mean that when you're in love the body is stolen from life?

CONCHITA No. The body robbed of life was their love. The love of Anna and her beloved.

The body that Vronsky robs of life is not the body of his mistress, but the metaphysical body of love, or more properly, the erotic desire characterizing the "first stage" of their romance. The cut that severs platonic from consummated love is repeated in the play in the cutting of the tobacco

leaves, the cutting of hair, and the cutting of the novel *Anna Karenina* itself.

Also evoked is the cutting of Anna's head from her body beneath the wheels of a monstrous piece of machinery—the train and the railroad participating in Tolstoy's novel's juxtaposition of the values of industrialized modernity to country life and traditional folkways. Cruz's play picks up this theme and unfolds it in the intense debate over whether the factory should modernize through the use of mechanized equipment that will cut tobacco and roll cigars more swiftly. The discussion is heavily ironic as, historically, the cigar industry was shortly to be diminished by the Depression and the increasing popularity of cigarettes. The idea of machine-made cigars horrifies the factory workers, primarily because they fear losing their jobs. The lector offers a different view:

JUAN JULIAN No, I'm warning you. This fast mode of living with machines and moving cars affects cigar consumption. And do you want to know why, Senor Chester? Because people prefer a quick smoke, the kind you get from a cigarette. The truth is that machines, cars, are keeping us from taking walks and sitting on park benches, smoking a cigar slowly and calmly. The way they should be smoked. So you see, Chester, you want modernity, and modernity is actually destroying our very own industry. The very act of smoking a cigar.

The re-reading of *Anna Karenina* in *Anna in the Tropics* is only slightly relevant to Tolstoy's novel, yet the drama succeeds in playing out the processes of interpretation and reading in a manner that is complex and intriguing, even if the quotations from the novel are contextually distorted to suit the playwright's needs. The postmodern technique of shaking loose a cultural icon from its standard setting and reexamining it according to a different cultural way of reading and understanding works well for Cruz and for viewers of *Anna in the Tropics*.

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