

The Last Station: Not a film about Tolstoy

Clare Hurley
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Directed by Michael Hoffman, based on a novel by Jay Parini.

The *The Last Station* opens with the line, “All, everything that I understand, I understand only because I love,” and then proceeds to state that the author of these lines, Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) was the greatest writer to ever live.

Indeed, the legendary author of *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and *Resurrection*, as well as volumes of stories, novellas and essays, certainly was among the greatest (and most prolific) of nineteenth century novelists, but like many of today’s biopics, this lavishly produced period piece glows with a faux authenticity that sheds little light on what actually made him so.

Director Michael Hoffman’s previous films have been generally mediocre comedies and dramas, occasionally enlivened by bright moments, with relatively big-name actors, that nonetheless failed to gain much attention. *Soapdish* (1991) and another costume drama, *Restoration* (1995), both featured Robert Downey, Jr., and *One Fine Day* (1996) billed Michelle Pfeiffer and George Clooney. He also directed a version of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1999), again with Pfeiffer.

Hoffman has taken the same approach in his current film. The tempestuous final conflicts between Tolstoy and his wife Sofya over his will and the copyright to his work serve primarily as an opportunity for the director “to create a vivid, moving picture about the difficulty of living with love and the impossibility of living without it. It’s not a film about Tolstoy. It’s a film about the challenges of love.”

The fine performances by Christopher Plummer (Tolstoy), and Helen Mirren (Sofya), for which they are both nominated for Oscars, are enjoyable; it is appealing to see faces lined with age (albeit very attractively) light up with passion for one another. But otherwise the film is light fare. And Hoffman is right, it is not a film about Tolstoy.

The characters and incidents that make up the plot are accurate enough, drawn from the voluminous diaries and letters of the protagonists, as well as several equally voluminous biographies. The film opens in the summer of 1910 in Moscow when Valentin Bulgakov (James McAvoy), a young admirer, is engaged by Vladimir Chertkov (Paul Giamatti) to be the great man’s secretary.

At this point, Tolstoy is 82 years old, beloved the world over as an author, but also a figure of controversy for his outspoken opposition to private property and his advocacy of agrarian communalism that had a strong appeal among the various radical and populist groups active at the time. The 1905 Revolution had taken place only five years earlier, and Tolstoy was undoubtedly being watched by the ruthless police network maintained by Nicholas II’s prime minister, Stolypin.

The man who engages Bulgakov, Chertkov (also well played by Giamatti), is Tolstoy’s principle disciple. He controls the publication of his work and promulgates the master’s teachings of celibacy, vegetarianism and non-violence at a Tolstoyan community at Telyatinki not far from Yasnaya Polyana, the Tolstoy estate. At their interview, he warns Bulgakov against the Countess Tolstoy, with whom he is engaged in a bitter feud over the master’s final allegiance, whether it is to him and the higher ideals of his own teachings, or to the carnal and domestic entrapments of his wife.

The Countess, for her part, is jealous of Chertkov, considers him the devil incarnate (his name, “chert” in Russian ironically means devil). At different points, both parties give the young man a diary with instructions to report on all that he sees so that they can use it against the other.

Upon his arrival at the rural commune at Telyatinki, Bulgakov is immediately taken with Masha (Kerry Condon), who with her bobbed curls, peasant blouse and trousers is vigorously splitting wood and obviously a liberated young woman. He also meets the prudish Sergeyenko (Patrick Kennedy), who polices the commune’s bedrooms to make sure the rules of celibacy are being observed. Masha interprets Tolstoy’s emphasis on love to mean free sexual love, and it is not long before the inevitable happens.

Meanwhile at Yasnaya Polyana, Bulgakov—the kind of naïve character Tolstoy himself might have created—is alternately overwhelmed by the unaffected straightforwardness of the great man and seduced by the neediness and wiles of the Countess. As the conflict over the will intensifies, Bulgakov, we are meant to believe, is increasingly conflicted in his loyalties, and learns a thing or two about what it really means to be married.

In the contest between Tolstoy and Sofya, Mirren steals the show with her histrionics—threatening to throw herself under the train like Anna Karenina, and into the lake to drown (both true). She is desperate to keep the copyright to her husband’s work, the income from which had made the old aristocratic family extremely rich, and which she claims is partly hers because she copied *War and Peace* over six times (also a fact).

Moreover, she insinuates virtual co-authorship because of her near ability to read her husband’s thoughts in the creative process and give constructive criticism. “Natasha (heroine of *War and Peace*) wouldn’t have said that. Pierre (hero of same) wouldn’t have reacted that way.” This is less likely, and like Hoffman’s creation of Masha (not a real historical figure), serves as a fairly cheap feminist gloss on the actual story.

The question raised is this: Does *The Last Station*, correct as it is in so many details—down to the Russian habit of sucking jam from a spoon to sweeten one’s tea—tell us much worth knowing about Tolstoy’s final days? In addition to the line about love (by which he did not in fact mean romantic love), Tolstoy also famously wrote, “It is very difficult to tell the truth.” It would be a shame to let such clichéd fare be the last word on a man who insisted that art concern itself with Truth (with a capital T) and not just satisfy itself with the mundane truths of everyday life.

Who was Leo Tolstoy that he should be considered if not *the*, then at least among the greatest writers to ever have lived? What made this iconoclast so beloved that his funeral, the first such in Russian history not to be officiated by the Orthodox Church, was apparently attended by 6,000 mourners?

The real Tolstoy

Count Lev (Leo) Nikolayevich Tolstoy was born September 9, 1828, just three years after the Decembrist Revolt led by a group of Russian officers fired a shot across the bow of the absolute monarchy. He died November 20, 1910, only seven years (almost to the day) before bourgeois rule, allied to everything rotten in Russia, was overthrown by the

proletariat in the 1917 Revolution.

The content and quality of his life were very much conditioned by the events that bracketed it. In some ways, his attitudes, particularly his relative political conservatism, remained deeply rooted in the earlier period. As Trotsky wrote in his obituary, “Tolstoy was no socialist,” but the logic of his experiences and the conclusions he reached and developed in his writing tended inevitably that way.

He was tormented by the injustice and depravity created by a class system in which the comfort of a handful of aristocratic gentry, such as himself, was based on the emmiseration of millions of peasants and workers. In his novels and stories, he depicted the effects of these social relations on the lives of his characters with insight, compassion and clarity.

What reader of *War and Peace* can forget the broad sweep of the novel’s characters—from the lively little princess Natasha who reads her girlish fortune in candle wax to the semi-autobiographical Pierre with all his attempted agricultural reforms, from the humble wisdom of the peasant Platon all the way up to the French Emperor Napoleon who catches cold on the eve of the Battle of Borodino because someone forgot to bring him dry boots?

Or *Anna Karenina*, which opens with the line, “All happy families resemble one another; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” And indeed, *Anna Karenina* throws over the sterile conventions of her marriage for the romantic passion and sensuality offered by the dashing Count Vronsky, only to find that these fleeting pleasures offer no real happiness or escape from the banality of her upper-class life.

The true nature of marriage in class society was a constant theme in Tolstoy’s work, but treated far more profoundly than Hoffman proves capable of in *The Last Station*. In one of Tolstoy’s last novellas, *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), a man who has murdered his wife in a fit of jealousy explains why he really did it to a fellow passenger on a train.

He explains that it was not so much jealousy, but the irreconcilable torments bred by a society that, on the one hand, encourages young men to live as libertines, indulging their passions with gypsies and prostitutes (or even better, married women, because they were less likely to carry diseases), and then, on the other, pretends that marriage to a formerly chaste virgin and a lifetime spent producing a baby each year is the proper moral alternative.

No, the anguished Pozdyshev declares, “We were like two convicts hating each other and chained together, poisoning one another’s lives, and trying not to see it. I did not then know that ninety-nine percent of married people live in a similar hell to the one I was in and that it cannot be otherwise. I did not then know this either about others or about myself....” (*The Kreutzer Sonata*).

Of course, none of this understanding finds expression in Hoffman’s film. *The Kreutzer Sonata*’s horrifying depiction of bourgeois marriage led to its ban both in Russia and the United States, where Theodore Roosevelt apparently labeled Tolstoy a “sexual moral pervert.”

When the story was finally published as part of Tolstoy’s collected works in 1890, he included an epilogue in which he sought to clarify its message. “We must cease thinking that carnal love is something peculiarly exalted; we must come to understand that the aim which is worthy of man is to serve humanity, his country, science, or art (let alone serving God).”

As he grew older, Tolstoy was particularly influenced by the writings of Schopenhauer, whose idealist philosophy sought to counter materialist and social revolutionary trends, by promoting forms of moral asceticism as the path to salvation. Tolstoy became convinced the path to social salvation lay through Christian love, celibacy, vegetarianism and non-violence.

He corresponded at one point with the Indian nationalist champion of passive resistance, Mahatma Gandhi; and his condemnation of the State and of organized religion led him to support the anarchist Kropotkin and

the ideas of the French petty-bourgeois socialist Proudhon, whom he’d met as a younger man.

His ideals drew many disciples who sought to live as “Tolstoyans,” and the novelist has been co-opted by various anarchistic, “free love,” back-to-nature radical movements ever since. This is the side of Tolstoy that *The Last Station* is most comfortable with. As Bulgakov says to Masha, the free spirited wood-splitter, “Maybe you are really truer to Tolstoy than Tolstoy himself.”

In reality, Tolstoy would have had little patience with the smug philistinism of the film. In part, because Helen Mirren’s portrayal of Sofya brings a certain charm to an otherwise self-absorbed character, but primarily because of the way it is shot and arranged, the film suggests that really, after all, what was the old man making such a fuss about? Why would he want to give up such a comfortable life and lovely estate? Why was he driving his poor wife to distraction by dressing up as a peasant and acting like Christ? Wanting to give up private property—Isn’t that just too absurd!

The film closes by saying that Sofya Tolstoy won back the copyright in 1916 though she died a few years later. It makes no mention of the fact that the Russian Revolution rendered this minor victory moot—or that it even occurred.

This failure to approach history with much more than the authenticity of costume design would have been deeply repugnant to Tolstoy. History was not a backdrop in his work. *War and Peace*, set in 1805, 23 years before his birth, spreads the panorama of the Napoleonic invasion of Russia, the occupation and burning of Moscow and finally the Battle of Borodino and the French retreat, not as a mere setting for the lives of his characters, but as a subject of the novel itself.

Moreover, while Tolstoy remained opposed to revolutionary action, he remained no less implacable in his conviction that private property and the social relations they engendered had to end. In *I Cannot Be Silent*, written in 1908, just two years before he died, he flung the pieties and hypocrisies of an unequal society back in its face. Of that work, Leon Trotsky wrote:

“And though he refuses a sympathetic hearing to our revolutionary objectives, we know it is because history has refused him personally an understanding of her revolutionary pathways. We shall not condemn him. And we shall always value in him not alone his great genius, which shall never die so long as human art lives on, but also his unbending moral courage which did not permit him tranquilly to remain in the ranks of *their* hypocritical church, *their* society and *their* state but doomed him to remain a solitary among his countless admirers” (*Tolstoy: Poet and Rebel*).

This is the Tolstoy whose legacy should be remembered. *The Last Station* might at least serve a useful purpose if it were to remind us: “Read Tolstoy!”



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