The Last Station

Recently I observed, in reviewing the film “Bright Star” about John Keats, that the literary life was notoriously difficult to capture on film, with that visual, realistic medium not suited to present a writer’s inner life. The new feature film “The Last Station” takes as its subject another singular writer, the Russian Leo Tolstoy, but here it is not a literary effort that is depicted, but rather the turmoil of the great novelist’s last months and his stormy domestic life. In offering coveted roles for two superb actors—Helen Mirren and Christopher Plummer (see photo below)—it rewards moviegoers with a plummy acting display.

The time is 1910, the last year of Tolstoy’s life, and the Great Man (at the time the most renowned, venerated writer in the world) is considering his legacy on his family estate of Yasnaya Polyana. Long detached from his major works, Tolstoy (Plummer) has found purpose and solace in embracing his own brand of Christian anarchy, eschewing the luxuries of the world and preaching a pious poverty for himself and others. His fully down-to-earth wife of more than 40 years, Countess Sofya (Mirren) feels her too-trusting husband is being mocked and swindled, especially by a Tolstoy disciple, Vladimir Chertkov (Paul Giamatti). Sofya especially fears that Chertkov has convinced Tolstoy to leave the rights to his novels to “the Russian people” rather than to his own prodigious family (they have 13 children) one member of which, Sasha (Anne-Marie Duff) sides with her father.

Into this familial struggle comes Valentin Bulgakov (James McAvoy), a devotee of the writer who is hired as his private secretary. He is overwhelmed and thrilled by Tolstoy’s ready acceptance of him, but, being close to the master, he becomes the target of plots concocted by both Chertkov and Sofya to fashion Tolstoy’s will to their desires. While the temperature of the Tolstoys’ connubial life rises and falls, the naïve Valentin himself becomes enmeshed in the arms of the free-thinking Masha (Kerry Condon), a Tolstoyan follower who favors the anarchic, rather than the stoic, side of his faith. The drama comes to a head when Tolstoy can no longer stomach his wife’s machinations and he leaves her, throwing his commune into a furor and his wife into despair. The “Last Station” is the one he ends up in after escaping from Sofya by rail.

Written and directed by American Michael Hoffman, the film includes historical elements but is based on fiction, a novel by Jay Parini. Rather than a genteel tone against austere backgrounds (the “Masterpiece Theater” model), this literary adaptation uses a lusty tone of fire and ice, just this side of a Strindberg slugfest, one in which Tolstoy can declaim at one point: “I’ve never stopped loving you, but God knows you don’t make it easy!” To leaven the knock-down, drag-out main event between the

principals, Hoffman has added the sweet Valentin-Masha romance for purposes of contrast, but their scenes only make you anxious to get back to the real battle.

Hoffman is on fairly familiar ground here with this picture, having made both an updated version of the Bard in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” (1998) and a walk on the bawdy side of history with “Restoration” (1996). The film is handsome: shot mainly in a birch-filled forest in Germany (where the picture was also financed) which stands in nicely for the verdant Russian countryside. The music is luscious and graced by operatic touches. Period details are careful, not flashy. One example: more or less unexplained, but present from the beginning in scenes around the estate, one notes the offhand presence of journalists and photographers hanging around, anticipating coverage. One is made aware, thus, of both Tolstoy’s worldwide reputation and the fact that he was one of the first international media celebrities.

McAvoy (“The Last King of Scotland,” “Atonement”) is an appropriately callow, worshipful presence in the movie. He does a nice near-faint, for example, when finally in the presence of his idol. Giamatti (“Cold Souls,” “Sideways”) is cunning and dogged, but he’s a too obvious villain. The drama would have been more intriguing and the conflict with the Countess more compelling if Chertkov had appeared to be a genuine and convincing advocate for Tolstoy rather than a one-dimensional gamester.

Yet the film belongs to Plummer and Mirren, the duel of the titans. Mostly they bring it off. Plummer, sporting a beard like a skateboard, is thunder and honey, a man full of appetites and contradictions (he himself declares he is not a Tolstoyan)—who flummoxes his disciples all the time. He plays the novelist not as the spiritual Great Author so many thought he was but as a carnal and questing man, fully human even when he is spouting mainly balderdash.

Mirren’s Sofya is, if anything, more mercurial, but never less than passionate and vibrant. At times, she seems liable to burst her Victorian era wardrobe. At 64, Dame Helen’s face bears the traces of the marathon marriage she has lived in the story, but it can also show both rhapsodic joy (when daddy comes to mommy one more time) and wholly stunned grief (when he runs out on her). Mirren handles such switches with ease and will probably be recognized again during this awards season. Hey, maybe it’s in the blood: Mirren’s great-great grandmother was a Russian countess.
(*The film is rated “R” and runs 112 minutes*)

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