

War and Peace

film review

Dennis Raymond

Most movies leave us with so little that it probably seems unfair to dump on Sergei Bondarchuk's film of "War and Peace" simply because it doesn't leave us with enough.

What it does give us is some rich and memorable images: a pregnant woman sewing by the light of an open window, reminiscent of Vermeer. The coming of Spring heralded by a variety of colors and textures that send the senses reeling, almost as if you could touch and smell the infinite sweetness of that budding flower up there on the screen.

Young Natasha's startling, radiant entrance upon a scene with the sunlight bounding off her head. And, much later, Natasha's first ball at which she meets and falls in love with the ill-fated Andrei.

Waltzing around the massive, mirrored ballroom, she expresses so effectively the feminine excitement and wonder of a young girl coming of age, not with words, but through the movements of her whole body.

Or that timeless, lyrical moment which seems so far removed from the rest of the movie, like that inspired scene in "Jules et Jim" as Jeanne Moreau sings "Le Tourbillon," when Natasha performs a delightful Russian folk dance in accompaniment to her Uncle on guitar.

It's moments like these when you actually think that Bondarchuk has captured the essence of Tolstoy in images—his celebration and love of life. Then the movie launches into the long and heavy battle scenes and after only ten minutes into the Battle of Austerlitz you no longer expect "War and Peace" to breathe and live; you just sit there, soaking it up like a sponge.

It isn't shoddy (except for the music). On the contrary. What makes "War and Peace" so uninteresting is that it's in such goddamn good taste. Someone may get his leg blown off during the Battle of Borodino, but you can rest assured that the frame will be geometrically impeccably composed.

It's all so ploddingly intelligent and controlled, so "distinguished," so stately, respectable, and static—all perfection and so few surprises.

But who wants to see a movie that's so meticulously worked-out and worked-over, it's finished, it's dead? We are denied the pleasures of involvement through thinking because everything's already been conveniently thought out for us.

It's like watching a gigantic task of stone masonry. "War and Peace" is not exactly a failure, but neither is it art) it's heavy labor, which, of course, many people respect more than art.

The worst problem with movie epics is that they usually start with an epic in another form, so the director must try to make another masterpiece to compete with the already existing one.

I don't think that anybody who tried to put a great work of literature on the screen stands much of a chance of reproducing its greatness in another medium, and probably much of its richness will be lost, but there is an irresistible and certainly not-to-be-condemned desire to visualize works we love.

We may squirm when we see "War and Peace" on the screen, but surely we must recognize that Bondarchuk has been carried away by his love.

But is his love enough? I don't think it is. No matter how pure his intentions, Bondarchuk can't really meet the challenge. His "War and Peace" wants to be a great film. It is a huge sprawling epic an attempt to use the medium to its fullest, to overwhelm the senses and feelings through scope and size.

It is a big, respectable, dull movie that, in the face of all the detail, statistics, and expenditure that it boasts, doesn't really seem worth all the effort because it's all so forgettable.

As a historical recreation of 19th century Russia, it may be impressive for the moment, but once you leave the theatre, it has evaporated. And really, couldn't we ask more of a movie that reportedly cost \$100,000,000?

Why aren't there more moments like Natasha's sunlit entrance or her inspired Russian folk dance to remember and respond not merely to the beauty of the photography but the beauty of the conception.

In recent years the spectacle form has become so vulgarized that probably most educated moviegoers have just about given it up. The art-house audiences don't think of movies in those terms anymore because in general they feel that the only way for artists to work in the medium is frugally.

Though there might occasionally be great sequences in big pictures, like the entering of the snow-covered summerhouse in "Dr. Zhivago," those who knew the novel had probably left by then.

If, however, you will admit that you went to see "Dr. Zhivago" under the delusion that it was going to be like the book, but you stayed anyway to enjoy the vastness of the Siberian landscape and the pleasures of the senses that a wide screen can provide—the pleasures of depth and distances—then you may be willing to sit through 6-1/2 hours of "War and Peace."

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