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## Review Essay

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### On Stage

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*Irony, Theater, and History in Time of War: Reflections on War and Peace, the Beginning of the Novel.* (Based on the novel of Leo Tolstoy.) Director Piotr Fomenko. Stage adaptation Piotr Fomenko, Everett Dixon, Galina Pokrovskaya, Evgeni Kalintsev. Designer Vladimir Maximov. Costumes Maria Danilova. Produced in association with Baryshnikov Dance Foundation. US premier, Lincoln Center Summer Festival, Alice Tully Hall, 6-7 July 2004.

The favourite of the Moscow art scene and one of Europe's preeminent stage innovators, Piotr Naumovich Fomenko returned to America and Lincoln Center after a four-year absence. His memorable version of Ostrovsky's *Innocent as Charged* (*Bez viny vinovatye*), shown here in 2000, had fueled expectations of local theatre-goers. Those who were able to see both adaptations that Fomenko brought to New York in early July, of Tolstoy and of Pushkin/Bryusov *Egyptian Nights*, can count themselves lucky (tickets had been sold out long before they were scheduled to go on sale through the theatre box office). Both plays revealed what we have come to expect of Fomenko. The easy spirit of the atelier that the actors are keen on sharing with the audience rests on an atmosphere of workshop-like camaraderie and mutual dependence. The actors go through an

intensive reading period preparing as they master the whole arsenal of mime, gesture, and discourse. Practical jokes and sardonic theatrical wit are bandied effortlessly back and forth. Fomenko continually features "interchangeable" characters to tease fresh ideas out of the originals (he deals exclusively in staging the classics and one may think at times that he is "up-staging" them). He dresses up his core "mannequins" and reuses them in a new garb in more than one role in the same performance—and often in the same act!—to emphasize concealed connections, accentuate mannerisms, and expose contrasts.

The atelier scene at Kutuzovsky prospect is still affiliated with GITIS where Fomenko has taught since 1981. Accorded independent status since 1993, the atelier is a Mecca for those in love with just such theatrical couture: light-headed, full of giddy movement, athletics, and irreverent attitudes. Several of the veterans (Liudmila Arinina, Boris Gorbachev) had been with the master on and off throughout his itinerant years at the Leningrad Theatre of Comedy, Taganka, Mayakovsky, Vakhtangov, and other guest appearances in stage direction and film (*Family Happiness* among them). However, most of the recent "Fomenki" came of age as actors at the Kutuzovsky stage. This means that as former and current GITIS students, they were growing up with Tolstoy's novel, in the seven years that it had taken the director and the troupe to make the production that premiered in Moscow February 7, 2001. *War and Peace* is thus a special item on Fomenko's repertoire, especially after it garnered one prestigious award after another: the Tovstonogov prize, the Golden Mask, nominations for the best stage direction of the "smaller theatre form" [sic!], the Russian National State Prize, best actress (Galina Tynina as Annette Scherer, Countess Rostov, and Princess Maria).

Responses in the Russian press after the play's debut were uniformly positive, critics being especially taken by the "removal of the anthological

polish" off the venerable classic. "There simply are no weak roles," wrote *Kommersant*. "Minimum pathos in discussing the truths remembered from school," added *Vedomosti*. "Charm, grace, freshness, ... full acceptance of the world as it is... the spectator returns to see his beloved actors, ... to recharge with their youthful energy" (*Itogi*). The raves from Russia are at odds with the reserved evaluations released in the American Press after July 7. Acknowledging the polished beauty of the vignettes in which only secondary characters excelled, Neil Genzlinger summed it up in *The New York Times*: "...Mr. Fomenko's overall intent remains unclear; perhaps the notion is that these beginnings of a great novel embody the beginnings of Russian identity. Also unclear is why, as the program relates, this relatively straightforward adaptation took seven years to develop. It would be nice to think that the company might return over the next few years and present the rest of the novel." Christopher Reardon delivered the following mixed judgment for *New York Newsday*: "For practical reasons, Fomenko sticks to the opening chapters.... The actors... often played the text for comic effect, but it never seemed out of place... The biggest problem with Fomenko's riff on Tolstoy is that it truncates the profound moral development of characters such as Andrei, Pierre, and Natasha. Then again, you can always read the book."

The disagreements are fundamental. The American critics consider fragmentariness and a *mise-en-scène* structure a natural evil that the director had to cope with in attempting to set this "behemoth" novel, consciously sacrificing the moral flow, that paramount element in Tolstoy. Americans also suggest that the boldness of this production might not appeal to every taste, but that it alone is neither a blemish nor a testimony of quality. Not so with the Russians, who defend the atelier ethic as they do the schoolmate ethic: they like it when Pierre and Andrei behave like their college roommates. At the same time—and this is significant—they demand that the characters do *not* look to us now as they did back in school. One Russian critic found the play so compelling that he decided to reread the novel and pulled it off the shelf as soon as he came home. When a sheet from a high school composition titled "The Spiritual Searching of Pierre" fluttered out of the dusty

tome, he was relieved that he had witnessed no such searching in the performance he had just seen. It was as if it were implicit in Russian critical responses that they had not reread the novel since high school and were proud of giving it fresh readings of their own. And when they see Fomenko, their medium, *War and Peace* rises up from the capricious recesses of their memory as a delightfully defamiliarized phoenix.

At stake here, in these exaggerated stances on either side, is the different cultural moment of the two nations at the present time. Russians still relish post modernism as an attitude and as a solution. To this reviewer it seems that Fomenko intended to scan the beginning of Tolstoy's exposé on determinism and free will as a possibility for *play and playing*. Fomenko also uses Tolstoy's brilliance at social *mise-en-scène* to probe into the utmost challenges of irony as theatre and as historiography. Such a suggestion would be in keeping with the appreciative comments in Western Europe, which saw the triumph of irony in Fomenko's rendition of Tolstoy. (In Europe outside Russia Fomenko produces the play at venerable comedy houses.) Perhaps the North American spectator can be made to appreciate the ironic potentials in the play if these seem to have a serious purpose.

The abbreviated summary that follows attempts to reveal these potentials. The play covers only the first twenty-five chapters compressed within thirteen scenes with two intermissions, constituting Part One of Book One of the novel. This gives us a rare opportunity to experience the original core of 1805 published in *Russkii vestnik* before anything has happened but the death of the Old Count Bezoukhov. History and life are underway, as in human experience, when history unfolds "theatrically," in discreet scenes and episodes. As we enter these scenes as actors and witnesses, we feel that a certain force is moving us ahead.

Fomenko introduces us to history as theatre (Tolstoy's *teatr istorii* from the Epilogue) from the very start. Before the opening Prologue scene begins (*What force moves the nations?*), the audience faces a magnificent curtain, the general map of Europe for 1805, washed by the "Western Ocean" on the West and "the German Sea" on the

North. Swinging frames with life size images of Napoleon (in the west wing), and Alexander I (in the east) stand on either side of the stage. The heads of the Emperors are in colour, with Napoleon's modelled on a painting by Louis David and Alexander I's by George Dawe; the bodies are drawn with pencil in silhouette, and look empty. In the round hat and grey cape of a free Swiss citizen, a slightly stocky and bespectacled Pierre (Andrei Kazakov) walks on stage to the sounds of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 1*, climbs a chair, and asks the question that opens the first chapter of Epilogue II: What is the force that moves nations? In his characteristic elliptical absent-mindedness, he fast-forwards to the joke about the *muzhik* who thinks that the devil is the force moving a locomotive (chapter ii), and then concentrates on his own freedom to raise or lower his hand (investigations from chapters iii and viii). Stepping from chair to chair, he pronounces himself free, only to fall down. This dramatical Prologue's indecorous conclusion contrasts sharply with the similarly philosophical prelude in the 1966 Bondarchuk film. There Tolstoy's (or the narrator's) God-like voice thunders from the sky as it sweeps over the battlefields and peaceful fields of the earth, calling on people to follow the simple truths of goodness. Pierre has barely had time to pick himself up and retire when the lights go up and we see Prince Vasily, the first guest in the scene designated in the playbill as *Anne Scherer's Salon* (chapters i through the middle of chapter v, Book I, part I). Prince Vasily (Rustem Youskaev, also Count Ilya Rostov), in a long velvet duster with brocaded order bars, does not strike us as particularly aristocratic, only lazy. Scherer (Galina Tiunina, also Countess Natalia Rostova and Princess Maria Bolkonsky), wearing a turban and a violet silk jumper strapped criss-cross at the back, speaks impeccable French with an intellectual flair that belongs in the camp of Mme. de Stael. She shocks us neither with the kisses that she periodically wings to the "angel" Alexandre nor with her youthful good looks, but rather with her crippled unbending limb, locked in at the knee, and a walking stick.

While newly arriving guests (Mortemar, and Helene, Lise, and Andrei, Pierre, Anna Droubet-skaya) are briskly introduced, the audience is deafened by "Cher-Scherer" and "enchanté,"

shrieked out by "ma tante" (Liudmila Arinina, also Maria Dmitrievna Akhrosimova and Princess Catiche), seated with her back to us. Together with Pierre, Lise Bolkonsky (Ksenia Kutepova, also Sonia and Julie Karagina) introduces an air of vulnerability and humanity into the puppet-like rhythm of the whole. Pierre is following Helene (Polina Kutepova, also Natasha Rostova and Malbroug's page), wandering listlessly around the stage. The audience, familiar with Tolstoy's novel, knows that Pierre's instincts are not clueless, and we also start trusting our own instincts about the production and its course. Her signature marble shoulders concealed from view, Helene, far too thin and flat-chested, is dressed in a bohemian costume of a café-chantant performer. Anna Mikhailovna (Madeleine Djabrailova, also Mlle. Bourienne), looks like an early client of Coco Chanel, in her black two-piece uniform. A fur collar with claws for cat fights is still handily attached to its top. With her springing gait and financial emergencies, she is a convincing and intimidating fighter for her share of the 1805 pie. In the middle of the anti-Napoleonic dispute initiated by Scherer and Viscount de Mortemar (the tall, elegant, and rook-like Karen Badalov, also the Stevens at the party, the German doctor, and Old Prince Bolkonsky) against Pierre and Andrei (Ilya Liubimov), our focus keeps shifting to follow how the "spindles hummed steadily and ceaselessly on all sides," still unsure whether it is the work of determinism or free will, naiveté or calculated risk, passion or artifice. We gape when the departing Pierre and Andrei pick up the suddenly frozen carcasses of Mortemar and Anna Pavlovna and carry them out of the salon. To add to the effect, Andrei and Pierre are not in a hurry to put their theatrical props back on their feet, but pause to talk in the very middle of chapter five, on their way to Andrei's, as if their burden is indeed weightless and hollow. Finally on his feet, Mortemar hears that he "must be a Mason," shrugs his shoulders, turns, and then leaves. The jarring conclusion prepares for further surprises.

In the next scene with Andrei and Pierre (lasting from mid-chapter v to mid-chapter vi of the novel), the curtain of Europe is drawn open. We see Andrei's sitting room, indicated by a column and a sparsely decorated interior. Kseniia

Kutepova as Lise plays her "fool's" mission as the terrified pregnant wife, but does it very skillfully, undermining Andrei's position as a hero. While she is going upstairs singing "my angel," Pierre asks the unanswerable question: why are you going to war? The question, and Andrei's response, "I don't know, this must needs be done," will become the play's leitmotif from this point on. The muscular and mercurial Ilya Liubimov as Andrei is wearing a costume reminiscent of a uniform of a cadet just out of military school and therefore out of phase with his manly confidence. What happens next is incomprehensible at first, but gradually settles in as a prelude to the *Malbroug* [Marlborough] pantomime. To the sound of the brassy military march, Andrei performs the Malbroug routine of Punch from "Punch and Judy," that "tragic comedy or a comic tragedy." He dons, in turn, his *aide-du-camp* cocked hat with gilded plumage and then a settee pillow, in the form of a cocked hat, a double and tragi-comic victim of domestic captivity and the law of determinism. Suddenly, the scene glides into the next one, when Pierre, perhaps tired of Andrei's escapades, decides to pay a visit to Dolokhov, whom he just promised *not* to see. Andrei remains seated in the corner, his powerful profile fitting in the empty frame vacated by the Russian Emperor.

Fomenko called the subsequent scene "*The bet*" and it carries us to the end of chapter vi with the orgy at Dolokhov's (Kirill Pirogov, also Nikolai Rostov). The scene is a flop. Instead of "Listen to me!/Attention! ["Slushat'!"] uttered by Dolokhov in the novel as an order, the brawlers in the play drawl it dreamily as "Li--ii-steni---inng" [sl--uu-sha-aat'] (the condition in the present continuous), lying supine on the floor. Doing and planning nothing except getting drunk might be a favourite Russian solution to determinism, but Fomenko fails to convince us here how it can compete with the opposite, the determination of Andrei. He rises to his feet, this time with a tin bowl for a helmet, and sings the Malbroug song flanked by his wife Lise in a white capote on the left and on the right a page (Helene/Natasha) in elaborate period costume. The drunken company sings along. The already familiar "— Why are you going to war?" — "I don't know, this must needs be done" exchange concludes "Act One."

Throughout "Act Two" old Count Bezoukhov (Boris Gorbachev, also the old hussar at the drinking party and Mikhail Ivanovich at the Bolkonsky's) will remain chairbound in the right corner on the upper-tier, mummified with white make-up, a German doctor (Karen Badalov) and the French luminary Lorrain (Thomas Motskus, also Anatol) frozen like two enormous birds of prey over him. Oblivious to gossip told about him, Pierre marches in and out in rabbit flop-ear hat, with a banner and map of the English Channel campaign, talking to himself.

Vodka-drinking and gossip are better suited for the genial company of inveterate Muscovites in *The Rostovs and the Bezoukhovs* scene (chapters vii-xi of the novel). At the mention of Old Bezoukhov's grave condition, the white mummy upstairs suddenly flails its hands and groans the grotesque "a-aha." Experimentation continues. As they enter the stage through the "Napoleon" frame (the Emperor, like his frère Alexandre, is now leaning against the wall), young characters introduce themselves by reading out loud from Tolstoy's directions in their copies of the novel. Sonia (the Lise of Act One) proudly displays her long golden braid, despite the author's insistence that she should be dark-haired. Natasha is indignant at being called uncomely; then she reads that she should "shriek" and does just that, forgetting about her looks. With special pleasure, egotistic Boris (Oleg Liubimov) obeys Tolstoy's directive to take centre stage, and look "at his handsome blond reflection in the mirror..." The two mirrors are the same empty frames, and they will continue to be important.

The audience at the performance I attended reacted instantly and gratefully to Tolstoy's inimitable play on social pretense and metaphysical incongruity "One cannot wait for the crisis: it is the salvation of his soul that we are talking about here!" (from the scene "*He is in such bad health*" chapters xii-xiii). Liudmila Arinina is a fantastic Catiche, hushing everyone away like a jealous Cerberus, her hisses complemented by a drumming of the pestle against the mortar. In this apothecary hell, the old man, at every mention of his name, repeats his flailing hands and groaning routine.

"*The Nameday at the Rostovs*" (chapters xiv-xvii) omits the dinner, focusing on Natasha (Pol-

ina Kutepova, Helene, and the page). She is made-up and dressed like a Scaramouche Judy in white. This was a splendid artistic solution that allowed a grown actress to render Natasha's spontaneity. She performs somersaults while dancing with Pierre. (Both Polina and Ksenia Kutepov [Sonia] are professionally trained dancers.) As in the very first scene, Pierre's attraction to his future wives (played by the same actress) is fated and against his will. Natasha is also Malbroug's (Punch's or Andrei's) growing page and ladylove. This scene is arguably the most charming, as a company of well-fed Cupids performs *The Brook* (in the Fomenko version, composed by Nikolai for Sonia), tugging at each other's togas and knocking laurel wreaths off each other's heads. Rustem Youskaev dances the Daniel Cooper number with eagerness and gusto. In this scene, we notice the increased use of the two empty frames—mirrors, doors, and transit areas between episodes (is there a chance to go back and change one's errors?). This is what the young characters attempt to do.

But there are "*Limits of human life*" that are "*fixed and may not be overpassed*" (chapter xviii). Thus speaks the Priest administering the sacrament of unction (Serguei Yakubenko, who also played all the servants in the play—Yakov, Mitenska, and Tikhon—without a slight chance to unbend his stooping gait). In dealing with death, Fomenko prefers the language of the crude grotesque. He capitalizes on the parallel between the "sixth *anglaise*" at the Rostovs and the "sixth stroke" suffered by the old Bezoukhov. The living corpse suddenly reads in his own voice from Tolstoy's text that he has just suffered the stroke in question, convulses in his chair, and drops the novel. Behind the sounds of Orthodox liturgy, we hear another noise, first intermittent and weak, then more and more audible: droplets of water. The limits of human life are represented as drops collecting in the empty tin bowl, Andrei's helmet upside down. The Old Count is finally dead in the middle of a cat-fight between Catiche and Anna Mikhailovna, while Pierre and Prince Vasily stand passively by. As Anna clutches at the precious portmanteau with the Count's will, the two demonic doctors slink downstairs, heads down and shoulders up, bearing the tin bowl with its deadly libation, and freeze in the door-frames. We recog-

nize in their figures the blood-curdling and yet comic images from the lithographs of Goya and Daumier.

In the last "Act," the curtain with map of Europe is drawn, and the portraits of the two Emperors are now framed and on the walls, with the standing frames left empty. The long dining table and the grand piano are downstairs. On the upper-tier, Maria Bolkonsky's room is in Pierre's corner from the previous scene, while the old Prince Bolkonsky's room is in old Count Bezoukhov's room on the right. The same generation as Bezoukhov, he is a healthy holdover from the eighteenth century and is seated facing the opposite wall, writing, expecting Maria to come upstairs for her *Geometry Lesson* (mid-chapter xxii). The Old Bolkonsky (also Mortemar, the German doctor, and Severs) gives Maria (Scherer, Old Countess Rostov) her letters from "Eloisa," Julie Karagina (Lise Bolkonsky, Sonia). *Letters of Mary and Julie* (mid-xxii-end chapter) are the highlight of the act. Julie runs around the stage with an enormous quill, using it to leave loving and hateful scrawls on the canvases with the two Emperors and to "describe" the characters literally. They—Pierre, Nikolai Rostov, Anatol Kuragin—appear in frames on stage while she gossips about them. Maria plays the Beethoven theme on the piano, thinking about the war. Suddenly the two Emperors start ventrilocuting like cartoon oracles. Now the war "must needs" take place, Julie disappears, and Mary switches into whispering prayers for Andrei and her unnamed bridegroom.

In the splendid *Father and Son* scene (chapters xxiii-xxiv), Karen Badalov and Ilya Liubimov offer us a comic face-off between the safely retired Malbroug who had beaten Napoleon with Suvorov, and the young hapless Malbroug. The meal scene is a sheer delight, a recreation by Fomenko of eighteenth-century theatric humours that are executed with perfection by the splenetic Old Prince (Badalov). Maria's giving *the holy icon* (middle chapter xxv) to Andrei is played close to the text, simply and humbly. Galina Tiunina as a pious Russian *baryshnia* is the most vivid example of the Fomenki being capable of both affection and affect.

*Andrei's departure* (chapter xxv to end) is really a summary. Pierre appears to ask Andrei

one final time, "why are you going to war?" Andrei's answer remains the same, "I don't know, this must needs be done," but he is visibly less resolute. The death-promising tin-bowl of a helmet is back on his head. Flanked again by his white-gowned wife Lise (in her burial shroud) and the page (his future bride Natasha) in black, Andrei sings with the two women: *Des blondes et des brunes, // Mironton, tonton, mirontaine; // Des blondes et des brunes, // Et des châains aussi.* Pierre and other characters join them one after another on stage and take a stand on the steps of the stairs. Such a conclusion spells doom, despite our knowledge that Andrei will temporarily return. "The curtain-map" is pulled back and forth, creating ripples and waves on the ocean of history that gradually covers everyone standing on stage.

Would Tolstoy, so suspicious of "striking effects," be beguiled by Fomenko's spell? Hardly, although nobody was more aware than Tolstoy of the profound artificiality of social situations. Hardly again, although Tolstoy himself wrote domestic theatricals full of satire, tomfoolery, and physicality. While he might have found the scenes at the Rostov home fascinating, he would not have agreed that family, war between nations, and dying were ever proper subjects for vaudeville and caricature.

Fomenko's success with Tolstoy lies elsewhere, on the delicate margin of the comic and character identity. Fomenko's set, with its swinging mirror-frames used for entry and re-entry into one's past, present, future, and new relationships, visually reflects constant Tolstoyan preoccupations in a new way. Despite his rejection of historical *hubris* or national "chosenness," it always mattered to Tolstoy *how* one "chooses oneself." For this very reason, too, the parade of fourteen actors playing thirty-three characters provides unparalleled insight into the nature of personality. None of the emptiest versions of human character that we have seen on stage is expendable, except the two "history-makers" removed from their frames, Napoleon and Alexander. This is not to say that Tolstoy was right in denying them a chance at making their bet for fame in the theatre of history. But it is to say that "heroes" do not make themselves into master-coordinators (*rasporiaditeli*). Rather, they become "secondary role players," workshop participants—and it is thus primarily that we can identify with them, in the everyday atelier of history and life.