

## 'War And Peace' Sings! Colin Quinn Gets Scholarly! 'Family' Flops!

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COLIN QUINN UNCONSTITUTIONAL \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
A FAMILY FOR ALL OCCASIONS \* out of \*\*\*\*

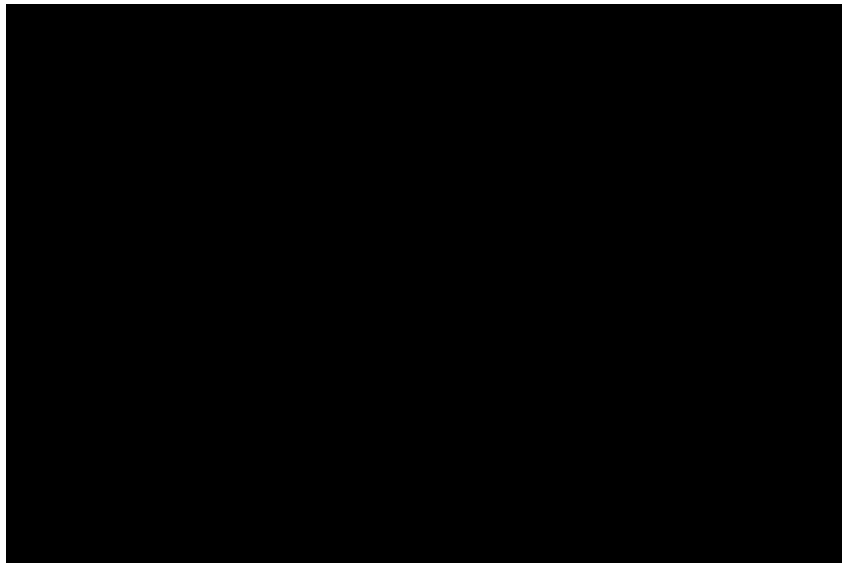
NATASHA, PIERRE AND THE GREAT COMET OF 1812 \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
KAZINO

Turn the sprawling masterpiece *War And Peace* by Leo Tolstoy into a musical? Well, it worked for *Les Miserables*, so why not? This Ars Nova Production opened last year to some great reviews and was picked as one of the best shows of the year by several outlets. I missed it so was especially eager to check out this new open-ended run. They've created a space down in the ever-so-hip meatpacking district on the lower west side of the Village. It's reportedly larger than the original setting but keeps the *Cabaret*-like, immersive staging where the actors wander among tables and catwalks snaking down each side of the space. Theatergoers get a full meal and either champagne or a shot of vodka to enhance the aura of Russian aristocracy.

Of course, what matters is the show. It's not just ambitious but very successful and a triumph for Dave Malloy who wrote the book, songs, score and orchestration, not to mention starring in the key role of Pierre, a philosophical figure that looms large in the novel. Unlike *Les Miserables* -- which is bursting with strong melodies -- most of the songs in *Natasha, Pierre...* are recitative, with actors nimbly delivering huge swathes of story and plot and personal thinking in an engaging, stylized manner. You can't hum them on your way out, but they're well-suited to Tolstoy's work.

Needless to say, it doesn't begin to capture one-tenth of that masterpiece. But it zeroes in on a major romantic plot and delivers it with enough zest and style to capture some of the spirit of the work. Fans of the novel won't be scandalized and those who haven't read it will surely realize it's just as involving and rich as *Anna Karenina*. (I strongly recommend the recent translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky if you do decide it's time to tackle this work.)

In this musical, the set-up is wittily provided by a rousing opening number ("Prologue") that exhorts audience members to keep the plot summary and family tree of major characters at hand because it's awfully complicated. In truth, you needn't know a thing about the novel to follow the action. Natasha is a lovely young woman who has come to Moscow while her fiance Andrey heads off to war. She has a terrible falling out with his family and soon finds herself bewitched by the dazzlingly handsome Anatole. Unbeknownst to her, he's already married but Anatole must have this beautiful virgin and doesn't care their affair will destroy her social standing forever. It's a Russian novel, so you know it won't end happily.



The direction and musical staging by Rachel Chavkin is inventive and fun, along with the choreography by Sam Pinkleton. By and large, it's well cast and performed (with one glaring exception) and the overall quality is enough to make this a show theater-goers should not miss.

Now, onto the caveats. The costumes by Paloma Young (which I assume include the makeup and other touches) verge on the kitsch far too often when a more quietly realistic vibe would do better. In fact, the entire production can't seem to make up its mind about the tone and style. Much of the show has a vaguely Russian air in the presentation and music and look. All to the good. But then you see garish tattoos on numerous minor characters or boots that seem more punk than Russian; it all seems a bit jokey. The score has a generally folksy Russian air of a modest sort but then lazily goes for a techno style during a party scene complete with strobe lighting and the conductor donning headphones. Anatole boasts a rooster hair cut that's unquestionably modern. But why? Sure *War And Peace* is universal but nothing is gained by these modern touches. The dominant strain is thoughtful, intelligent and often quite moving when remaining true to the source material. That's the show at its best; those other hip flourishes feel out of place and lazy.

Two of the biggest moments are completely out of whack to their importance: one is directorial and the other musical. The show begins with a dramatic entrance by much of the cast and serving crew. They all burst into the room. But for what? To deliver one final appetizer before the show begins? Surely this scene-setting attention grabber should be saved for the show itself. In the much shorter second act we find the longest, most exuberant musical number. And what's this peak moment about? Balaga, a thoroughly unimportant troika driver who will be whisking Anatole and Natasha away. It stretches on and on, like one of those old musicals where they decide they need a big dance number and just throw it in willy nilly. Given the time and energy expended, you would be forgiven for thinking Balaga is the most crucial character in the show rather than a nobody.

Indeed, the entire second act feels out of whack. They'd be better off ending the first act when Anatole and Natasha first kiss, a wonderful scene inventively staged right down to having performers rub their fingers along the rim of glasses to create a haunting musical moment. That would give more balance to the two acts and allow them to drastically shorten or cut "Balaga," which eventually does incorporate some actual plot.

These failings stand out because much of the show is so very good. Amber Gray is excellent as Anatole's sister Helene and shines especially in her big number "Charming." Grace Mclean is very good as Marya D, the woman who takes Natasha into her home and then berates the child for bringing shame on their household. Brittain Ashford is also wonderful as Natasha's sweet cousin Sonya. Her big number is the show's most melodic and striking tune, one that could stand alone outside the show. Called "Sonya Alone," it's another piece that nods to a pop style -- in this case it has a Seventies singer-songwriter vibe, a mood heightened by Ashford's mellow delivery. It's thoroughly out of place (just like the dash of techno and some other bits) but it's so strong you're willing to forgive it. Blake DeLong is an amusing, quarrelsome old Bolkonsky, though he leaves little impression in his key, final appearance as Andrey where his refusal to forgive should have maximum impact.

Above all, Phillipa Soo is a real find as Natasha. She's completely in character throughout, shy, amorous, troubled, determined -- you're with her every step of the way. She sings in a lovely, unaffected style and handles the winding melodies and elaborate lyrics of Malloy with ease. When she and Malloy have a climactic meeting, it's quiet, hushed and beautifully penetrating. It's a genuine emotional moment that lets you put aside the more modest failings.

Unfortunately, she's paired with a very miscast and misdirected Lucas Steele as Anatole. His hairstyle sets the tone from the very beginning: it's jokey and silly and that's exactly how he's been encouraged to play the part. This is fine at the very beginning, where he mockingly poses for photographers (though again this "modern" touch feels uninspired). But he continues the posing throughout. Even at the crucial scene where he hopes to steal Natasha away, Anatole turns and plays it up to the crowd. This undercuts the real risks, the way he's toying with her future (and his own) and keeps the tragedy at bay. Worse, Steele is one of the weaker singers and the tunes Malloy has written for Anatole veer into arena rock territory. When he sings that he'll flee to St. Petersburg, that city is delivered in a high-pitched squeal that sounds like a scene from the 80s musical *Rock Of Ages*. At this very dramatic moment, nothing could be more off-putting. Steele's take on the role seems right for a comic relief minor character in *Rent*, not the charismatic Anatole.

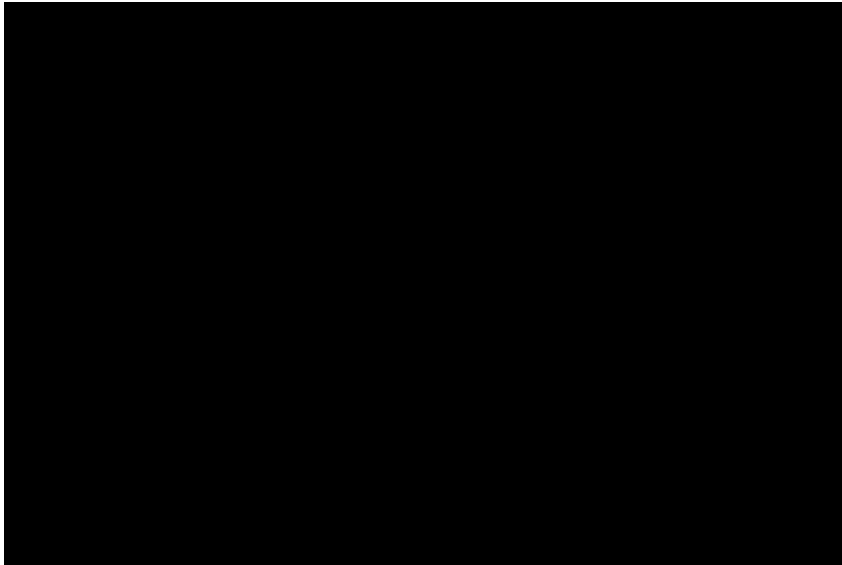
As for the meal they serve, it's unremarkable but nothing shocking if you've ever eaten at a bar mitzvah or wedding and know the sort of pre-cooked, warmed chicken and appetizers that get dished out at those sorts of events. Arrive early or you'll have to wait till the intermission to eat. If you just accept that the ticket prices are a little high for Off-Broadway and just treat the meal as sort of an amusing addition to the show (rather than a satisfying event in itself) you'll be fine. Mind you, if you order more drinks to add to your tab, you're sure to get better service than my table, which asked repeatedly to no avail for more bread or took an hour to get more water.

So the setting is gimmicky but fine, the meal bearable as an add-on. More importantly, the musical is very promising, showcases Soo with major appeal and reveals Malloy to have genuine talent. His Pierre appears at the beginning, steps in for a duel in the middle and has a wonderful scene at the finale. Still, it's only his name in the title that shows you what a major figure he is. Even more of a presence for him throughout would be welcome. The score he's written is very good and with a tighter, less catch-all production it could be shown as even finer than it appears at first blush. That final scene between Pierre and Natasha, followed by his reverie over a comet and the quiet insight it inspires is a marvelous theatrical moment. Much of *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812* is so good that you long for the rest to be better. Malloy's next work will surely be one to watch as well.

**COLIN QUINN UNCONSTITUTIONAL** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**BARROW STREET THEATRE**

I've never seen Colin Quinn in concert before. His everyman appeal is obvious; he's a garrulous, regular guy but has more insight than the average Joe. He just disguises it well. At first blush, *Unconstitutional* looks like it might be more ambitious than usual. Quinn clearly had the comic insight that the Constitution was written by a bunch of guys at a convention and thus they were probably pretty drunk throughout. That's why the drunker you are, the more you think you know about the Constitution. ("I know my rights!" is the battle cry of every drunk being arrested by a cop.) Fair enough. Flashing passages on the wall of Barrow Street Theater and making fun of certain phrases like "a more perfect union" (other countries can have a perfect union,

jokes Quinn, but the United States is going to have a MORE perfect union), he promises a clever show rooted in knowledge of the Constitution and the issues that it raises.



Unfortunately, this modest, pleasing hour of stand-up doesn't follow through on that premise. Soon enough the phrases from the Constitution seem less and less important and Quinn is delivering jokes about the Kardashians. Quinn may have a constitutional right to make jokes about the Kardashians but they have precious little to do with any essential issue raised by the Constitution and you can't help feeling your heart sink a bit when routine topics like that pop up so soon.

He scores some good laughs, such as a bit about gun control and arming teachers where Quinn imagines what it would be like if teachers really did pack heat and you suddenly see a teacher brandishing a gun when students haven't done their homework. (It's a credit to his skill that this seems funny rather than off-putting, given the inevitable Sandy Hook memories that he evoked earlier.)

Fans will be satisfied and the comedy on display is fine as far as it goes. But there's a much smarter, much braver show waiting to get out if Quinn will bear down, cut out the obvious gags and really dig deep. The Second Amendment alone should inspire a riff on the comma, the source somehow of all our legalistic debate over what it actually means. You can see his ambition on display at the finale. He goes on a riff about other countries and tags each one with a defining characteristic, like our toxic relationship with China and so on. It ends with new immigrants arriving to the country of freedom and democracy and capitalism, bright eyed and eager and wondering where the party is. "You missed it" says Quinn as he turns out the lights.

Quinn seems capable of writing a great show that deserves that dramatic and effective ending. Here's hoping he puts a lot more work into writing it.

**A FAMILY FOR ALL OCCASIONS** \* out of \*\*\*\*  
**LABYRINTH THEATER COMPANY**

This new play by Bob Gladini (author of *Jack Goes Boating*) feels more like a rough draft not quite ready for a staged reading, much less a full-blown production directed by Philip Seymour Hoffman and filled with a generally able cast. I hesitate even to review it.

It's so hazy and unformed that you can't even be sure what it was trying to be about. At its most simple level, it's about a father and step mother to two teenage misfits. The son hides in his room all day working on a video game program he insists will get him a scholarship to a great college. The daughter is a stripper in a nightclub. The stepmother slaves away every day at a fading factory that produces boxes. The father is retired and tries to keep the peace, seeing the best in his kids or at least hoping for the best each and every day. Are the parents messing up the kids by coddling them? Are the kids cruelly indifferent to the parents doing their best? The mother that took off and dumped the kids for good -- was it just in her nature and will genetics prove the daughter is just as hapless when it comes to the maternal instinct? Whatever the case, nothing here will make you care much one way or another.

Jeffrey Demunn brings a warmth and specificity to the father Howard that the character doesn't really deserve. Deirdre O'Connell is less effective as his new wife May but that's more the fault of an ill-defined role. Charlie Saxton is pretty good as the hapless geek Sam while Justine Lupe is weakest as the daughter Sue. I wouldn't hold it against her since that's also the most poorly written, least motivated character.

Out of nowhere arrives a vivid, interesting person named Oz (William Jackson Harper). He befriends Sue at her nightclub and though the character on paper makes little sense, Harper makes the most of him. He comes into the home and disrupts their tepid lives with ease. Charlie is enamored with Sue (God knows why since he's far more intelligent and interesting), calms the father, finds a better computer for the son and gets the perfect gift for the wary and weary May -- a foot massager. His scenes with each character crackle and come to life. You sit up straight and realize the play has begun. All due credit belongs to Harper (who was also in the Pulitzer Prize winner *Ruined*), a terrific and appealing actor. As Gladini tackles major rewrites, surely he'll realize the heart of the play is right there.

You can't wait for Oz to meet the whole family at the dinner he's been invited to in Act One. Bizarrely, the show avoids this scene and Oz almost disappears entirely for a while. Nothing makes sense in act two nor are we sure what to think about what actually happens. So the son really is exceptionally good at programming and gets a scholarship? What does it mean that when he "escapes" from perfectly reasonable, well-intentioned parents that he cuts himself off from them entirely? Is it their fault? His fault? Why would Oz be remotely interested in Sue? (A clumsy seduction scene certainly doesn't shed any light.) Given everything we know about him, the idea that he would just abandon a child he's fathered beggars belief.

Hoffman can't make sense of this as a director. The only real step he might have taken was to call a halt until a more sensible draft was in place. Still, certain transitions between scenes are handled poorly and for that Hoffman and the lighting by Japhy Weidemann are to blame. The set by David Meyer is pretty ambitious for the awkward space of Labyrinth and gets the job done more effectively than anything else. The home they live in is convincing; it's the characters inside it that block our sight lines to the story they're trying to tell.

#### **THE THEATER 2013** (on a four star scale)

*The Other Place* \*\* 1/2  
*Picnic* \* 1/2  
*Opus No. 7* \*\* 1/2  
*Deceit* \* 1/2  
*Life And Times Episodes 1-4* \*\*  
*Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (w Scarlett Johansson) \* 1/2  
*The Jammer* \*\*\*  
*Blood Play* \*\* 1/2  
*Manilow On Broadway* \*\* 1/2  
*Women Of Will* \*\* 1/2  
*All In The Timing* \*\*\*  
*Isaac's Eye* \*\*\*  
*Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery* \*\* 1/2  
*The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County* \* 1/2  
*Much Ado About Nothing* \*\*\*  
*Really Really* \*  
*Parsifal at the Met* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Madrid* \* 1/2  
*The Wild Bride at St. Ann's* \*\* 1/2  
*Passion at CSC* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Carousel* at Lincoln Center \*\*\*  
*The Revisionist* \*\*  
*Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella* \*\*\*  
*Rock Of Ages* \* 1/2  
*Ann* \*\* 1/2  
*Old Hats* \*\*\*  
*The Flick* \*\*\*  
*Detroit '67* \*\* 1/2  
*Howling Hilda* reading \* (Mary Testa \*\*\*)  
*Hit The Wall* \*  
*Breakfast At Tiffany's* \* 1/2  
*The Mound Builders* at Signature \*  
*Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Cirque Du Soleil's Totem* \*\*\*  
*The Lying Lesson* \* 1/2  
*Hands On A Hardbody* \*  
*Kinky Boots* \*\*  
*Matilda The Musical* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream* \*\*\*  
*Motown: The Musical* \*\*  
*La Ruta* \*\* 1/2  
*The Big Knife* \*  
*The Nance* \*\*\*  
*The Assembled Parties* \*\* 1/2  
*Jekyll & Hyde* \* 1/2  
*Thoroughly Modern Millie* \*\* 1/2  
*Macbeth* w Alan Cumming \*  
*Orphans* \*\* 1/2  
*The Testament Of Mary* \*\* 1/2  
*The Drawer Boy* \*\*  
*The Trip To Bountiful* \*\*\*  
*I'll Eat You Last* \*\* 1/2  
*Pippin* \*  
*This Side Of Neverland* \*\*\*  
*A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney* \*\*\*  
*Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812* \*\*\*  
*Colin Quinn Unconstitutional* \*\* 1/2

*A Family For All Occasions \**

*Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.*

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