



The epic Italian film adaptation of WAR AND PEACE is a December, 2024 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Library of the Heritage Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd.

14 of a possible 20 points      \*\*\*1/2 of a possible \*\*\*\*\* = very good film

Italy 1956 color 208 minutes live action feature epic drama in English  
Ponti-De Laurentiis Cinematografica Producer: Dino De Laurentiis

Key: \*indicates an outstanding technical achievement or performance

#### Points:

- 1 Direction: King Vidor 2<sup>nd</sup> Unit Direction: Mario Soldati
  - 1 Editing: Stuart Gilmore (Supervision) and Leo Cattozzo
  - 2 Cinematography: Jack Cardiff\* 2<sup>nd</sup> Unit Cinematography: Aldo Tosti\*  
Still Photography: Mai Bulloch and Bud Fraker
  - 2 Lighting: Bill Neff (Gaffer) and Francesco Brescini
  - 2 Screenplay: Bridget Boland, Robert Westerby, King Vidor, Mario Camerini,  
Ennio De Concini, Ivo Perilli, Elizabeth Hill,  
Gian Gaspare Napolitano, Irwin Shaw, and Mario Soldati  
adapted from the novel by Lev Tolstoi
- Musical Direction: Franco Ferrara
- 1 Music: Nino Rota
  - Choreography: Aurel Milloss\*

**1 Art Direction: Mario Chiari\* and Franz Bachelin\***  
**Set Decoration: Piero Gherardi\***  
**Costume Design: Maria De Matteis\* and Giulio Ferrari\***  
**Makeup: Albert De Rossi (Supervision) and Bud Bashaw, Jr.**  
**(Audrey Hepburn's)**

**1 Sound**  
**Sound Editing: Leslie Hodgson**  
**Sound Recording; Charles Knott**  
**Dialogue Coach: Guy Thomajon**  
**Sound Mixing: Harold Lewis and R. D. Cook**

**1 Acting**

**1 Creativity**

**14 total points**

**Cast: Audrey Hepburn\* (Natasha Rostov), Henry Fonda (Pierre Bezukhov), Mel Ferrer\* (Prince Andrey Bolkonsky), John Mills\* (Platon, a serf), Herbert Lom (Napoleon), Oscar Homolka (General Kutuzov), Anita Ekberg (Helene Kuragine), Helmut Dantine (Dolokhov), Barry Jones\* (Count Rostov), Anna Maria Ferrero\* (Mary Bolkonsky, Andrey's sister), Milly Vitale (Lise Bolkonsky, Andrei's wife a.k.a. "The Little Princess"), Jeremy Brett (Nicholas Rostov, brother to Natasha and Petya), Lea Seidl (Countess Rostov), Wilfred Lawson (Old Prince Bolkonsky), Sean Barrett (Petya Rostov), Tullio Carminati (Kuragine), Mai Britt (Sonya), Patrick Crean (Denisov), Gertrude Flynn (Peronskaya), others**

**Crafting a monumental film from a monumental book of some eleven hundred plus pages didn't faze director King Vidor, whose previous credits included *The Crowd* (1928), *The Champ* (1932), *Our Daily Bread* (1934), *Stella Dallas* (1937), *The Citadel* (1938), and the infamous *Duel in the Sun* (1946). A native of Texas, he was accustomed to ambitious, grandiose achievements and advertising. Both were needed to lasso audiences into sitting through three and one-half hours of war, dancing, and romance.**

**As can be observed in preceding credits, a team of ten writers toiled to produce a workable screenplay adaptation of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy's *Voyna i Mir*. It included generous dollops of direct translated quotations from**

the original text, always a fraught undertaking for a theatrical film. While fidelity to Tolstoy's words was deemed necessary, casting of Russian actors seemed to present insurmountable difficulties. Instead of matching authentic spoken dialogue to Russian gutturals, producer Dino De Laurentiis chose an international cast of performers, resulting in everything from contemporary Swedish accents to improbable Midwestern flatness. All the refinements of period-perfect costuming didn't successfully offset pseudo-Russian thespians trying to pass themselves off as czarist Muscovites or Gallic army officers.

However, Audrey Hepburn turned out to be a marvelously effective Natasha Rostov, full of youthful energy, charm, and naïve innocence. She completely captured the alternating studied gracefulness and shy social fumbling of a maturing adolescent who experienced two disastrous crushes before finally wedding consolation prize Pierre Bezukhov.

Herbert Lom's Napoleon repeated an earlier characterization of that dictator in *Young Mr. Pitt*, a 1942 production. It had a fascinating combination of swagger, petulance, and misery as the militant Corsican metamorphosed from cocky conqueror at Borodino to humbled fugitive at the Berezina River Bridge.

Mel Ferrer in the mid-1950s was Mr. Audrey Hepburn. So casting him as Prince Andrey Bolkonsky was art copying reality. Since the junior prince was depicted by Tolstoy as an icy, detached aristocrat, Ferrer's screen persona matched it beautifully. Except, of course, for an absolute absence of anything resembling a Russian accent.

Even more injurious to that cause was casting Henry Fonda as Pierre Bezukhov. Fonda's relative ectomorphism simply bore no similarity to initial chubbiness of Bezukhov in the novel. His blatantly American speech further distanced him from the character he was supposed to embody.

Jeremy Brett's Nicholas Rostov was acceptably eager, good-natured, amiable, a cruiser quite content to travel harmoniously with prevailing winds and tides.

Though perhaps a bit too crusty to be totally credible, Wilfrid Lawson's senior Prince Bolkonsky displayed crochety gruffness enveloping a tender interior.

Even better was John Mills' enactment of ill-starred muzhik Platon, whose generous equanimity and pious Orthodoxy lead Pierre to cast away notions of vengeful patriotism and immobilizing despair. Assassinating the great man wannabe Napoleon wouldn't rebuild Moscow or revive its dead defenders.

Somewhat too long in the tooth to pass for teen Petya Rostov, Sean Barrett at least acted appropriately for a precipitous, adventure-seeking adolescent youth.

Not so persuasive were Milly Vitale's "Little Princess" Bolkonsky and Anita Ekberg's Helene Kuragine.

Lise Bolkonsky, as depicted by Tolstoy, was a spoiled but affectionate child-woman, wishing only to be loved and accepted by those she encountered. There was nothing fraudulent or studied in her behavior. Nor was she a whining, emotionally insecure manipulator. In this film, thanks to an unflattering script and an actress out of her depth, Lise appears to be nothing more than fretful deadweight, incapable of fulfilling duties of either spouse or mother.

Helene, as Tolstoy imagined her, was an egotistical, caustic-tongued, amoral adulteress, attractive to men besotted by dreams of possessing a trophy beauty and inherited wealth. It's no coincidence she bore the name of Homer's war-precipitating adventuress. A vicious gossip and provocateur, impervious to sensitivities of those orbiting her, she was a most fitting sister to an equally self-serving brother.

Anatole Kuragine, as hammy played by Vittorio Gassman, fell somewhere between melodramatic Victorian seducer and ostentatiously leering Heathcliff in uniform and awash with money. His relatively early exit from the drama was a disguised blessing for filmmakers.

Mary Bolkonsky, Andrey's sister, was a genuinely devout young lady exhibiting unfeigned empathy with those fortunate enough to encounter her. She was admirably represented onscreen by Anna Maria Ferrero, who had the advantage of operating on native soul. Unlike Swede May Britt, whose Sonya proved disappointingly colorless, so much so that her seemingly whirlwind courtship by Nicholas Rostov probably dumbfounded audiences. Whatever did he see in *her*?

Recklessly courageous showoff Dolokhov came wholly intact to the screen thanks to an intelligently restrained Helmut Dantine.

Scheming aristocrat Prince Vasili's dignity and deviousness melded smoothly together in Tullio Carminati's interpretation of the role.

Barry Jones might have been a couple shades too Pickwickian as Count Ilya Rostov. All the same, his presence was both cheery and engaging.

It's difficult to evaluate Oscar Homolka's General Kutuzov, since that historical figure himself operated in camouflage much of the time. Where did the real Kutuzov begin and the rustic simpleton masquerade end? Perhaps Homolka overplayed cunning and earthy aspects of that officer, overshadowing his patient stubbornness and inclination to sluggish fatalism.

In the role of Countess Natalya Rostov, Austrian native Lea Seidl seemed adequate, but nothing more. Hardly the driving force she must have been in controlling the Rostov family finances and keeping three impulsive children in check.

What was most impressive about this production had to be its battle scenes, tracking shots of the French army in retreat, and glittering gowns paired with gleaming epaulets in ballroom dancing shots. Thanks to lighting genius Jack Cardiff for designing ideal camera placements to optimize those features.

If a little disorienting at times due to huge geographical leaps in the action and a multitude of supporting characters clamoring for brief moments in the spotlight, editing kept the film from bogging down in annoying excursions into static, extended stretches of philosophical musings about the nature of history or the inherent deficiencies of mankind's moral character.

Surprisingly, Nino Rota's music, while conveying the Napoleonic Era's atmosphere in formally elegant, clipped rhythms representative of that time, lacked the buoyancy and biting sarcasm so typical of his Fellini scores.

Certainly watchable and doing no great damage to its literary origins, this Italian super-production is still an enjoyable, if lengthy, introduction to Tolstoy's masterpiece. It would have benefitted enormously from Russian location shooting and native speakers in the cast. But *War and Peace* was made during the Cold War era when relations between Soviet and Western European republics were quite frigid. Cooperative filming between them would have been nearly impossible to even contemplate.

If for no other reason, screen this to see Audrey Hepburn's superb performance in the lead female role.

*War and Peace* is suitable for viewing by teens and adults *if* they can tolerate a runtime of two hundred eight minutes.

The Hugh Stoupe Library of the Heritage Methodist Church has available for borrowing (1.) an unabridged English translation of the *War and Peace* novel, (2.) an abridged version of that novel, and (3.) a copy of the dvd just reviewed.