

Anna karenina

Literature



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On the 17th October the GCSE I went to the Bolton Octagon Theatre and watched Anna Karenina. The original story was written as a novel by Count Leo Tolstoy and was adapted for the stage by Helen Edmundson. The Octagon Theatre itself is very contemporary and is normally a theatre-in-the-round hence its name, however, for this play, it had been adapted to a thrust stage. It was only a small working area and the seating was very formal. Despite this, it was not a traditional stage as there were no curtains.

I think that the play actually opens from the moment you walk into the auditorium, with Levin, one of the key characters, already sitting on stage. This convention was used to capture the audience's awareness and also meant that the actual opening of the play could begin whenever the actors were ready as the spectators were already quiet and ready for the performance to commence. Levin was sat in the corner of the stage, writing in the candle light into a journal. This intrigued the audience, making them wonder why he is there and what he may be writing about.

The drama began with a very loud, shocking train horn sounding which focused the audience to the stage. I thought that this was a good opening scene because the loud sounds made the audience silence straight away and got the action going quickly, rather than having to start off slowly and build up pace which often makes the audience lose interest. It was also a good effect because there was a large contrast between the stillness and silence of Levin at the beginning and what was happening right then. At this a smoke machine was set off, adding the impression of a train station as Anna entered.

On Anna Karenina's entrance, a dark hooded figure followed her and she kept on screaming, " Who are you", which again confused the audience into asking what was happening, and what was going to happen next. Although the question intrigued the audience, it also caused confusion, which made a lot of the attention of the audience change from the stage, to asking someone else what was going on. At this, the hooded figure left the stage by going up the stairs by the audience. By exiting via the stairs, it included the audience in the drama which made the piece more interesting.

By doing this, they not only added to the interest of the audience, it made the audience part of the drama itself. The set was very minimal and only used props and lighting effects to set the scene. The main props in the play were two simple chairs on either side of the play, which were moved to show a change in setting. For example, on the opening scene of the play, each chair was on either side of the stage, representing, what I believe to be the mind of Anna and Levin but for the ballroom scenes, the chairs were moved to centre stage and the actors acted around them.

The set was specially designed for the play, with a trap door which had a shallow basin, filled with sand which was used by Levin to show that he was on his farm, working. This worked well because although it only showed a small part of Levin's life and work, not much was needed to get the image across- Levin was a hard working man, who owned a farm. This also fit in with the very minimalist style of the play, rather than having very complicated set changes. The play was always moving on and never seemed to stay still.

This effect was created by the constant movement of the actors and how scenes Anna and Levin were constantly slipping inbetween what was actually happening in their lives. I think it vital for the play to be of this nature because it showed how the lives of the characters were constantly changing and therefore the ways in which they tackled their problems also changed. The extra space that was gained behind the scene by changing the type of stage, was used to create a platform where the actors performed as silhouettes behind a screen with light shining through.

This was unusual and worked well as it used a different level for the audience to look at, rather than just the actors on ground level. It also gave chance to use very stylised movements to make sure that the audience could understand what was happening. One time when this was used was during one of the final party scenes. During the party, the action suddenly stopped and all the actors on stage turned and looked upwards at the screen. At this, the lights below faded, and a silhouette of Stiva and a woman appeared as the lights on the balcony looked up.

I thought that this was a stunning effect because it showed what was happening with the other characters that were not on the stage. It also showed how the people at the ball were aware of what Stiva was doing but were putting on a front, pretending that everything was perfect in their lives and acting as though it was almost a form of entertainment for them. The play was a tragic Russian love story about a woman called Anna Karenina who gets married to the governor of a province although she did not love him. She then falls in love with Count Vronsky and ends up pregnant with his baby.

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The couple then end up running away, leaving the child with his father. Because of the great pressures of Vronsky's job, Anna and Vronaky slowly begin to get frustrated and Anna turns to drugs. At the end, she takes an overdose of Morphine and kills herself. The story of the play itself was simple, but because of the adaptations made to it by Helen Edmundson, it was very difficult to follow. At first, it appears as though Anna and Levin are talking about memories together or are friends. It appears to be a series of flash backs but to the end of the play, you discover that Anna and Levin had never met before that point in the play.

This left the audience to decide how they believed Anna and Levin to be associated. My personal view is that Anna and Levin live their lives separately but at the same time they knew each other. Anna was a part of Levin and Levin was a part of Anna. The two characters were opposites, and when they expressed their views and opinions they were very critical upon each other. Anna was very wild, and believed that love was enough for anything. Levin, however, believed in marriage and frowned greatly upon divorce and Anna's affairs.

I think Levin's character is what Anna really wanted and the kind of man that she could really fall in love with and Levin wanted to be more free natured, taking him where the wind blew. The link scenes were always taken by Anna and Levin, who asked, " Where are you now? " to which the actor would walk about the stage describing which part of Russia they were in and what was happening. I believe this to be the characters asking where they are in their lives and how the two characters are dealing with their morals despite their compromising situation.

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The actors played their parts well, despite the very complicated structure of the play. Anna was made to be a woman who was confused about what she wanted to do about her situation, torn between her child and husband, with the true love that she found with Vronski. The facial expression used was most effectively to express their anger or shock. When Anna and Vronski were meeting at balls and parties, the other characters would wear masks, making comments about the couple's predicament. This was very effective because it worked in the opposite way to facial expression.

By using plain white stage masks, they were able to create characters who were just 'gossiping' about the couple, not caring about their feelings, and looking upon them as if they were a form of entertainment. It also gave them an inhumane feel as if they were looking down upon Anna for having emotions such as love and allowing this to ruin her life. There was also an echo of Jerzy Grotowski techniques, who trained actors to think of their characters like an animal. One of the sex scenes was tied in with horse racing.

The people that attended the ball lined up, looking through binoculars at Anna and Vronski, as Anna acted as the horse, and Vronski as the rider. The movements used were very sexual and comments made were in parallel to the horse racing and sex. As Vronski whipped Anna, the story was narrated with the spectators chanting about the horse (Anna), falling over and breaking her back. The horse then had to be shot, and Anna was then pregnant. This was very symbolic, as it showed Anna being pregnant as the end of her life, like it was the end of the horse's.

This was true to the story because it meant that Anna could no longer hide from anyone, including her husband, the fact that she had been with Vronski. The final scenes of Anna's life were very effective. As Anna drank the morphine from the small bottle, it showed her slowly turning mad, getting more and more worked up about never seeing Vronski and how she missed her son. Her body language was lazy, as if there was nothing left for her to live for and therefore there was no point in even putting effort into even walking. The speech was slurred because of the drugs and there was a sense of despair.

Inbetween talking, there would be long pauses, where she would take gulps of air and there would be a long pause as she ran ideas through her head. The pace was very fast to create dramatic tension and the tone was varied to show her different feelings. The intonation of her sentences would have more emphasis towards the end of the sentence to draw a conclusion to that idea or thought. The pitch also became higher when a conclusion was reached to show the despair of the character because it seemed as if nothing she could do would be able to rectify the situation.

At the middle of the play, the marriage between Levin and Kitty took place. For this, to show the setting, a gobo of an arched church window was used. This worked well as the light fell onto the priest, not only casting the shape of the gobo across the stage, but also the elongated shadow of the priest. The balcony behind the curtains for the silhouette was also used for the priest. Due to the fact that the priest was on a higher level than the other actors, it showed his status and religious symbolism- God is above everyone and everything.

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The costume of the characters was again very simple. Anna only had one costume change during the interval and before this, she wore deep purple traditional dress wear that would have been worn by the upper classes. In the second half, she wore a black dress, which symbolised the worsening of Anna's predicament as she plunged further and further into circumstances which she could not escape from. There was an obvious establishment of class where the upper class women wore dresses and the men wore suits and uniforms and the beggars wore old clothes, which were very simple and monochrome.

In all, the dramatic effects produced were very good and the conventions used were effective, however, the play was hard to follow because of this. I think that the play write concentrated too heavily on trying to use drama conventions than making the plot understandable. I think that because of this, the audience could not enjoy the play to its full potential because they had to focus too hard to understand the play, rather than being able to get involved with the characters and empathising with them.