

TELEVISION EUNY HONG-KORAL

# Too much sex for its own good

In Channel Four's controversial mini-series adaptation of *Anna Karenina*, Anna (Helen McCrory) and her paramour Count Vronsky (Kevin McKidd) are shown flinging off their clothes and romping spiritedly in the sack. This incensed some Tolstoy purists when the programme was aired last year in Britain and Canada, but I found the dramatic licence to be within reason. Though it's true that Tolstoy never spelt it out, surely he would have agreed that adultery without sex would be a waste of time. (PBS. In two parts, on February 18 and 25, at 9pm. Check local listings.)

It was one of the programme's other sex scenes that was more surprising. Konstantin Levin (Douglas Henshall) and his betrothed Princess Kitty (Paloma Baeza) are meant to represent a morally superior and more authentic way of living than that of Anna and Vronsky. Just before their marriage, Levin forces Kitty to read his diaries.

He does this because of some hyper-ethical conceit that his bride-to-be should know what is inside his heart, a strange notion for which Tolstoy provides no clear explanation. The novelist tells us only that Kitty is perturbed by what she has read. The mini-series, on the other hand, makes a speculative leap and invents a torrid, pornographic account of Levin's liaisons with "prostitutes and gypsies".

On their wedding night, this production has the innocent Kitty going straight for Levin's breeches, indicating that she intends to perform fellatio. When Levin recoils, Kitty's explanation seems based on a bad screenwriter's misogynistic sexual fantasy of a virgin-whore: "I thought that's what you liked, from those women in your diaries!" Levin's reply: "But I don't want it from you!" Needless to say, none of this is in Tolstoy. It is the worst example of dramaturgy I have ever seen; I found myself burying my face in a cushion in



Not for Tolstoy purists: Helen McCrory in 'Anna Karenina'

read these lines.

This production's overemphasis on sex has a deleterious effect on the storytelling. The novel's platonic relationships – by far the most interesting – have been neglected. Tolstoy had a keen understanding of the unspoken complications in friendships: Levin and Oblonsky, for example, are chums because they knew each other as children but they fundamentally disrespect each other. Tolstoy writes: "It seemed to each of them that the life he led himself was the only real life, and the life led by his friend was a mere

phantasm." Couldn't this, as well as the female friendships, have been explored in greater depth?

There's very little Tolstoy in this production, right down to the fact that the character of Levin, the author's fictional alter ego, has been whittled down to a hulking, inarticulate type without a tinge of the intellectualism Tolstoy wrote for the character. In the novel, Levin delivers lengthy speeches about

agricultural ideology – not exciting, perhaps, but important to Tolstoy and to Russian political history. In the adaptation, his obsession is reduced to a few senseless comments about how reaping-machines "destroy the land".

To watch this programme is to be annoyed by one detail after another, such as the tinny and unnecessarily melodramatic soundtrack. The peek-a-boo camera technique is also irritating. The cameraman shoots from behind a piece of furniture or a lamp to give the viewer the illusion of eavesdropping on the characters. There's just one problem: the frame is obstructed with a blurry close-up of a table leg and the audience can't see a thing.

This mini-series has reduced Tolstoy's rich symbolism to metaphors about grooming. The plot is signalled by the state of Anna's hair and make-up. Neat coiffure means she's going to get her way; unbrushed hair means she won't.

I was so bored by this programme that I wasn't even paying attention to the dramatic final moments; even when I realised what I had missed I didn't bother to rewind the tape.

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The Opera Nazionale Italiana was a well-projected, gloriously voiced company who left everyone wanting more. Bangor Daily News, Maine, USA

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