

Reading 'War and Peace' as Broadway Homework

Cast members read Tolstoy's novel to prepare for 'Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812'

By Caitlin Huston • Updated Nov. 7, 2016 10:19 p.m. ET

Actors starring in a Broadway show adapted from a novel often pore intently over the original source. Many plow eagerly through the text multiple times, dog-ear the pages and load it with margin notes.

Then there is ["Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812," currently in previews at the Imperial Theatre.](#) Its source material? Leo Tolstoy's "War and Peace."

In preparation for their roles in the Broadway musical, many of the show's principal cast members say they have read the complex 1869 epic. For some, who have been with the production through its off-Broadway development, it has taken years to finish.

Others haven't exactly gotten all the way through the novel which, depending on the translation, can run upward of 1,000 pages.

The reading isn't a cast requirement, per se, but actors say the text has proved helpful—and even cathartic—in preparation for their roles. Some say they have found redemption or moments of joy for their characters.

The musical draws from a 70-page snippet of the book centered on a young girl, Natasha. Separated from her betrothed, Andrey, she finds herself swept up in a romance with the rebellious Anatole, while Pierre, a kind but awkward man, looks on.

Like any good Russian story, the plot is fleshed out with a large, and complicated, band of side characters.

While many lines in the musical were taken directly from a translation by Aylmer and Louise Shanks Maude (chosen because it is in the public domain), the production isn't exactly a snoozy book report.

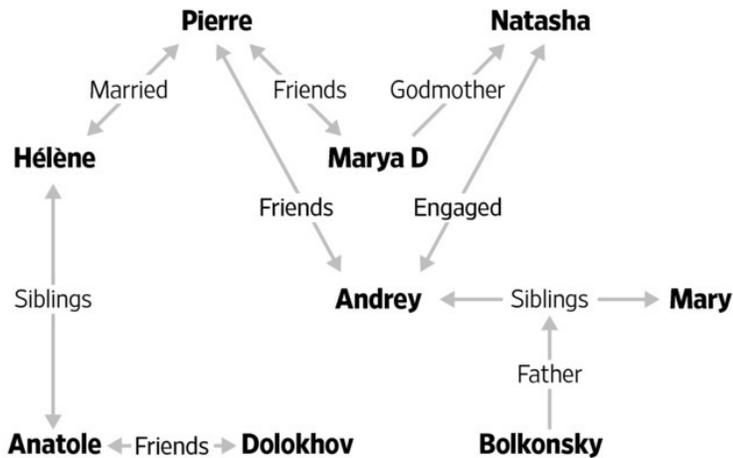
The text is set to an electro-pop score colored with characters dancing around the theater to strobe lights and weaving through the audience.

Nick Choksi, who plays Dolokhov, a friend to Anatole, has been with the show for four years; he has just finished the book.

“I was an English major, and until this play came around I had not even attempted to crack the novel,” said Mr. Choksi.

The Families of ‘The Great Comet’

A look at some of the relationships found in ‘Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812,’ based on Leo Tolstoy’s ‘War and Peace.’



Sources: Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812; War and Peace
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

He counsels other readers to stick with it through first 100 pages; after that, he said, it gets easier.

On the other hand, Gelsey Bell, who plays Princess Mary, the sister to Natasha’s betrothed, Andrey, was thrilled to bring to life one of her favorite books, which she had turned to about nine years ago during a breakup. The book gave her solace, she said, as well as advice on relationships and spirituality.

“It was like a literary shrink for me,” said Ms. Bell.

Grace McLean, who plays Natasha’s godmother, Marya D., had also picked up the book ahead of her role in the show and then returned to it during the 2013 run to mine for details about her character.

She found a passage depicting her stern character as imposing, yet awkward while trying to fit in at a ball. She has used it, she said, to inform her character on stage.

“I like to imagine this big, lumbering dragon of a woman who’s really stern but trying to have fun,” Ms. McLean said.

Not everyone has been able to conquer the tome.

Nicholas Belton, who plays Andrey and Prince Bolkonsky, describes himself as a “CliffsNotes kind of guy” and said he didn’t make it past the 70-page section. Instead, he filled in his knowledge of the story by watching the BBC miniseries. Lucas Steele cracked open the book in 2012 when he started playing Anatole, and found a passage where his roguish character is forgiven—a release he doesn’t get in the musical.

He still has about a third of the book left.

The length of “War and Peace” may be daunting, but the structure of the story is comparable to that of classic musicals, which typically have two romantic couples—an A couple and a B couple, said “Natasha, Pierre” composer and writer Dave Malloy.

He picked up a copy of the book while working as a pianist on a cruise ship and saw the pairings in the relationship—one between Natasha and Anatole and between Pierre and his existential angst, which acts as a subversion of a romantic plot, he said.

He immediately envisioned this as a musical, he said.

Since then, Mr. Malloy has read the entire novel twice and the 70-page section “hundreds of times,” he said.

Though his reading habits currently veer toward comic books and graphic novels, he is planning a musical trilogy of “impossible novels” which will include, in addition to this production, one based on Herman Melville’s “Moby-Dick” and another on James Joyce’s “Ulysses.”

“Those three books together seem to embody everything that is considered impossible and hated about literature,” said Mr. Malloy. “[But they’re] such incredible, page-turning love stories.”