

## FILM REVIEW

## Tolstoy hits the end of the line

Ribaldry and gagged overacting mar what could otherwise have been a moving account of the final days of the Russian author's life

BY A.O. SCOTT  
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## Film Notes

## THE LAST STATION

DIRECTED BY:  
MICHAEL HOFFMAN

STARRING:  
HELEN MIRREN (SOFYA TOLSTOY),  
CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER  
(LEO TOLSTOY), PAUL  
GIAMATTI (VLADIMIR CHERTKOV),  
ANNE-MARIE DUFF (SASHA TOLSTOY),  
KERRY CONDON  
(MASHA) AND JAMES MCAVOY  
(VALENTIN BULGAKOV)

RUNNING TIME:  
112

TAIWAN RELEASE:  
TODAY

Leo Tolstoy wrote enormous novels that reached the very pinnacle of literary art. He was a master of both quality and quantity, which may be why *The Last Station*, a new movie about the end of Tolstoy's life, confuses the two. You will certainly see better acting in a great many motion pictures (including from the cast of this one), but it is unlikely you will see more. To say that the actors — Helen Mirren, James McAvoy, Christopher Plummer and Paul Giamatti, among others — overdo it would be an understatement. I can't handicap their Oscar chances, but isn't there a scenery-eating contest every summer out on Coney Island?

Plummer plays Tolstoy as a kind of volatile Russian Santa Claus. When he laughs, it is a great, lusty laugh. When he shouts, it is a deep, abdominal bellow. And when he capers around his bedroom clucking like a chicken, you can be sure

you are witnessing a world-historical feat of poultry impersonation. Mirren, as Sofya Tolstoy, the great man's wife, matches Plummer howl for howl. She smashes crockery, enters rooms in a state of operatic dishevelment or regal calm and seems determined to restore literal meaning to the word henpecked. Not to be outdone, Giamatti twirls his moustache to denote his character's villainy, and McAvoy does what he usually does, which is mime wet-eyed, stricken, lovable innocence, but this time in a more Russian way than he has before.

McAvoy plays Valentin, a nervous young man hired to be Tolstoy's secretary. In the twilight of his life the writer has ascended from man of letters to spiritual guru, attracting disciples to a vaguely defined movement led by Vladimir Chertkov (Giamatti). This utopian project, which includes a commune of sorts not far from Yasnaya Polyana, Tolstoy's estate, has

alienated Sofya. She complains, not without reason, that Chertkov and his flunkies are trying to marginalize her and manipulate her husband into changing the terms of his will.

Valentin manages to gain the confidence of both Tolstoy's. Leo flatters the young man by inquiring after the progress of his work, while Sofya quizzes him on the state of his love life. This centers on Masha (Kerry Condon), a fresh-faced Tolstoyan who brings tea to Valentin's bedroom at the commune and returns later to bestow other favors, in spite of the supposed Tolstoyan commitment to celibacy.

All well and good, but *The Last Station*, written and directed by Michael Hoffman (*The Emperor's Club*) and based on a novel by Jay Parini, is the kind of movie that gives literature a bad name. Not because it undermines the dignity of a great writer and his work, but because it is so self-consciously

eager to flaunt its own gravity and good taste. The humor is mirthless; the pathos is daubed on like jam on a blini, and the shuffling of books and papers substitutes for real intellectual energy. Hoffman has, in press materials, invoked the spirit of Chekhov, but instead of the stringent, sympathetic intelligence that Chekhov would have brought to this material, there is bombast and grandiosity.

Which is a pity, because a rich and peculiar story lies underneath the histrionics. Tolstoy's fame was an early form of modern celebrity, with proto-paparazzi ranged around the gates of Yasnaya Polyana and the rural train depot that gives the film its title. His marriage could have been a novel in its own right, an epic of loyalty and betrayal. His temperament as grand and paradoxical as any in the annals of literature. All grist for a fascinating movie, for sure. But this isn't it.

## OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

## Gangster Rock (混混天團)

Following on from *Buttoman* (鈕扣人), a local gangster flick that managed to secure an international release of sorts back in 2008, director Joe Chien



(錢人豪) is back with yet another vastly improbable gangland movie about a debt collector, Ah-Hau, played by Singaporean actor Leon Jay Williams (立威廉), who becomes involved with the music industry when he is asked to collect repayments on loans made to musician Ah-Hai — played by Van Fan (范逸臣), reprising his role from *Cape No. 7* (海角七號) — who has been set up to take the fall for debts incurred by his record company. The two men end up hitting it off, and Ah-Hau decides to help his new friend sell records and organize concerts to pay off the debts, only to discover that the music industry is even more corrupt than the life he is used to.

## Korean Film Festival 2010

A great selection of films from South Korea will be offered up by courtesy of film distributor CatchPlay (which also brings us *District 13: Ultimatum* this week). Most of the films are relatively recent, and highlight the stars, both in front and behind the camera, that have made South Korean film and television such runaway successes in Taiwan. The films range across gritty and violent character studies such as Joon Yang Ik's *Breathless* (Ddongpuri), young love/lust in *The Five Senses of Eros* (Ogamdo), dark fantasy in *Hansel and Gretel*, soppy tear-jerkers such as *More Than Blue* (Seulpeumboda deo seulpeun iyagi), which reportedly rates off the charts if you want a good cry, and, as they say, much, much more. Sixteen films in all will be presented. For detailed information on the program, visit [www.catchplay.com/korean](http://www.catchplay.com/korean). Screenings run through May 7 and will be held at the SKCineplex (台北新光影城) located at 36 Xining S Rd, Taipei City (台北市西寧南路36號).



## No More Cry (Nakumonka)

A Japanese film about two brothers separated at birth who find their separate ways in life, one as the potential heir to a successful restaurant business and the other as a comedian. When the brothers discover the existence of one another, a chain of events is triggered that is intended to have audiences laughing through their tears. The script is by Kankuro Kudo, who has a strong reputation as a writer and director, but *No More Cry* seems to lose itself in stodgy melodrama, making its 134-minute running time something of a trial.



## A Pierrot (Juryoku piero)

Released as *A Pierrot*, this bizarre thriller is about two brothers, one a geneticist, the other a cleaner of roadside graffiti, who become involved in an investigation into a series of arson attacks. The clues point back into their own childhood memories. Based on a best-selling novel by Kotaro Isaka, many of whose mystery novels have been adapted for the silver screen. The film has done well at Japanese film festivals, and includes a respectable line up of young acting talent, including Ryo Kase, who had a supporting role in Clint Eastwood's *Letters From Iwo Jima*.



## Mai Mai Miracle (Maimai Shinko to Sen-nen no Maho)

The mainstream release of a Japanese animated film that was featured as part of the Taiwan International Children's Film Festival earlier this month. *Mai Mai Miracle* is based on a book by author Nobuko Takagi about a nine-year-old girl, Shinko, who discovers that the place she lives is connected directly to the distant past. She and a friend make a magical journey back to the Heian Period, more than 1,000 years ago, when the writer Sei Shonagon wrote her famous *Pillow Book*, a text which provides inspiration for some elements within the film.



## The Descent: Part 2

The sequel to what was by a fairly decent take on the horror genre. Part 2 picks up where the original left off, with a rescue mission, including one traumatized survivor, heading back into the dark, clammy caves of the Appalachian mountains to find out what happened to a caving expedition. The fate of the women who made up the expedition was covered in graphic detail in the first film, in which director Neil Marshall also exhausted most of the movie potential of the "chicks with picks" idea. The standard format does not prevent him from producing a couple of real scares, so if that's what you're looking for, *The Descent: Part 2* will probably do the job.



## Toy Story

Marketing has reached a whole new level with this week's release of *Toy Story 1 and 2* in a double bill, priming audiences for the release of *Toy Story 3*, which is scheduled to hit screens on June 19 (the original *Toy Story* came out in 1995). As a trip down memory lane, the double feature, which opens today, might serve as a pleasant enough journey, but the upgrade to digital 3D is probably irrelevant, given that *Toy Story* remains, in its 2D version, one of the milestones of modern animation filmmaking.



## CINEMA

## Cannes, the preview

A press agency boycott is the only sour note as the 13-country lineup for the Cannes Film Festival is announced

BY LIZZY DAVIES  
THE GUARDIAN, PARIS

Mike Leigh, the Salford-born doyen of English cinema at its grittiest, will return to the red carpet of the Croisette next month as the only British director in competition for the Palme d'Or at this year's Cannes film festival.

*Another Year*, a comedy drama starring Imelda Staunton, Jim Broadbent and Lesley Manville, will be making its debut alongside 15 other works whose names were unveiled on Thursday last week by the organizers in Paris.

Speaking amid the gilt mirrors and marble walls of Paris's Grand hotel, festival chief Thierry Fremaux told the world's media that this year's selection process had been rather difficult and lengthy. But he added that, with entries from 13 countries including Chad and Ukraine, the finished lineup reflected a growing desire to broaden the festival's horizons.

"Our selection shows the fact that great filmmaking is alive in every country," said Fremaux. "It's not just a dialogue between Europe and the US but a global dialogue."

Among the films vying for the prestigious Palme d'Or are works by world cinematic heavyweights including Tokyo-born Takeshi Kitano and Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, whose *Copie Conforme* is his first work filmed outside his home country and stars Juliette Binoche.

And, while Cannes 2010 is shaping up promisingly for the host nation, with three French films vying for the Palme d'Or and

another by Nouvelle Vague hero Jean-Luc Godard, *Socialisme*, appearing in the Un Certain Regard category, it looks likely to be another modest year for the US.

Only one US director, Doug Liman, is in the running for the Palme d'Or. His spy thriller *Fair Game* is based on the true story of ex-CIA officer Valerie Plame and stars Naomi Watts and Sean Penn as the outed spook and her diplomat husband. Despite months of speculation, a question mark still hangs over the eventual screening of fellow US filmmaker Terrence Malick's latest creation, which some had predicted would make it into the lineup. Fremaux said yesterday that *The Tree of Life*, starring the Hollywood power duo of Brad Pitt and Sean Penn, "is not ready." But he left open the possibility that it might still be added to the program before the festival opens on May 12.

This year's jury — to be headed by Tim Burton and made up of film figures including Kate Beckinsale and the Puerto Rican actor Benicio Del Toro — will have much to chew through with the 16 Palme d'Or contenders. But it is away from the coveted group that many of the big names will be in the eye of publicity storms. Oliver Stone, whose *Wall Street* sequel, *Money Never Sleeps*, will be getting its premiere out of competition along with Frears' take on a feisty journalist's exploits in rural England.

Allen, who is notoriously averse to showing his films in the official Cannes competition, will also be showing on the sidelines of the

festival — although his London-filmed movie, *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*, is bound to attract intense excitement on the Croisette. "We tried to ask him to be in the competition for once and the answer was 'no,'" said Fremaux.

Gilles Jacob, the festival chairman, added that another invitation — this one largely symbolic — had been extended to the Iranian director Jafar Panahi to be guest of honor at the 2010 festival. Panahi, an outspoken

critic of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's regime, has been in prison since his arrest in Tehran last month. The decision had been taken for Panahi's "professional competencies," Jacob said, but added: "From a human point of view, I believe that having him at the festival would be very good for artistic freedom."

For those critics hungry for a dash of drama ahead of the opening night, the press conference provided an opportunity to delve into an

ongoing battle over the event's media coverage.

Angry at moves to restrict the amount of time they will be permitted to report on the festival, news agencies including Reuters, the Associated Press and Agence France Presse boycotted the press conference. "There is obviously no question of not doing our utmost to ensure this boycott is no longer in place when we're in Cannes," said Fremaux. "We will do everything to find a solution."

## Many stars, but only one legend

BY PETER BRADSHAW  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

This year's Cannes will begin and end in ways to make us meditate on the themes of property and theft. Ridley Scott's new *Robin Hood* film will launch the festival with what we all hope will be a beefy and resounding twang; the closing film will be Oliver Stone's *Wall Street 2*.

Both are out of competition, emphasizing the Cannes habit of showcasing Hollywood movies in this relaxingly non-judgmental way. Glitzy American pictures will bring in the star names and red-carpet glamour, but my first recognition has to go to Stephen Frears' *Tamara Drewe* based on a graphic novel by Posy Simmonds.

Mike Leigh is a great British auteur and former Palme d'Or winner, back with a new ensemble drama, *Another Year*, starring Lesley Manville and Jim Broadbent. Leigh's relationship with Cannes has been checkered. The festival famously

turned down his 2005 film  *Vera Drake* — Leigh took it to Venice where he won the Golden Lion and thumbed his nose at the French.

There is a strong Asian and Russian presence with films from Im Sang-soo, Lee Chang-dong and Nikita Mikhailkov — the latter returns with *Burnt by the Sun 2*, a follow-up to his most popular film.

The French presence looks interestingly low-key. Veteran filmmaker Bertrand Tavernier presents his recent costume drama *The Princess of Montpensier*, and the actor and recent Bond villain Mathieu Amalric makes his directorial debut (in the main competition, no less) with *Tournee*, about American burlesque girls on tour in France.

Abbas Kiarostami is the Iranian director with impregnable status and esteem and respect will be paid to his new film *Certified Copy* starring Juliette Binoche, his first made outside Iran.

Perhaps my favorite director in