

WELCOME, TRAVELERS!

-A Review-

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“War & Peace” Deserves Your Devout Time During Simulcasts on A&E, Lifetime, and the History Channel*

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I watched an advance screening of “War & Peace” before the credits were put in. And even before I read the press releases on what will be an unprecedented undertaking of the novel which is perhaps best known for being long than for being one of the best novels ever written, I kept asking myself, why is this feeling—that is, the tone—so familiar? And why was it reminding me of the A&E presentation of the classic, “Pride & Prejudice” which I have always deemed the best adaptation and interpretation of Jane Austen’s novel?

After watching the first two of hours of what is being hailed as a monumental event to be simulcast over three networks, I finally read the press releases. And there it was! The name, Andrew Davies. Therein lay why I appreciate this version of “War & Peace”. Yes, I have read the novel; however, it was a long time ago, and it felt good having my brain waves refreshed, especially by Davies whom I consider one of a handful of writers who can adapt what we like to think of as classics into contemporary substance. Davies deals with tone, which in my estimation is practically a defunct art in contemporary writing. Tone sets the mood—yes, even on the motion picture screen.

Before I continue, let me tell you that this version of “War & Peace” airs as a limited four-part series in simulcast broadcasts by A&E, Lifetime, and the History Channel, on Mondays beginning on January 18 at 9 p.m. ET.

Now after my ‘commercial break here,’ let me say that I have neither liked nor appreciated movie versions of Jane Austen’s “Pride & Prejudice”; and I have neither liked nor appreciated movie versions of “War & Peace” because of two main missing elements: The characters are stagnant and the movie format simply has not so far lent itself well to these lengths of works because of strict time limitations.

But nowadays with large television HD screens, one can get the magnificence of landscape and character development. This series was filmed in Russia, Latvia and Lithuania.

What I appreciate about Davies is that he draws out the subtleties in character development and these are what set the tone, that invisible foundation of a movie or a book. In “War & Peace” these subtleties deliver a foreboding world of wealth and

emptiness. So what does one fill it with? From what I viewed, Davies has taken “War & Peace” characters where I would think Tolstoy meant for them to be: In a flesh, blood and emotional world of love and conflict, which is in fact the nature of war. I am a strong believer that landscape in such novels should, too, serve as a quasi-character and should be used as a vehicle for exploring characterization – not just for moving them or the reader or viewer from point A to point Q, not following through to satisfy you at Z.

“War & Peace” is extensive because it portrays five families: The Bezukhovs, Bolkonskys, Rostovs, Kuragins, and Drubetskoys. Inside each family, its members are explored in-depth. The war explodes; the characters implode.

Tolstoy writes his story on several levels. But one level which is usually missed when being adapted or translated to the screen is that “War & Peace”, too, is a political novel. Davies doesn’t miss this. (He, of course, is the writer of “House of Cards”, a political series shown on Netflix. I must confess that I have never seen “House of Cards”, but I hope to one day.). For the most part, “War & Peace” has been seen as a historical novel (thus, why it is fitting for the History Channel) and a romance novel (thus, why it is fitting for Lifetime). And, of course, it is ‘art’ and ‘entertainment’ (thus, why it is fitting for A&E). To reiterate, the novel is a political one and it is this facet which brings about a dirty war on the remnants of the French Revolution which proliferated a class war that eventually elevated in the rise of Napoleon.

When “War & Peace” begins, it is 1805 and French troops under Napoleon attempt to conquer Russia. It is a time of universal Haves and Have-Nots; a time when the political philosophies of Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, the Marquis Antoine Nicholas de Condorcet *et al*, and such concepts as the general will, individual freedom, social contract, pro-peasant, and Storm the Bastille laid groundwork for what? What else, but war. And if these concepts sound abstract and boring, it is not so if you’re caught in this mess. Trapped in it. This is why I am enamored of the four-eyed Pierre, portrayed by Paul Dano, who sees life through rose-tinted lens. You see the metamorphosis of Pierre who is the male equivalent of a Plain Jane (Plain John, I suppose). Dano delivers him to you in what should be an Emmy Award performance.

This is a remarkable cast consisting of Lily James (*Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*), James Norton (*Happy Valley*), Jim Broadbent (*Iris*), and Gillian Anderson of *The XFiles* fame.

But to reiterate, Davies is the secret ingredient in this masterful presentation. You are first drawn into this version by landscape. A panoramic roaming of the camera’s eye pulls you into 19th Century Russia and traps you there— in conflict and emotions.

I am not about to write this review with umpteen spoiler alerts even if the work is a classic and has been around since 1869, having been published shortly after the United States’ Civil War, a setting that gave the literary world and motion picture industry another long novel called “Gone with the Wind”. In one sense, Davies reminds me of David O. Selznick in that he pays attention in that ‘devil in the details’ way. It’s how he traps you in this foreign world of history and a time that should be forgotten, but isn’t and can’t be.

Yes, the romance is in “War & Peace” as it is in most great novels (as is the case of Tolstoy’s “Anna Karenina”). Unlike “Gone with the Wind” which has been mainly reduced to just a romance movie (albeit it a splendid one) and is still popular, “War & Peace” has been reduced to being stereotyped as stiff and stodgy in movie form no matter

how brilliant it is said to be. With the exception of happy Black slaves as portrayed in “Gone with the Wind”, these depictions do not serve well either novel both of which are known for being long, simply too long for impatient readers who want quick satisfaction (“Gone with the Wind”, if one would take the time to read it and not shortcut to the movie, one can see GWTW is also a political novel.). There is an amount of patience demanded in “War & Peace” because of in-depth character portrayals. That shouldn’t turn you off, but rather intrigue you. Make you relish the dialogue and situations.

Great novels transcend time because they depict the human condition which in itself remains contemporary. From what I saw, this treatment of “War & Peace” will be the screen version to transcend time. Hopefully, it will give “War & Peace” the popularity it deserves.

If you haven’t read the novel, do so. I plan to reread it.

I do hope that English and history teachers force their students to see it, if need be. Trust me, they’ll live—and live to enjoy what I believe is well worth their brain cells being activated.

END

*The above is on the Television and Book lanes on The Mid-South Tribune and the Black Information Highway at www.blackinformationhighway.com, and on various blogs. *Welcome, Travelers!*