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War and Peace—The Greatest

By Judith Crist



Those Russians . . . ! And now, I bet, they'll beat us to the moon! Chauvinism be damned—I'm putting *Gone with the Wind* into historical perspective and second place, for certainly the Russian *War and Peace* is not only the cinematic super-spectacular we have been yearning for and the finest epic film of our time, but also a great and noble translation of a literary masterpiece, surpassing our expectation and our imagination.

Superlatives are native to movie-talk in this country but I am using each advisedly. What we had seen of this Russian work, as we reported two weeks ago—the first three of the four separate films that comprise it in the original—led us to hope for much from the two-part English-language version that was being prepared for distribution here. But we had crossed fingers, not only because the fourth film, then in preparation, was unseen. The magnificent sweeping panorama of battlefield or ballroom or of city aflame, the intensity of detail in the bloodletting of war, in the exquisite nuances of romance, in the undertones of social and family relationships and the overtones of political maneuver might well be diminished, if not lost, in the "trimming" of an hour of film to reduce it to a feasible six hours and 13 minutes (the first part, three hours and 15 minutes, the second, two and 58, each with intermission). Above all there was the English dubbing to be feared; too many fine films have been mutilated if not destroyed by the idiocies of dialogue geared to lip-sync rather than meaning or by the disparities of voice and character. (Subtitling, we had felt when viewing the second part, proved an annoying distraction from the glories of the screen.)

Our fears were for naught. As with *Ulysses*, distributor Walter Reade Jr. has kept the faith in the integrity of a great work; Sidney Katz, supervisor of the editing, and every technician involved is to be congratulated, with special tribute to Andrew Witwer for writing and Norman Rose for speaking the narration and to Lee Kressel for the dialogue direction.

In common with *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* (if one may, on a purely movie-epic level and in those terms, consider the Margaret Mitchell work with Tolstoy's), *War and Peace* is concerned with an epic war and its impact upon a

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nation and a segment of its society epitomized by a group of people therefrom. But far beyond the broader historical sweep of the seven years of Napoleonic wars, with the climactic retreat from Russia in 1812, there is Tolstoy's concern with the nature of man, with the acceptances of life and of death, with the philosophical resolution of good and evil for the individual and for society. And here is the point of separation between the American work and the Russian, for this *War and Peace* far transcends the requirements for the spectacular film—the magnificent and awesome and terrible mass movements of historic events, the beautiful and unbeautiful individuals who involve us in them, the drama and tragedy and comedy of human affairs. The film succeeds in all its aspects in probing the soul of man and the conscience of mankind, thanks to director-producer Sergei Bondarchuk's avowed fidelity to "Tolstoy's own remark that literary art differs from non-art in that it stimulates not one idea but an infinity of ideas." Bondarchuk has made this a truth for cinematic art.

Bondarchuk's cinematic technique had seemed, when we viewed the first three segments of the film in the avant-garde atmosphere of the Montreal Film Festival, old-fashioned, albeit in the best sense. And certainly he uses a relatively slow-paced novelistic approach, with contemplative beauty and grandeur never slighted, but throughout, and coming to climactic brilliance in the last segment (indicating a change in Bondarchuk's own directorial style over the five years of production), there is the breath-taking use of the camera to go beyond the physical, to probe the stream of consciousness, attaining a near-surrealism in Pierre's duel with the dissolute Dolokov, in the looting of Moscow, finally in Andrei's death-bed scene, which is simply overwhelming.

Carefully, and with immaculate timing, alternating the panoramic scenes with near-vignettes, Bondarchuk unfailingly gives us the intimate detail of the first and the universal scope of the second, so that

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the individual protagonist is never lost in the mass and the characters carry with them always an aura of the stage on which they play their relatively minor roles.

You will find the leading protagonists unforgettable. Never has there been a creation like Lyudmila Savelyeva's Natasha, part nymph, part doe, the ultimate child-woman, a creature of heart-breaking beauty and grace. A trace of the young Audrey Hepburn in the huge eyes, the elegant neck line; a touch of the witchery of the young Vivien Leigh but with a disarming innocence to sweeten the headlong passions; but perhaps most of all there is in her every tiniest movement a recall (Miss Savelyeva is herself a ballerina) of Margot Fonteyn's unsurpassable Juliet, and Natasha's meeting and dancing with Andrei at the ball is comparable, in its quintessential depiction of awakening love, to the Fonteyn-Nureyev duets.

Vyacheslav Tihonov's Andrei, darkly handsome, touched with the malaise of a man seeking self-fulfillment and too conscious of the burdens of human relations, is not only the perfect romantic counterpart of this classic love story but also the embodiment of the intellectual man involved in the murder that is war. In this aspect he too has a partner, superbly provided by Bondarchuk himself as Pierre, the man of thought rather than action whom a frivolous society therefore regards as a fool, the man in search of identity and meaningful existence. That Bondarchuk makes this roly-poly bespectacled man achieve heroic stature is no mean feat.

An obvious master of the purely spectacular, as a director Bondarchuk is perhaps even more skilled in finding the essence of the moment and the truth of character in a gesture, a turn of the head, a glance; verbals, as it should be with film, are not of prime importance. Natasha's father comes clear in a moment of dance; Andrei's sister's lifetime is before us as she clasps her father's hand, Natasha's mother's as she walks through the home she must flee. Faces bare the soul within: the stolidly beautiful and lustful Helene, the dastardly and devastatingly handsome Anatole, the earthy and honest Uncle, the eccentric self-centered Prince Nikolai are instantly revealed to us. And there are literally hundreds of others.

The humans, and not the stage sets,

provide the spectacular in this film. The "purely" spectacular mentioned above goes far beyond what money, even the equivalent of \$100,000,000, years of production and government sponsorship could provide. It is the artist's eye that is ever present in the details of pre-1812 Moscow and of its burning and looting, of the battlefields at Schoengraben, Austerlitz and ultimately Borodino, of armies in heat of bloodshed and cold of retreat, of the fairy-tale ballrooms and elegant dining rooms and drawing rooms and officers' clubs and opera house—above all, in the glorious vistas of earth and sky. Suffice it that this finished film confirms our preliminary impression that the screen has never before been so properly or so beautifully exploited to contain the magnitude of an event or for the depiction of a shattering human experience.

It is the weaving of this huge tapestry that makes the film unique among even the few "intellectual" spectaculars of our time. Neither history nor man is diminished; they are inextricably part of the whole, which is concerned with ideas. (We become even more aware of the failure of *Doctor Zhivago* in this respect, in what wound up as an attempt to co-star a love triangle with the Russian Revolution.) And still another of the film's triumphs (do we have to iterate that of course they are initially Tolstoy's?) a rare triumph in films concerned with war, is that it considers the spectacle of war—the parade, the deployments, the marching and the galloping, the shot and shell and flashing sabre, and, amid the mayhem and the murder, the gallantries and the heroics and the heroism, the victories and the glories—and it still emerges clear-cut as one of the great anti-war films.

Let us concede, in our orientation to films that are invariably longer than they should be, that there could be a bit of trimming here or there, but certainly not enough to turn this into a viable single motion picture. It is, in fact, so rich, so fruitful and filling and yet so stimulating an experience that it is better appreciated on two separate occasions. Excellent as Eleanor Bunin's title and character introduction is to each part, I recommend that you see the two films in proper sequence. You will have seen the greatest and most meaningful spectacular of our time. ■



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