

and speak to one another.

I am sorry that this film does not cohere. On the other hand, perhaps this failed version will inspire a new team to undertake another film version of the novel. As Louis Malle and Andre Gregory demonstrated in "Vanya on 42nd Street," on the stage of a decaying Manhattan theatre in acute disrepair, one does not have to travel thousands of miles to Russia in order to depict the Russian soul. One does not have to spend millions of dollars on creating a Russian look. All one has to do is search within, intensely and intensively, in order to capture the meaning of certain human lives. And this is, after all, what Tolstoy himself, through his mouthpiece Levin, urged the readers of *Anna Karenina* to do—to reject the false external glitz and glamour of society, and to seek meaning in the quiet, simple spiritual truths and values of a deeply examined life.

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A Duet in Passion and Suffering: Shared Experience's Anna Karenina. Adapted from Leo Tolstoy's novel by Helen Edmundson, directed by Nancy Meckler. (World premiere, January 30, 1992.) Performed at the Next Wave Festival, Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, November 11-14, 1998.

For almost 25 years, Shared Experience has used its stage in London's Soho Laundry to turn great novels, such as *Anna Karenina*, *Jane Eyre*, or *Mill on the Floss*, into theatre performances. While the concept of using minimal cast and props has been successfully practiced by other European troops, such as the Shakespeare Company in Germany, the devotion to adapting novels

for the stage by these means appears to be the provenance of Shared Experience, a group committed to "creating theater which goes beyond the everyday, giving form to the hidden world of emotion and imagination." Their work has received international recognition and acclaim with honours such as the Peter Brook Empty Space Award in 1995, and a Prudential Arts Award nomination in 1993 for Director Nancy Meckler's contribution to innovation and creativity in British Theatre. The current production of *Anna Karenina* has been named Best Touring Show at the Martini/TMA Awards in 1993 and Outstanding Theatrical Event, Time Out Awards, 1992.

The production features eight actors, each playing multiple roles, and limited props—a few chairs, suitcases, robes, and capes, in minimalist sets. Teresa Banham and Richard Hope, both experienced and past members of the Royal Shakespeare company, play Anna and Levin, respectively, while Derek Riddell, as a Vronsky with piercing bright eyes, turns in a credible performance.

Helen Edmundson, the author of the stage adaptation, chose to make Anna and Levin the focus of the dramatic action. The two characters also act as narrators and guides to the audience. Edmundson, who also adapted *War and Peace* and *The Mill on the Floss*, explains in the program notes that her choice to invent a relationship between Anna and Levin beyond what is in the novel came about in the process of working through the text: "Without Levin, *Anna Karenina* is a love story, extraordinary and dark, but essentially a love story. With Levin, it becomes something great."

The curtain opens on an almost empty stage. A small wooden box with an icon and a few candle stumps is the only visible object. Two characters, Anna and Levin, each with a suitcase in hand, walk onto the stage, deeply preoccupied, until they notice each other. Their dialogue continues throughout the play. If one of them is participating in the main action, the other sits and quietly observes from a corner. They frequently ask each other, "Where are you now?" or, like a narrator, supply the audience with information

about the time and place of the main action. Though following each other's story, their relationship is increasingly complicated as the drama unfolds: Levin begins to be disgusted by Anna's illicit affair and several times asks her to leave him alone, while Anna, increasingly alienated and outcast from society, becomes more and more dependent on Levin as the only character taking her seriously as a person. By the time the novelistic scene of Levin and Anna's meeting is staged, Levin, the dialogue partner, has long ceased speaking to Anna.

The performance is further notable for its imposing physicality, a trademark of the successful collaboration between Nancy Meckler, who has been the company's director since 1987, and Liz Ranken, a choreographer and performer who has been the company's Movement Director for the past six years. Many events and emotions are related through movement or almost Brechtian gestures, some of them repeatedly used as a kind of signature to represent one character in the thoughts of another. For example, whenever Levin thinks of Kitty and his failed marriage proposal, she enters the stage, circles around him in ice-skating movements and repeats her part of the proposal dialogue. Pooky Quesnel plays Kitty as well as Anna's son, Seryozha. The latter role is almost entirely mime: with head bowed and a mock-soldier's willful movements, Seryozha marches into the room in a paper sailor's hat with wooden sword in hand, unnaturally controlled but yearning for attention. His entrance leaves the spectator with the eerie feeling that he is not only very irritated by the lack of attention he receives, but is ready to enter into battle against his mother.

The actors' stage presence is almost acrobatic, as for example, in the love scenes. Karenin's love-making is logistic and mechanical. He works his way down Anna's body in strategic strokes from head to lower body, ending on top of her in push-up position before the lights go out. The encounter between Anna and Vronsky is staged in snake-like, accelerated, and increasingly passionate movements; the actors seem completely entangled, short of devouring each other. For the race sequence, the cast stands on chairs facing the

theatre audience, while close to the edge of the stage, in an almost embarrassingly graphic display, Vronsky imitates riding movements with Anna playing the horse who is raced to death and, with broken neck, shot by Vronsky. Karen Ascoe's Dolly only has to take off and adjust parts of her dress to change from a stern, pregnant mother mourning her lost youth, to a seductive maiden in a tight corset, showing off her red dancing shoes. Ian Gelder puts a cape over his suit, without changing the posture of his Karenin, and convincingly assumes the role of the priest marrying Levin and Kitty.

Anna herself stands out in her elegant, black dress, laced on top, a stunning figure who switches instantaneously from seductiveness to madness to mourning. These changes are achieved by gestures alone; like the other characters, she never changes her costume, but adjusts it with slight changes, removing her gloves, cape, and hat. When she suffers in labour and a high fever, she wears a simple white gown over her dress, evoking patient and penitent simultaneously. In the last act, Anna is dragged onto the stage by a muffled figure in a coarse, grey sack. Anna lies in the sack for a moment like an object, until, barely appearing to be alive, she slowly crawls out of it. The same muffled figure appears, groaning, whenever sickness or death occur in the main action. It accompanies Nikolai dying and Anna in labour. Similarly, the candles in the icon box, lit by Anna and Levin in moments of despair, are blown out at the moment of Anna's suicide. As she walks toward the edge of the stage to imaginary train tracks, the lights grow dim and red like the stage backdrop. While a threatening sound increases and imaginary passengers walk behind Anna, Kitty and Levin stand in the left stage corner, Kitty, in painful labour, held by her husband. At the climax, just before the lights go out and the train whistles, two cries are heard, one of life and one of death, closing the circle.

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