

Literary genius as silly old buffer

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Tolstoy
Aldwych

THE American dramatist, James Goldman, specialises in cutting marital feuds down to size. In *The Lion in Winter*, he turned the quarrel between Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine into hitchy Broadway comedy. Now, in the dismal *Tolstoy*, he takes the lacerating feud between the great novelist and his wife, Sonya, and makes it seem like an episode from a Russian soap.

The year is 1910. The setting is Yasnaya Polyana, the family estate. Tolstoy and Sonya are at loggerheads. She is desperate to save him from the Tolstoyan cultists and in particular from his devoted acolyte, Vladimir Chertkov. When Chertkov persuades Tolstoy to part with the diaries that he and Sonya have kept obsessively, she responds with an attempted drowning.

Finally Tolstoy leaves home and ends up in a railway junction hut at Astapovo, where, denying his demented wife access, he dies in agony.

It is one of the most tragic ends to an extraordinary life, the story of a modern Lear. But this is to reckon without Mr Goldman, who reduces it all to bathos. It is impossible, for a start, to believe that the genial old buffer calling himself Tolstoy bears any relation to the despotic genius who emerges from the biographies. Henri Troyat wrote that Tolstoy enjoyed the destiny not of one man but 10 or 20. Here he seems a manipulated weakling who even twinkles

merrily when one of his daughters quotes the Shakespeare he so detested.

I suspect Goldman's aim is to do justice to Sonya, who devoted herself to Tolstoy during his great periods of creativity. But there is no mention of the fact that she hated sex and used it only as a means of gaining power.

And, although she was a compulsive journal keeper, when she utters lines like "Can I save Leo from himself?" the only diarist of whom she reminds one is Mrs Dale.

Worse still are the attempts to add a little compensatory theatrical colour. At one point there is an unpersuasive flash back to happier times when the Tolstoy's dance to a waltz he wrote when young. Even more risible is the moment when the dying Tolstoy has a vision of a gypsy dancer whose demure hoofing suggests she has scarcely ventured further east than Tunbridge Wells.

Jack Hofeiss's production, with its unexpected glimpses of characters moving about in the wings, is barely competent. F. Murray Abraham, so good in the *Amadeus* movie, is given little chance to show Tolstoy's contradictions or to suggest that he died, in Isaiah Berlin's words, "oppressed by his sense of perpetual moral error".

And although Gemma Jones deploys her formidable technique to convey Sonya's mixture of dementia and devotion, she does not have the lines to work with.

Mr Goldman once wrote the book to Sondheim's *Follies*, a work that says infinitely more about bad marriages than any thing in this piffling bio-play.

Billington on Tolstoy

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