War & Peace by Helen Edmundson from the novel by Leo Tolstoy

Education Pack by Gillian King
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This pack is intended as an introduction and follow up to seeing a performance of War & Peace. I’ve included background material, such as the history and culture of the time, and also information specifically on our production, which includes interviews with the Creative Team. Although this cannot be an exhaustive account, I hope that it introduces some of the ideas and approaches central to Shared Experience and this production. Scattered through the pack are questions and exercises that I hope will be useful in stimulating discussion and practical work of your own.

Gillian King

At the heart of our work is the POWER and EXCITEMENT of the performer’s physical presence and the unique collaboration between actor and audience – a SHARED EXPERIENCE. We are committed to creating a theatre that goes beyond our everyday lives, giving form to the hidden world of emotion and imagination. We see the rehearsal process as a genuinely open forum for asking questions and taking risks that redefine the possibilities of performance.
In our everyday lives we hide much of what we think and feel, for fear we would be considered foolish or even mad. I believe we have a longing to see expressed in the theatre that which we conceal in life; to share our ‘madness’ and understand that we are not alone.

Central to Shared Experience's approach is the desire to go beyond naturalism and to see into the character's private world. There will be moments on stage when we literally enact whatever a character is secretly feeling or imagining. In more realistic scenes the social façade is a thin layer beneath which bubbles a river of barely suppressed emotion. During rehearsals we encourage actors to allow this bubbling emotional energy to explode and take over. In a scene where someone is secretly feeling very angry, when we allow the inner to erupt onto the surface they may viciously attack the other person; if the other character is feeling afraid they might crawl under the table. Having allowed the inner to erupt, the actor must return to the scene and struggle to conceal it. Although we may see two people drinking tea, we sense that underneath the social ritual it is as if murder is taking place.

This emphasis on subjective experience runs through all areas of the production. For example, the setting of the play will be more expressive of what a place feels like than what it realistically looks like. In Jane Eyre everything on stage was grey or black to express the loneliness of Jane's inner world. In War & Peace the set was a hall of mirrors to suggest the vanity and narcissism of the aristocracy in Tolstoy's Russia. In The House of Bernarda Alba the house feels like a prison. We decided to make the door colossally large and encrusted it with locks and bolts. It is this emphasis on the 'inner' or the subjective experience which characterises expressionism and it is at the heart of Shared Experience's approach.

Polly Teale, Joint Artistic Director
At a soirée of Russia’s social elite, the illegitimate and dissatisfied Pierre Bezuhov upsets his fellow guests through his admiration for Napoleon Bonaparte, whose undefeated army is moving ever closer to the motherland.

Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, Pierre’s dearest friend, is unhappily married to the charming and pregnant Lisa. Eager for glory and for escape, Andrei goes to war as an adjutant to General Kutuzov - leaving his wife in Bald Hills in the care of his eccentric father and devout sister, Princess Maria.

Nikolai Rostov, and his social-climbing companion Boris Drubetskoy, also join the army with hopes for greatness. Nikolai leaves behind his family - notably his enchanting and highly-spirited sister Natasha and his childhood sweetheart Sonya, a poor and orphaned cousin.

In Moscow, Pierre’s father dies and he unexpectedly inherits his fortune. Uncertain of his future or purpose, Pierre falls prey to the monetary plotting of Prince Kuragin who is eager to marry off his attractive but immoral children, Hélène and Anatole. Unable to ignore Hélène’s adulteries once they are married, Pierre injures her lover Dolohov in a duel before fleeing to St Petersburg in despair. On the way he meets Bazdeyev who introduces him to the principles of the Freemason Brotherhood and the redemption found in good acts and forgiveness. Pierre returns to Moscow, is formally reunited with Hélène, and finds meaning in philanthropy and charitable work.

At Austerlitz the Russo-Austrian army is defeated by the French, whereupon Prince Andrei, who has been wounded and left for dead, is rescued by Napoleon. Nikolai and Boris return home on leave where Nikolai plunges the family into further financial ruin through gambling. He continues to be loyal to Sonya however and vows to reverse the failing fortunes of his father Count Rostov.

In Bald Hills, Prince Kuragin introduces Anatole as a possible suitor to Maria. She prays for guidance but rejects him after observing an illicit tryst between him and her companion Mlle Bourienne. Maria is reunited with her brother Andrei, who returns home in time to witness Lisa die in childbirth. Disillusioned by war and remorseful of his treatment of his wife, Andrei rejects both religion and hope and retreats from society. Pierre visits him and his young son Nikolai; they debate the meaning of existence and social responsibility.

At a New Year’s Eve Ball in St Petersburg, Pierre insists that Andrei asks the now grown Natasha Rostova to dance. The two fall joyfully and unexpectedly in love but, on the stipulation of Andrei’s father, they agree to accept a year long engagement before they wed. Whilst at the ball Pierre is forced to acknowledge Hélène’s continued infidelity, this time with Boris. Disenchanted and humiliated, Pierre vows to finally separate from his wife and is once again consumed by the fear that life is meaningless.
On their estate in Otradnoe, the Rostov children hunt an old wolf through the snow. Nikolai, to the dismay of his parents, proposes to his impoverished cousin Sonya and Natasha impatiently awaits the end of her year long engagement to Prince Andrei.

At the Opera House, Natasha falls under the spell of the handsome and corrupt Anatole Kuragin and she is persuaded to betray Andrei and elope. Sonya discovers their plans however and Anatole is driven from the house leaving Natasha distraught. Pierre, knowing his brother-in-law to be married already, pays for his exile from the city and tries to comfort Andrei who refuses to forgive. Natasha, on hearing the news of Anatole’s previous marriage, takes poison and retreats from society; Pierre visits her in her confinement and realises he is love with her.

With Russia once again under attack from Napoleon, Andrei returns to the army to protect Moscow from the invader. Pierre, eager for a new sense of purpose, enters the Russian camp at Borodino where he is reconciled with Dolohov and awaits victory. As the battle spirals out of control Andrei is injured and Pierre, faced with the horrific reality of war, is finally disillusioned with his hero Napoleon. No longer a visionary to Pierre but a tyrant, he vows to kill Bonaparte to revenge the loss of Russian life.

In Bald Hills, Prince Bolkonsky dies in his daughter’s arms. Maria then attempts to leave but, bribed by the French, her peasants refuse to move or to help. Nikolai, returning from the battle comes to her aid and escorts her to safety. He eventually takes her to his family where Sonya releases him from their engagement. Maria is reunited with her brother Andrei who, after seeing his son, dies happy, in love and at peace.

In war torn Moscow, Pierre realises he is unable to kill his enemy in cold-blood. He begins to fight with a French soldier and is taken prisoner. After witnessing gruesome executions, Pierre is thrown into a prison hut where he meets Karataev, a peasant, who teaches him the love of God and inner peace. In the Kremlin, Napoleon despairs at the state of his army and Europe and retreats from Moscow. The prisoners, including Pierre and Karataev, are forced to leave but during the march Karataev collapses from exhaustion; he prays to God before he is shot. At night, Russian soldiers approach the camp in an attempt to rescue the prisoners and Petya Rostov is killed.

Pierre returns to Moscow where he learns of the deaths of his estranged wife Helene and Prince Andrei. He is also reunited with Natasha, to whom he declares his love which she joyfully returns. Eight years later Natasha and Pierre, Nikolai and Maria are happily married with their own families. Whilst Nikolai is finally content with his domestic life Pierre, though happy, is still restless, yearning for change, when good men will build a better world.
I re-read the book – twice! Then I went on a research trip to Russia and came home with lots of different views and interpretations. I read every essay I could lay my hands on and started to come to conclusions about what I felt and what it was thematically that I wanted to explore. I don’t see any point in doing an adaptation unless you’re trying to discover something or explore something which is of relevance to everybody. There’s no point just doing it to pay homage to a writer.

I didn’t worry about the size and scope of the novel while I was writing the adaptation – it would have been counter-productive. In fact, I don’t think I have shied away from the epic nature of the book. The adaptation deals with universal themes and by exploring those themes I have tried to capture the quality of the book. There are other ways in which the adaptation transcends the particular and the domestic: for example linking the story from the novel with today, writing up the battle of Borodino, introducing the device of Napoleon as Pierre’s fantasy or conscience, and making the decision to do the whole book rather than just an element of it.

Tolstoy began thinking about the novel which was to become War & Peace in 1861. His original intention was to write about a man returning from Siberia, after having been exiled for involvement in the failed Decembrist uprising of 1825. However, as he constructed the history of this man and the experiences which brought him to the point of revolution, Tolstoy became increasingly interested in the period 1805-1812, and the book developed in a different direction. It is consequently not until the final epilogue that we find Pierre (the original ‘man’) becoming involved in subversive political activity and we are left to imagine his fate.

Although coming so late in the novel, this information became key to my interpretation of it. In the philosophical passages, Tolstoy sets out clearly, if not dogmatically, a new idea of human freedom: dismissing free will as an illusion and the exercise of will as futile and dangerous, he claims that real freedom lies in relinquishing the will and reconciling ourselves to whatever life brings. This is borne out in the experiences of his characters, in his depiction of the struggle between Napoleon and Kutuzov and, finally, is verbalised beautifully and simply by the peasant Platon Karataev. However, in leaving us with a Pierre who is ejecting Karataev’s wisdom and preparing to intervene, Tolstoy, almost in spite of himself, admits that this philosophy is not an easy answer, that it is not an answer at all for some, and this throws up all sorts of questions which I felt should be at the centre of the play. Should we make peace with life and our mortality, or should we fight it to the bitter end? How can we reconcile ourselves to what is going on around us if we feel injustice is being done? If we decide to take action, how can we judge whether it is for the best? Is it ever right for one person to impose his or her will on others? Even if movements start in the name of justice and freedom, are they doomed to become corrupt in the struggle to sustain themselves? These are dilemmas; ones which are perhaps particularly relevant to our politically apathetic and introspective society.
Memories of the Trip

Helen Edmundson’s adaptation of War & Peace opens with a prologue:

A gallery in the Hermitage Palace, Saint Petersburg 2007. In one corner, on a wooden chair an attendant is sitting, knitting; he has the hunched worn air of many Russian men.

The ideas for the attendant and the gallery came directly from Helen Edmundson’s research trip to Russia. Helen remembers:

‘We went into a small gallery in the hermitage, the 1812 gallery, pictures crowded the walls. We took a photograph and the attendant told us sternly – ‘No flash’. But after we had asked him some questions and he realised we knew a certain amount about the period his attitude completely changed. He became open, animated.’

Helen also remembers another incident:

‘We were in the Armoury Museum at the Kremlin, Moscow. An old woman was selling tapes of religious music. She was grumpy, unfriendly, her face showed no humanity at all. I told our interpreter to ask her which tape she liked best. ‘Ask her what?’ said the interpreter. ‘Which one she likes best’ I insisted. When the woman heard the question, her expression changed completely. I bought the tape she recommended.’

From those two experiences was born the idea for the attendant and the gallery:

‘The attendant is a touchstone for the audience. He is a timeless link between Tolstoy’s Russia and the Russia of today. He is not experiencing the turmoil of the other characters but he understands them. It is as if he has been there before and will be there again. He helps to thread through the idea that history repeats itself. In the great scheme of things the present, and all the chaos and revolution within the present, is just a tiny bit of history. He also personifies a particularly Russian attitude to life: Like Karataev, he does not effect change, but accepts all that happens as inevitable.’

Helen Edmundson
Tsarist Russia was a turbulent and deeply flawed society. It was largely unknown to the western powers until Peter the Great (1696-1725) adopted western dress and lifestyles and began the process of turning Russia into a major world power. The Tsars however, even those considered by history to be more liberal than most, were autocratic rulers who believed that strong, personal rule was not only their right but also the only way to control such a vast, diverse and backward country. There was never any serious move towards even a semblance of democracy and the country remained a feudal society well into the 19th century. The overwhelming majority of the population consisted of peasants and serfs, impoverished and deeply traditional and, until their emancipation late in 1860, bound to their owners and employers with virtually no rights at all. Censorship was often strict, printing presses were frequently subject to State control, and an active secret police flourished.

Not surprisingly, dissatisfaction and unrest were never very far below the surface and various uprisings and revolts broke out at frequent intervals, often with the intelligentsia and leading writers of the age in the forefront of dissent. Pushkin, Turgenev and Dostoyevsky among many others all fell foul of the censors and suffered banishment or worse for allegedly subversive writings. Dostoyevsky, in fact, was condemned to death and subjected to a mock execution before being banished to Siberia for ten years. Tolstoy himself was critical of Russian army life during the Crimean War and of the plight of the serfs.

However, the 19th Century and the early 1900’s - Tolstoy’s Russia – was a prolific age for the arts. Apart from the great writers, including Gogol, Pushkin, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and others, Russian music rose to prominence through the works of Glinka, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Rachmaninov. In the theatre, Chekhov was writing *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard* with Stanislavsky directing and Diaghilev was reinventing the world of ballet. Russian artists began to achieve fame and Russian craft metalwork reached its peak with the beautiful designs and expert workmanship of Carl Fabergé.
1828 Birth of Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy, the fourth son of Count Nikolai Tolstoy and Princess Maria Volkonsky. He is educated at home but, following the deaths of his father (when Tolstoy was two years old) and his mother (when he was nine) he is brought up first by his aunt and then, following her death, by her sister.

1844 Tolstoy enters University to read Law and Oriental Studies but is described as ‘unable and unwilling to learn’ and leaves in mid-term.

1851 Tolstoy, having moved to Moscow, begins to tire of his dissolute life and travels to the Caucasus where he joins an artillery garrison in Chechnya as a ‘private soldier of noble birth’.

1852 Tolstoy’s first book Childhood is published and is well received. At this stage, Turgenev is probably the most prolific author in Russia and his Huntsman’s Sketches is also published.

1854 - 1856 The Crimean War against Britain, France and Turkey. Tolstoy is commissioned in the army and fights first against the Turks in modern-day Bulgaria and then transfers to the garrison at Sevastopol. He writes Sevastopol Sketches describing army life which are well received, even by the Tsar, and add to his reputation.

1855 Death of Nicholas I and the accession of Alexander II. Many of Nicholas’ draconian laws are repealed. The Crimean War draws to a close and Tolstoy, tired of the carnage, resigns his commission and travels in Europe. However he is disillusioned by what he sees as a bourgeois civilisation and returns with a more oriental, almost Buddhist outlook on life. In Moscow he is feted as a great author but, although flattered, he is not at ease with the intelligentsia and returns to his estate. There, he becomes impressed by the apparent honesty and simplicity of peasant life and later, starts a school for peasant children.

1861 Emancipation of the serfs in Russia.

1862 Tolstoy marries Sofia Andreyevna Behrs who, at 18, is 16 years younger than him. The marriage is, for the first fifteen years or so, a happy one and produces thirteen children, five of whom die in childhood. The Cossacks and Polikushka are published during his first years of marriage.

1866 Unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the Tsar.

1868 Publication of Tolstoy’s War & Peace. His wife was a devoted helper and copied the book, by hand, no fewer than seven times, from beginning to end. Tchaikovsky’s 1st Symphony is given its first performance. Otherwise, social unrest continues within Russia despite Alexander’s reforms and more liberal regime, and terrorist groups begin to form, aiming to completely wipe out the Tsarist system. Alexander’s problem is that, having granted many freedoms, he begins to lose control and to regain it, he begins to revert to the old autocratic ways.

1872 Publication of Tolstoy’s Prisoner in the Caucasus.

1873 Russia, Germany and Austro-Hungary form the short lived ‘League of Three Emperors’ (Drei Kaiser Bund).

1875 Rebellion in the Balkans against Turkish rule, this leads to war between Russia and Turkey in 1877. Within Russia itself, social unrest continues to grow.
1875  Tolstoy begins publication of *Anna Karenina* in serialised installments. He is also in the throes of a spiritual conversion. He feels he cannot go on living without knowing the meaning of life and eventually finds his answer in the teachings of Jesus but gives these almost a Buddhist interpretation. In particular, he concentrates on the moral message of the Gospels and its emphasis on the individual leading a ‘good’ life. This, in turn, leads him to reject and condemn the Church, which he sees as attempting to control the individual and the State, which as well as controlling private lives, appears to sanction violence and corruption.

1878  End of the Russo-Turkish war, with Romania, Serbia and Montenegro gaining independence.

1878-1901  During his later years, Tolstoy becomes increasingly attracted to pacifism and civil disobedience and begins to attract – reluctantly from his standpoint – a number of ardent followers and disciples. He establishes contact with some of the more radical Christian groups such as the Dukhobors, with social activists abroad like Thoreau with his advocacy of civil disobedience, and with others such as Gandhi who would later achieve their own prominence on the political scene. But despite this – and despite the increasing level of suppression in Russia following the assassination of Alexander II and the accession of Alexander III - he remains unmolested by the authorities. By this time, he is well-known abroad and the government is, no doubt, anxious to avoid too much unfavourable publicity. Even so, over this period, Russia remains a hotbed of revolutionary fervour with censorship and the secret police increasingly active.

However, Tolstoy’s own family is opposed to his teachings. His wife, in particular, is implacable in her opposition and asserts her right to attend to her family and its welfare. She refuses to give up any property and Tolstoy eventually surrenders to her all his property rights and the copyright to his earlier works.

1901-1910  He remains in good health apart from a serious illness in 1901 which necessitates a long convalescence in the Crimea. He returns to his family home but becomes increasingly irritated by his easy life and the apparent contradiction with his radical Christian communism. The formation of the Bolshevik party in 1903, the rise in terrorist and revolutionary activity and the ‘Bloody Sunday’ riot in 1905 do not affect him but he remains oppressed by his family and his easy life. Finally, in 1910, he leaves his home to go to a convent where his sister is Mother Superior, but falls ill and has to seek shelter in a station-master’s house. He dies there and is buried in a simple peasant’s grave on his family estate.

**Background to War & Peace**

**1789 - 1799**
French Revolution during which the ruling monarchy is overthrown and replaced by a violent and unstable republic. Napoleon returns to Paris and seizes control in 1799 in a coup d’état, proclaiming himself ‘First Consul’.

**1801**
Accession of Alexander I.

**1804**
Russia annexes Georgia, leading to war with Persia. In France, Napoleon proclaims himself ‘Emperor’.

**1805**
Defeat of the combined French and Spanish fleets at the Battle of Trafalgar. On land, Napoleon defeats the combined Russian and Austrian armies at Austerlitz.

**1807**
Britain abolishes the slave trade. Peninsular war begins following Napoleon’s invasion of Portugal and lasts six years until the French are driven out of Portugal and Spain. Defeat of Prussian forces by the French at Jena leads to an uneasy alliance between Imperialist Russia and the French Empire. Napoleon and Tsar Alexander I agree to peace and sign the Treaty of Tilsit on rafts on the Nemas River, so avoiding being in the other’s territory.

**1812**
Napoleon invades Russia and defeats Russian forces at Borodino. The French occupy Moscow briefly but are forced to retreat by the onset of winter and lack of supplies.

**1813-14**
French defeated at the battle of Leipzig. Napoleon goes into exile on Elba. Bourbon monarchy re-established in France but Napoleon returns, Louis XVIII abdicates and Napoleon’s 100 days begins.

**1815**
Napoleon defeated at Waterloo and is exiled to St. Helena. Congress of Vienna redraws the map of Europe. German Confederation formed. Kingdom of Poland re-established under Russian control.
‘Tolstoy is particularly exciting for Shared Experience because we are always interested in ways of expressing the inner life of characters – the emotional energy which is bubbling away beneath the surface. Tolstoy is brilliant at dipping inside a person’s consciousness and describing the inner sensation of the moment. Often this is at total odds with what the character allows other people to see. It is this conflict between the outer and the inner self which fascinates us and is crucial to the physical life of the work.’

Polly Teale

If we look at a scene between Pierre and Andrei in the novel and the adaptation, we see that both Tolstoy and Helen Edmundson show how a character can say one thing but feel something completely different.

THE NOVEL

The scene describes Prince Andrei’s sense of hurt pride when Natasha jilts him for Anatole, Tolstoy writes:

‘Well how are you? Still getting stouter?’ he said in an animated tone, but the newly formed furrow on his brow deepened. ‘Yes, I am very well,’ he replied to Pierre’s enquiry, and smiled. It was clear to Pierre that his smile meant: ‘Yes, I am well, but my health is of no use to anyone now.’

THE PLAY

Helen adapts the scene as follows:

Pierre You look well. Was the treatment a success?
Andrei Oh yes. I’m very well now. I have received my dismissal from Countess Rostova. Here are her letters and her portrait. Kindly return them to her – if you happen to be passing.

In the play, David Sturzaker, the actor playing Andrei, gives away very little in this scene. He is busily packing his case and hardly looks at Pierre whilst he speaks to him. He does not in any obvious way betray his emotions, and yet it is utterly apparent to an audience that he is struggling to contain these powerful feelings. The tension in the scene is tangible.

When the actors rehearsed this scene they were asked by the directors to ‘physicalise the underneath’ – this means that at moments during the dialogue the actors physically express the emotions beneath the surface of the scene. When physicalising the scene in this way it became apparent through the gestures and sounds found by the actors that Andrei is in immense pain but he is desperate for Pierre not to touch him or help him. Pierre is trying to soothe his friend, but he is constantly rebuffed. After the actors had physically expressed the subtext of the scene they were then told to contain the physicality completely, only allowing it to show in one small part of the body. What remains of the physical improvisation in the finished scene is a small but important detail – Andrei’s hand twitches constantly as he talks, suggesting in that physical detail all the contained emotions within him.

The method of ‘physicalising the underneath’ was used a great deal in rehearsals to define what was happening emotionally to the characters, beneath the surface of the scene.
Physicalising the Underneath of War & Peace

- First the actors were asked to imagine an emotion – FEAR for example. Fear was taking over their whole body. They were told to become a physical expression of fear. Starting in a line on one side of the room, they worked their way across to the other side of the room building the physicality of fear and using sounds (not words) to express themselves. They then repeated this process using different emotions.

- Next the actors were told to repeat a simple action – take off a shoe and put it back on again. They were instructed to invest an emotion into the action - for example, a sense of loss for the person who might have owned the shoe. They were then told to restrain the sense of loss and were only allowed to let it show in small parts of their body, such as the hand or the lips. Finally, when it became too great to hold it in any longer, they released the emotion, expressing it with both physicality and sounds.

There are times in the play during moments of intense emotion when the inner life of a character actually bubbles to the surface of the action. So when Natasha meets Andrei for the first time at the ball, we are allowed to see into her imagination. The stage directions tell us:

She jumps into his arms like a ballerina. He lifts and turns her and then puts her down again. We return to reality.

This fantasy of Natasha’s is naïve and sweet. She sees herself as a prima ballerina and Andrei as her romantic lead. When Natasha first meets Anatole we are again allowed to see into her inner life; we see that she is affected very differently by his presence. Through the opera coming to life we see that Natasha is drawn to Anatole sexually. The heightened energy of the Opera is used to express Natasha’s sexual excitement. With Andrei she is still a child, with Anatole she feels like a woman.

Exercise

In small groups read the following extract from Part 2. What are the characters really thinking? What is their sub-text? Consider a way of staging the section of text that would allow us to see the scene AND the emotions below. For example two people could play each part – the inner and outer manifestations.

The Count’s study. The COUNT is with NIKOLAI.

COUNT Forty-three thousand rubles? You’re not serious.
NIKOLAI I’ve promised to pay it tomorrow.

The COUNT sinks into a chair. All the wind has gone out of him.

NIKOLAI It’s just one of those things.
COUNT Forty-three thousand.
NIKOLAI It could happen to anyone. It’s happened to lots of people I know.
COUNT Yes. Yes. Nikolai, I don’t have that sort of money.
NIKOLAI But...
COUNT Our finances...things have grown rather difficult of late. My fault. All my fault... But I’ll find it. I might have to sell...I’ll find it. Who...?
NIKOLAI Dolohov.
COUNT I’ll find it. Don’t worry now. It can happen to anyone. One of those things.

He starts to go.

NIKOLAI Papa? Papa!
He rushes to his father.

NIKOLAI (sobbing) Forgive me.
He kisses the COUNT’S hand. The COUNT embraces him.

The actor ought to consider the major and predominant concern of each character, what is it that consumes his life and constitutes the perpetual object of his thoughts, his idée fixe'

Characters

Karataev
Super Objective: I would like to live in harmony with all creation.
Obstacles: My own ego.
Favourite Line: Lay me down like a stone, O Lord.
And raise me up like new bread.

Lisa
Super Objective: I want to create and live in a perfectly charming world.
Obstacles: Dealing with a deep sadness from my former life, which causes me to over-compensate.
Favourite Line: Lisa And you would never believe who Kitty Odyntsov has married…. Old Prince Ryervsky. Why he is so, well…
Prince Bolkonsky Old
Lisa Yes! Everyone was quite shocked!

Sonya
Super Objective: I want to belong to the family.
Obstacles: I fear rejection because I will never truly belong - I'm not part of the real family.
Favourite Line: I don't expect anything of Nikolai. I love him. That is enough.

Napoleon
Super Objective: To establish a united Europe with myself at its head/to win/to rule supreme.
Obstacles: Fear of failure, defeat and a return to my comparatively' modest roots.
Favourite Line: I will never be forgotten.

Prince Bolkonsky
Super Objective: To perfect myself and all around to create a moral universe.
Obstacles: My own emotions. I fear losing control.
Favourite Line: And Bonaparte is a trumped up little Frenchy who has only won so far because he's stuck to fighting Germans. From the very beginning of the world everyone has beaten the Germans.

Natasha Rostova
Super Objective: To live unbound!
Obstacles: The fear of having to grow up.
Favourite Line: I am Natasha Rostova. Don't you see how charming I am, how intelligent and pretty and graceful I am?
Nikolai

Super Objective: I want to prove myself a hero.
Obstacles: Fear of being weak.
Favourite Line: And if Arahcheyev bid me lead a squadron against you and mow you down, I shouldn’t hesitate for a second. I shall do it.

Andrei

Super Objective: I want my life to have meaning.
Obstacles: The fear that my life will be meaningless, and of my unsatisfiable Father.
Favourite Line: You’ll be alright no matter what because you are alive. Don’t waste it.

Maria

Super Objective: I want to achieve perfection in the eyes of God.
Obstacles: Wanting earthly love and allowing earthly feelings, such as lust and hate, to surface.
Favourite Line: I would rather die than bring that shame upon my family.

Anatole

Super Objective: Avoid all responsibility and live for pleasure!
Obstacles: Fear of being forced to take responsibility.
Favourite Line: Our regiment has gone to the front but I’m attached to er… what is it I’m attached to Papa?

Countess Rostov

Super Objective: The survival and flourishing of my family.
Obstacles: My lack of power – I am only a woman.
Favourite Line: As we are? As we are? Oh. Natasha, whatever made you think anyone can go on as they are?

Anna Pavlovna

Super Objective: Fame and immortality – to be indispensable and at the epi-centre of St Petersburg Society.
Obstacles: Being born a woman and therefore ‘having to play the game’.
Favourite Line: I don’t have a particular one!

Vasili

Super Objective: I want to secure the highest position in society for myself and my family.
Obstacles: That I will be found out!
Favourite Line: Are not the French our Gods? Is not Paris the Kingdom of Heaven?

Boris

Super Objective: I want to raise myself as far as possible in society.
Obstacles: I feel afraid of of failure and rejection.
Favourite Line: I hope this is a good time your Excellency. I was here on the hour but they kept me waiting outside.

Hélène

Super Objective: I want to live on my own terms – to be free from restrictions and to have control over my own life.
Obstacles: Fear that if I stop to examine myself I will discover a void, an emptiness of self.
Favourite Line: I don’t have a particular one!

Pierre

Super Objective: I want to discover how to live in a meaningful way – outside of ordinary human existence.
Obstacles: Fear that life is meaningless. My own hedonism and my illegitimacy
Favourite Line: I am in the abyss!
Two chairs are placed in the empty space and two actors each sit on a chair. Each actor is given an objective to pursue, a ‘want’, for example:

- To punish
- To want forgiveness
- To enthuse
- To freeze
- To protect
- To blame

Using only the chairs and their position relating to the other person and in the room, each actor must try to change the emotional state of the other. No words or sounds should be used.

One person ‘speaks’ by moving their chair in relation to the other person and the space, then the second actor ‘answers’ by moving his/her chair.

They pursue their ‘want’ in opposition to their partner, purely through this physical action and without using words. Their objective is to achieve their aim and to enact change in the other person.

**Question**

Choose one character. What do you feel their Super Objective is for the whole play?

What are their smaller Objectives that drive through particular scenes?

**Exercise**

Des McAleer
In 1812, Ilarion Pryanishnikov.

**The Facts**

Alexander I (1801-25) was initially opposed to Napoleonic France. Russia had strong economic ties with Britain and a traditional friendship with Austria. Napoleon however was seen as one who had guillotined the King and Queen of France, along with most of the nobility, and destroyed the natural order in Europe.

The War of the Third Coalition broke out in 1805, involving Austria, Russia, Sweden and Great Britain on the one hand and France and Spain on the other. However, Austria was very rapidly forced out of the war when the combined Austrian and Russian armies were crushed at Austerlitz on the 2nd December 1805. Russia fought on, now with a new ally, Prussia, but a second crushing defeat at Jena effectively reduced Prussia to a second rate power and Russia was forced to negotiate with Napoleon. The Treaty of Tilsit in 1807 required Russia to support France against Britain and to accept Napoleon’s redrawing of the map of Europe.

The alliance with Napoleon was always very tenuous and failed to satisfy either side. Russia resented French domination of Europe, especially its ‘meddling’ in Austria and Poland, and thirsted for revenge after its military defeats. It also disliked its new obligation to join France in the so-called ‘continental blockade’ aimed at destroying Britain’s commerce because it hurt Russian exporters and thus the powerful ruling class. Napoleon’s policies in the Middle East and his refusal to support Russia in the Balkans added to the tensions.

France, for its part, objected to Russia’s lukewarm support for its war with Austria in 1809 and its lack of commitment to the continental blockade. There were many other causes for dissatisfaction on both sides and eventually open warfare between the two great powers of continental Europe became inevitable.

The invasion began in June 1812, with some 600,000 French soldiers crossing the border faced by a Russian force less than a third of its size. The Russians were divided into two separate armies, one commanded by Prince Peter Bagration and the other by Prince Barclay de Tolly. There were numerous engagements along the invasion route, all resulting in Russian defeats but at heavy cost to the French and the Russians avoided encirclement and total destruction. The two Russian armies finally combined near Smolensk (under Kutuzov as supreme commander) and the two sides finally met at Borodino, about 70 miles from Moscow. The battle was inconclusive with both sides suffering heavy losses but the Russians decided to withdraw, leaving Napoleon to enter Moscow in September 1812.

Napoleon assumed this occupation would mean a Russian surrender but Alexander adamantly refused to consider peace so long as the French remained on Russian soil. French problems were exacerbated by a lack of supplies, unending Russian attacks on their supply lines, the burning and almost complete destruction of Moscow and finally, the severe Russian winter. Eventually, the French had no choice but to begin the infamous and ignominious retreat out of Russia, harassed by the Russians all the way and debilitating by hunger, cold and disease. Only about 50,000 out of an invasion force of around 600,000 finally returned to France.
Tolstoy’s Plan

The battle of Borodino was described by Napoleon as ‘The most terrible of all my battles’. Tolstoy researched the battle meticulously, visiting the battlefield some fifty three years later;

‘I have just come back from Borodino. I am very, very pleased with the trip…’ and after reading countless first-hand accounts and historical analyses he wrote to his wife Sonia, ‘If only God will give me good health and tranquility I’ll write the best battle of Borodino yet!’

The Adaptation

‘I decided to do it all from Pierre’s point of view’ Helen explains ‘as he experiences it, we experience it. His ignorance comes in handy. When he first arrives, soldiers explain the general landscape of the battle to him, and thus to us. I also use him to introduce Napoleon and Kutuzov: as he asks about them, they appear on stage. And when the battle finally begins, we follow it through Pierre’s eyes. We follow his changing attitude to the battle.’

So Pierre begins by thinking the battle is beautiful: ‘Pierre is awe-struck by the most fantastic sight he has ever seen’ and the action on stage reflect his point of view. It is only when Pierre understands the full horror of the battle: ‘Pierre realises he has arrived in hell’ that the action descends into chaos and horror.

Helen Edmundson explains that she plotted the battle sequence as a series of images interspersed with dialogue: ‘It is important that these images tell a story – for example we must know that Anatole falls and loses his leg and that Andrei is hit by a shell. Apart from upholding the storyline they are only a blueprint and can be taken in any direction during rehearsal’.

Shared Experience avoid being too literal in their approach to Borodino. Nancy Meckler explains: ‘We wanted to evoke the sense of carnage, of human pain and despair which is particularly strong in Tolstoy’s descriptions of war. So in our images of Borodino it is immaterial whether the actors are French soldiers or Russian soldiers; they are just people – men and women – suffering terribly from the atrocity that is war’.

Exercise

• In groups read through some of the stage directions below that help to create the battle of Borodino. Choose a section and using just chairs as the props create a small section of the battle.

• Experiment using three frozen images that portray this battle, then consider how you might theatrically link them together. Do you use slow motion? Dance steps? Contrasting movements?

As they kneel with their heads on the earth, night passes and the first light of dawn begins to fill the sky. A drum begins to beat. All rise with expressions of profound concentration and take their positions. NAPOLEON stands at the top of the hill and surveys the scene. KUTUZOV goes to stand at the other side of the hill and does likewise. PIERRE stands in between them. Silence. As the sun rises fully in the sky, NAPOLEON raises his arm and lowers it and a moment later the first cannon-ball explodes over Borodino.

The emphasis of the battle should be PIERRE’s changing attitude to it. At first it should seem extremely beautiful, like a sound and light show, with swirling mist and violet smoke, brilliant sunshine and gleaming dew, the flash of steel, the silk standards, the white church glistening in the distance, the moving bodies of soldiers in uniform.

He is awe-struck by the most fantastic sight he has ever seen. Then fighting begins in earnest. The lines of charging men come over the hill again and again. Some fall. The gestures of war become more extreme. PIERRE wants to join in, but he is ordered out of the way by an irate officer.

NIKOLAI, ANATOLE and DOLOHOV line up to charge. The sounds of the battle become muted and they fall into slow motion as we enter their thoughts.

They wind themselves up for the charge until the tension becomes too great and they move forward - slowly at first then faster and wilder. The sounds of the battle crash in around them. There is smoke and confusion. ANATOLE falls. On the hill, PIERRE is looking worried. He can’t make sense of it any more. It seems to be out of control. He calls out to an OFFICER who is rushing up to KUTUZOV.

He catches him and claps his arm just as the OFFICER takes a bullet in the back. His body crumples. PIERRE eases him to the ground. He looks about and becomes aware of other bodies. A SOLDIER begins to scream continually. Horses are groaning and whining. Two men push past carrying an injured man across their muskets. PIERRE wants to help but they are gone. He realises he has arrived in hell.
Liz Ranken, the Movement Director on War & Peace, led improvisations around the theme of war, concentrating on how war affects people personally. She explains:

‘I was interested in exploring interpersonal politics. The sense of hatred which instigates war for example, begins with the small and the personal and finally reaches global proportions.’

The physical gestures enacted by the company during the war sequence all have their roots in personal emotions and feelings. Past trauma or pain becomes the source of the violence that is expressed in the battle.

The actors explored imagery which related to the sense of power inspired by working as a group. Even walking towards the audience in a threatening line was powerful, so charging as a group towards the audience became very potent.

Animal Imagery
The directors were interested in exploring the animal imagery which Tolstoy uses throughout his description of Borodino. Nancy Meckler explains that, ‘the senseless pain inflicted on animals evokes the horror of war with absolute clarity’. So the anticipation of the battle makes the soldiers take on the nervous excitement of horses as they wait to charge.

Creating the stage for war
Having begun our story in the palace of St Petersburg, one of the biggest challenges faced by the company was changing the space to create a battlefield.

Any ornate features of the set, like mirrors, were removed to reveal the more utilitarian materials of the theatre. Brick walls and ropes are revealed and sections of the floor are upturned giving the impression of desecration - of a place destroyed by carnage. The changes in the set reflect what is happening to the characters.

Exercise
In groups create 3 photographs that reflect the journey of a battle or a war; the beginning, middle and end.
Nancy Meckler explains:

‘Having decided to do War & Peace, we felt it was important not to change our way of working simply because it was such a huge project. If we were to suddenly have a large cast of say 25, and if many of those 25 were to only play one small part, it wouldn’t be true to our way of working. In order to have each actor equally involved we asked, What is the minimum number of people we could do this with? We came up with number 15. All the actors have more than one part and all play villagers, soldiers, and peasants as well.

I believe there is great truth in that old saying: ‘Necessity is the mother of invention’. When you limit your canvas it forces you to be more creative, to solve problems in an original way. When you have unlimited resources sometimes it doesn’t feel like theatre; it may as well be film.

One moment we are following a hunt in the country, the next moment we are at an opera in Moscow or at a ball – so you, for example, only see elements at the ball and your imagination starts to fill in the rest. So we offer little things that suggest and stimulate the imagination and suddenly an audience imagines that they can see this enormous room with chandeliers and people in ball gowns.

The actors are the set, they all play any number of characters and are available to hold frames, be a dog, move chairs – anything they need to do to support each other and the production.’
Exercise

Read this extract from Part 2 of War & Peace. In small groups, how would you dramatise this scene? To play a wolf or a dog, consider the energy of the animal rather than trying to copy a real dog or wolf (i.e. you don't have to be on all fours).

• What is this scene meant to express in relation to the big themes of the play?
• Where in the scene are the strongest moments of tension?
• What happens if you introduce the idea of slow-motion for the fastest action sections?
• What happens if you change what space the scene is played out in? Would the scene work in the round? In a very small studio space?

SCENE:
NIKOLAI hurries away with his dogs, moving almost silently. He reaches the optimum position and crouches down. The horns are growing louder as the hunt moves closer.

NIKOLAI Oh God, I know Thou art great and it's wrong to pray about this, but would it really be so hard for you to make this happen? Please let me have some luck, for once. Please, please make the old wolf come this way and let Karay fix his teeth in her throat and finish her off. Just once in my life, to kill an old wolf...that's all I want...that's all I want...

Suddenly the wolf enters, running easily, unaware of danger.

NIKOLAI No. Oh God, it can't be. It can't be.
The wolf pauses. NIKOLAI whispers to the dogs -

NIKOLAI Tally-ho!
The dogs jump up. Suddenly, the wolf sees NIKOLAI. Their eyes lock. They are still for a moment and then NIKOLAI yells -

NIKOLAI Tally-ho!
He lets the dogs go. The wolf flees. He cries out again. Hunters appear behind him.

NIKOLAI She's getting away. Karay, stop her!
Hunters and dogs set off in pursuit, shouting and hollering. Karay reaches the wolf and attacks but the wolf fights her off and Karay drops away from her.

NIKOLAI Karay! Karay!
The dog tries again, leaping at the wolf and brings her down. More dogs arrive and set upon the wolf. NIKOLAI flings himself onto it, putting his foot on her throat. Other huntsmen arrive on the scene, including the ATTENDANT. NIKOLAI takes his knife from his belt.

ATTENDANT Don't. We'll string her up.
They thrust a stake between the wolf's jaws and bind her legs. As she is brought under control, everyone cheers.

ATTENDANT Well done, sir!
Like the majority of her European counterparts, a Russian woman’s father and husband controlled most aspects of her life. Even noblewomen could not vote, hold their own passports, or attend high schools or universities - secondary education was unavailable to women until the 1850s. What little education high-born women received was largely vocational, amounting to skills in marriage, housekeeping, and motherhood. However noble Russian women did enjoy one legal right not shared by most other European women: they could hold property.

Marriage was the career goal of the Russian woman, though she would find it ultimately a restrictive, confining institution. Among nobility, matches were often arranged through parents, who chose husbands from the same class or better, seeking aristocratic backgrounds that would add to a family’s social and financial status. Character was of lesser importance, if considered at all.

NIKOLAI I intend to leave the army as soon as I possibly can. I will marry her. You know I have always loved her...

COUNTESS Love? What has love to do with this? The whole fate of your family depends upon your marrying well. She is penniless. She is nobody.

NIKOLAI Do not speak about Sonya like that.

It was not uncommon for women to select their own husbands, though they were expected to choose from upper-class men they met at social occasions such as parties and balls organised by relatives for that purpose. Once married, a wife’s duties were to take care of her husband, preside over the household, and bear children. The 1836 Code of Russian Laws stated: The woman must obey her husband, reside with him in love, respect, and unlimited obedience, and offer him every pleasantness and affection as the ruler of the household. Husbands determined when their wives travelled, conducted business, studied with tutors (perhaps French or literature, though not in academic terms), or gained employment (extremely rare). Many husbands dictated daily activities, such as deciding when wives could leave the house. Children were the property of a woman’s husband, even if she had a child with another man via an adulterous affair.

Such legal inequality sprang from the Russian ideal of women during this time. ‘Decency’ was the key word: women were seen as either chaste or impure, and impure women were worthless.

PETYA You know, Natalie, I’m awfully proud of you. All my friends think you’re lovely. They only come to the house to see you.

NATASHA Nonsense. They probably think I’m easy prey.

PETYA No they don’t. Some of them know what happened...

NATASHA Don’t.

Russian society dictated that men marry well-behaved virgins. Once married, women were viewed as child-bearers living under a patriarch’s rule; obedience replaced chastity as the utmost requirement. Those who strayed outside the rules were seen as ‘unnatural’ and were treated harshly, whether with violence or social casting-out. This attitude prevailed in most European societies, and had some roots in organised religion. The Russian book, Domostroi, or Household Arrangements, written by a 17th Century monk named Sylvester, advocated methods of wife-beating for those women who disobeyed; his only admonishment was to go easy on pregnant women for the sake of the unborn child. He also advised against damaging a woman’s eyes, because a blind wife wouldn’t be able to carry out her tasks.

Despite this environment of condemnation, infidelity amongst the aristocracy was commonplace. In War & Peace, Hélène, though promiscuous, remains at the heart of the upper echelons of St Petersburg high society.
Free Will is the philosophical doctrine that human beings have the power to choose from alternatives, unrestrained by causality or by preordained mystical powers.

Determinism is the philosophical doctrine that every event in the universe is the inevitable consequence of a preceding cause.

KARATAEV  We cannot shape the way things are. It’s all as he disposes. The great thing is to live in harmony

NAPOLEON  Who decides where the line should be drawn?

KUTUZOV  I will do nothing... patience and time are the two most powerful warriors’

PIERRE  My idea is just that if vicious people unite together into a power, then honest people must do the same, that’s simple enough, isn’t it?

Exercise

Choose one of the questions that Helen Edmundson considered whilst adapting the novel. In pairs discuss the concept. Can you both agree?

• Should we make peace with life and our mortality, or should we fight it to the bitter end?

• How can we reconcile ourselves to what is going on around us if we feel injustice is being done?

• If we decide to take action, how can we judge whether it is for the best?

• Is it ever right for one person to impose his or her will on others?

• Even if movements start in the name of justice and freedom, are they doomed to become corrupt in the struggle to sustain themselves?
What research did you do before starting to compose for this play?

The main musical areas of research were of course looking at the various musical styles current in Russia at the time. Although this involved researching Russian liturgical chants (zmeny chants) and folk music, most of the music which the characters in the play would have heard at their soirees, recitals and balls would have been European-influenced music. French opera and ballet had been performed there since the 1770s and towards the end of the 18th century the Russian court was particularly keen on Italian composers. Many Russian musicians went to study in Italy and would have imitated the styles currently popular there. Interestingly, the French were also increasingly keen on the Italian style and while the Russians were commissioning Italians to write operas for them Napoleon’s Josephine was employing an Italian named Spontini to create similar entertainments for her. Ironically, it is an opera by Spontini that I have used as the basis for the ‘Opera’ scene (see below).

This ubiquitous European music was not only lyrical and dramatic, but often featured characteristics of military music - not just in the operas and concert music but also in the popular music used at balls and parties. Combined with the formal almost military nature of many of the dance steps, this enables us to suggest the threat of approaching war within the seemingly frivolous settings of ball and party scenes.

But of course a very important strand running through the play is the emergence of a new order and the rise of the Russian ‘folk’.

What instruments are you using and why?

Mainly European classical instruments, but also ones which have a link to folk music, in particular the violin and clarinet; drums and percussion feature, sometimes blended with sounds of war or explosion; the characteristic sound of Russian bell-ringing (unlike English bell-ringing where the bells tend to be rung in sequence, Russian bell-ringing is characterised by the bells being struck together); various electronic and atmospheric sounds; occasional brass instruments - as they were the military instruments of the time. I also use a piano because of all its associations with the salon, recital room and sophistication... and as one features strongly on stage! Despite this sophisticated image however once the piano is struck like Russian bells with clusters of notes simultaneously, as Stravinsky would do a century later, it becomes as powerful and violent as any percussion instrument.

Any major challenges for you?

The Opera! Helen has specified that the characters in the play start singing dialogue, which has to fit over an opera they are listening to so that, in Natasha’s fantasised experience of her encounter with Anatole, they become part of the opera. Having located a suitable opera (Spontini’s La Vestale – see above!) written in 1807, which could possibly have reached Russia by 1810, I have had to cut and paste it into a shape which enables me to get over the impression that you are hearing an act of an opera and making space for the actors to sing over sections of it. To heighten the unreality of the scene I also add in electronic sounds to emphasise the fantasy element.

It’s an epic novel and now two plays – how long does it take you to create the score?

Fortunately a great deal of work was done on this the first time round. However, although much of the material will remain similar and the themes and ideas remain the same, there’s a great deal of restructuring of the music to be done and, because with touring we are not in a position to use live music, the score has to be recorded. With research, getting initial ideas, trying things out in rehearsal, preparing and teaching vocal material and then finalising and recording the music a project of this size would take between 5 and 7 weeks... and changes may even need to be made at any time during the tech.
By Helen Leblique – Assistant to the Directors

This was the first day that the entire company of War & Peace met...

After the warm up, we played a game of tag. Polly pointed out how each person played the game slightly differently. She asked the actors to watch Hywel Morgan, who plays Anatole, looking carefully at his individual movement quality. She then asked all the actors to play the game ‘as Hywel’. Watching a whole roomful of actors taking on the same physicality was fascinating. It was particularly interesting to note that just by copying someone’s physicality you also discover their attitude to the game – are they desperate to win? Or are they playing for fun? Do they play attackingly? Or defensively?

After this we talked a bit about what influences our individual physicality. Suggestions included: our parents, our genes, our nationality, our work, and our emotional state. We talked about how certain experiences, especially those from early life, or those that are painful, are held in the body, often causing tension and affecting the way we move. As adults we are also self-conscious about how we are seen by others and this too causes us to move in certain ways – to fit in with, or maybe to stand out from the crowd.

As children however, humans are not so self-conscious, often moving without goal or purpose, just for the simple pleasure of moving. To explore this, the directors asked the actors to think of a place from their early childhood when they loved to play, where they experienced freedom and simple pleasure. They were asked to bring every detail of this place to mind (the light, the sounds, the smells, the people) and then to remember a game or activity that they loved to do. Once they had a really clear image of themselves in this place, the actors were asked to inhabit their childhood selves, doing that activity or playing that game. One actor was rolling around on the grass, another was jumping to try and reach something and another simply running backwards and forwards. It was lovely watching the actors doing this, because it reminded everyone just how physically free we were as children. We talked about how it is, as we become socialised, that this connection with our bodies and freedom of movement changes.

The next exercise they did was to explore physicalising more adult emotions. In this exercise the actors were asked to express how any given emotion (jealousy, love, embarrassment and excitement) made them feel using sound and body alone. Starting in a line at one side of the room they crossed the space, taking on the physicality of the feeling, exploring it in all its possible variations. Afterwards we talked about how some emotions were more difficult to do than others and how different emotions seemed to lodge themselves in different parts of the body. Nancy and Polly suggested that it is these very physical feelings that the people of War & Peace are trying to control throughout the play.

In the next exercise the actors were given a task to do (putting on their shoes and coat) and asked to do this task whilst trying to cover a given internal emotional state. During the exercise they were instructed to let the emotion ‘leak out’ (become visible) through different parts of their body (for example, neck, or foot) and then to ‘leak out’ through the whole body but at a small level at first then a larger level, until it totally took over their whole body again as in the previous exercise. Then they were asked to cover it again, because they didn’t want everyone else in the room to know what they were feeling.

The Russian aristocrats of War & Peace live in a highly ritualized society where status and power are everything. To allow others to see your fears and vulnerabilities is to risk failure and rejection. Helen Edmundson wanted us to see that beneath the ‘civilized’ spectacle of high society another kind of war is taking place – a battle for status, for power, and that beneath the surface bubbles a welter of fear and envy. That primitive feeling of threat and danger underpins the very fabric of this society.

Polly Teale
What were your initial thoughts on reading the play/novel?
I read the play first...just looking at the size of Tolstoy's novel left me with slightly sweaty palms. However, as I began to read Helen’s brilliant play I wanted to know more about particular events, so I began dipping into the novel for specific detail and eventually found myself back at page 1, but slightly less intimidated! Tolstoy is actually incredibly readable, but this novel is so vast. What Helen has done is clearly present a number of the most important families and their journeys though his fascinating time in history. Focusing on the life of Pierre and using him as the centre point of the story has turned it from a novel into a play.

What sort of research did you do?
My role was to create a physical space in which this story could be told, so most of the research I did was looking at photographs of Russian architecture and interiors. Nancy and I decided early on that we loved the idea of this huge mirrored space as it really captured the essence of those old Russian museums and houses...so opulent. I eventually found one brilliant book full of references for old mirrors. I don't know what I would have done without it.

Which scene was the hardest to design?
The Battle at Borodino was difficult as we wanted to create levels for the actors and all we had was a rather simple space. It needed to be different from the rest of the play as this is one of the most important battle sequences and it wouldn’t work in a space that still looked like a ballroom. However, we also wanted the change of scene to be quite effortless. Nancy and I were so excited when we decided we would use boxes that looked like old museum packing cases. It seemed a perfect solution as the boxes could be moved by actors and had endless other possibilities for altering the physicality of the space, but they also had a kind of authenticity, as if they belonged to the space.

Do you watch many rehearsals?
Yes it’s always really interesting to watch that process unfolding and the discovery of the story taking place in the rehearsal room.

Do you have a favourite image or scene?
I love the image of a young Natasha singing alone in a vast ballroom, but I also find the battle scenes very dramatic. I think both of these moments encapsulate the essence of War & Peace as it is both a journey for individuals and a country.
What are Natasha’s strengths and weaknesses?

Strengths: She is a very loving, exciting person who adores life. She always wants to make people happy, in order to be happy herself. She has a very generous spirit.

Weaknesses: Natasha often acts before she thinks things through; she can act selfishly and is a little spoilt.

As an actor which scene presents the most challenges and why?

The more intimate scenes between Natasha and Nikolai can be very challenging. These can take a long time to develop in rehearsal. This is because, as an actor, you want this type of scene to be as real and specific as possible, so you have to take time to develop the relationship. For example, the scene with Nikolai out in the snow is a very beautiful and gentle scene and it has taken several weeks for us both to understand how Natasha and Nikolai relate to each other as brother and sister.

Natasha’s story runs strongly through Part 1 and Part 2: she makes mistakes, she grows up, she falls in love several times...How do you portray her at the start of the cycle and at the end of the cycle?

At the start of the cycle she’s physically a lot more free and impulsive than later on in the story. As she grows older her tempo becomes a little slower, more sophisticated, although the essence of her is still there – the energy of someone who loves life. After the incident with Anatole she becomes withdrawn, physically weaker and introverted.

What is it like working with Shared Experience? What elements of the rehearsal process do you enjoy most?

It’s a fantastic opportunity to work with them! The focus is always on working as an ensemble, which as an actor means you feel like you’re contributing creatively to the project, which is very exciting. The bit I love the most is when we all have to create one of the more epic scenes, physically, with no props or set etc, just us. I think it’s impossible, then out of nowhere lots of brilliant ideas emerge.
What research do you do before coming to rehearsals and during rehearsals (i.e. looking at the history/the novel/fashions etc)?

I read some wonderful Tolstoy short stories to get up to speed and then embarked on the novel. I was surprised at how much I enjoyed it - what a delightful, exciting, deep read it is! I also read Natasha’s Dance by Orlando Figes and Memoirs of Sergeant Bourgogne – a fabulous true account of the retreat from Moscow by the French. I am now reading Guy de Maupassant’s short stories for a bit of French influence!

What are the vices and virtues of Pierre’s character?

All Tolstoy’s characters are full of flaws and virtues, full of wonderful contradictions. You might think you know a character when suddenly they do something extraordinary! They are all the more real for that I think.

Pierre is very well-educated and clever, extremely well-meaning and sociable. He is warm and personable, loyal and loving. At the same time he is a depressive drunk, directionless and unmotivated, morose and self-flagellating, neglectful, dark and brooding. The journey of the play spans 15 years, and countless joys and tragedies, so Pierre, and all the characters, change enormously throughout the story.

In Part 1, Napoleon appears to you as an image or you imitate his speeches – theatrically how is this done? Do we see Napoleon or is it like the dagger appearing only to Macbeth? And why does he inhabit your sub-conscious?

The audience do see Napoleon, as a figment of Pierre’s imagination long before they see the man himself. Pierre, having spent his formative years in Paris, hero-worships Napoleon and sees him as everything he is not – a doer, a go-getter, a man of action. He judges his thoughts and actions against what he feels Napoleon would do – “What would Napoleon think of that?” For much of the play Napoleon acts as Pierre’s conscience, his inner voice, supporting him or goading him.

As an actor which scene presents the most challenges and why?

This is a massive story, on stage we have to present two enormous battles, balls, soirées, a wolf hunt and a night at the opera. These ‘set pieces’ are the toughest to get right, and sometimes it is a relief to get back to the dialogue scenes - even if you have to break down in tears and scream and shout!

What is it like working with Shared Experience?

Working with Shared Experience is a very freeing experience. Often as an actor you feel constrained by text, it is the strongest tool you have for telling the story, but with this company the physical story is as important as the verbal one. There is less focus on the naturalistic narrative and more an inner emotional journey. There are sections of the play which become like dance, representing passages of time or changes in character and mood. It’s very exciting!
You play two very different characters. If you were describing them to a friend what would you say? What are their strengths and weaknesses?

Yes, I love the contrast between the idealistically naive Petya and the devil-may-care hedonism of Anatole. As with all the characters in War & Peace though, they’re both definable more by their weaknesses than by their strengths. Petya desperately wants to emulate the military heroism of his elder brother, Nikolai, but they have both been so cosseted and protected by their indulgent parents as to make them useless soldiers, despite ardently wanting to be great Russian heroes.

Anatole has similarly been spoilt by his father. Presumably on the assumption that they stand to inherit Count Bezuhov’s fortune, Anatole and his sister have grown up to be much admired society creatures with few opinions and little discourse. His life of narcissistic, alcoholic and sexual hedonism fills the void that is at his core.

As an actor which scene presents the most challenges?

Probably the scene where Pierre confronts Anatole to account for his failed elopement with Natasha. Anatole is desperately trying to brazen it out, but Pierre morally and physically holds the high ground. Nevertheless, Anatole manages to turn the situation to his advantage and weasels out of the situation to emerge victorious.

What does Anatole really feel about Natasha? Is he a hapless romantic or a scheming rake? Or both?

He’s certainly not aware of being either. He falls passionately in lust with a beautiful young girl at the Opera and has to possess her. That Natasha is so young, so beautiful and so unavailable increases his desire for her so that the pursuit itself becomes even more exciting and compelling than usual. The thing with Anatole is that he doesn’t consider the ramifications of his actions for a moment. He never has. He leaves a wake of destruction behind him wherever he goes and has never had to account for his actions. In this instance, he hasn’t thought past the moment of getting Natasha away to Poland on a sled. The fact that he’s already married to a girl in Poland hasn’t even crossed his mind. There’s calculation in his seduction of an innocent young girl, but I believe that the relationship would quickly fizzle out once the excitement of elopement had worn off.

You are in your thirties. Physically how do you approach playing someone like Petya who is just a child?

I’m drawing on a lot of memories of my brother at that age actually. He was prone to great flights of fantasy and would often get lost in private reveries of fantastic imaginary battles in which he was the hero, whereas he was actually a very sensitive child and quite shy. That all changed when he ended up playing American Football for Great Britain a few years later, but I remember his dreamer phase vividly. As for the physical side of Petya, I’m definitely using my younger self. I’m still a very high-tempo person with quick physical rhythms which makes me very clumsy, not wanting to miss a single thing that goes on around me. Petya’s the same, there’s a real ‘Ooh! Ooh! Me! Me! I want a go!’ quality that I really relate to!

What do you like about working with Shared Experience?

Well, I can legitimately spend my time reading classic literature like War & Peace or Mill on the Floss and call it research! Apart from that, I love the excitement of working with a company of artistically and physically committed people who set huge challenges for themselves and fearlessly explore them, be it battlefields, funerals or opera...
Guidelines for writing a review:

Say what you saw
Say what you think
Reflect on your responses
Write freely from the heart
Don’t worry about given theories
Create your own theories
Describe the tiniest moment that remains vivid
Question that moment
Find out what it says to you
Say why it spoke to you

CONSIDER

The light, the sound, the movement, the colours and textures of the play
The words, the music, the rhythms of the text
The set, the costumes, the style of the production

The Objects:
The ropes
The ornate mirrors
The chairs
The floor that lifts up

THE THEMES

THE CHARACTERS

THE STORY

THE ENDING...

(and try to say everything you want in just 300 words!)

Send your review to:

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