

The captain plays the count

Christopher Plummer whom we once knew as the dashing Austrian Captain Georg von Trapp plays aged Russian Count Leo Tolstoy in the new film *The Last Station*. It is based on Jay Parini's 1990 novel of the same name. Script writer/director Michael Hoffman says that he wanted to make a movie about the "tragi-comical" marriage of the famous novelist and Sofiya, 16 years his junior, played by Helen Mirren. He might have aimed higher.

Most who read more than current fiction will claim to have, at least, dipped into Tolstoy's monumental *War and Peace*, arguably the first great modern novel. Many have quoted the opening words of his *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way".

In 1910, aged 82, Tolstoy determined to end his days in the contemplative solitude of a Hindu *sadhu*. Kneeling to kiss the ground at his rural estate, Yasnaya Polyana (Serene Meadow), he left home secretly on a final journey. After contracting pneumonia, he died in the railway station master's house at Astapovo, 200 kilometres south-east of Moscow.

Plummer, Tolstoy on the screen, is scheduled to play Prospero in *The Tempest* at Stratford this year. Other noted actors have chosen that as their final role. The possibility that it could be Mr Plummer's swan song gives the coming season added interest and a theatrically historic aspect.

Tolstoy was himself once a thespian. Although he and Bernard Shaw were contemporary writers, his plays satirising the rich, intellectuals and his own inner struggles have never been produced at Niagara on the-Lake. *The Fruits of Enlightenment* (1889), for one example, is much more than a "tragi-comical" marriage tale.

Although Plummer was born in Toronto, he grew up in Senneville near Montréal.

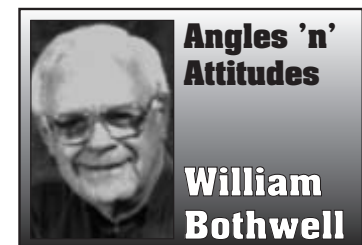
I first encountered him 46 years ago when, home on vacation from Montréal, we took our children to see *The Sound of Music* at the old Eglinton Cinema in Toronto. The now

veteran actor, then in his 30s, says that he has never thought of himself as a film star. His world is the stage. Indeed, he downplays the von Trapp role except to say

that working with Julie Andrews was "like being hit on the head by a Valentine card". Was that, in fact, a compliment?

The man who is generally agreed to be the greatest Shakespearean player born in North America in the 20th Century is the great-grandson of Sir John Abbott, sometime dean of the Law faculty at McGill, a senator and successor to Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald whom he outlived for only two years.

Plummer told a recent interviewer that he enjoys 'disappear-



Angles 'n' Attitudes

William Bothwell

ing' into the roles he plays. He said that playing characters "can bring out in you a personality that you have never known before. To play Tolstoy I used bits of all the parts I have ever played".

Director Michael Hoffman says that had a younger actor been cast as the Russian reformer he would not have been as convincing as Plummer, aged 80. Despite the patriarchal beard Tolstoy remained a romantic and young at heart. A filmed love scene with Sofiya was written to make the point.

Although Christopher Plummer and his long-time third wife have lived in Connecticut for many years he remains a Canadian citizen. He has been since 1968 a Companion of the Order of Canada, this country's highest civilian honour. Were it not for Canada's rejection of overseas titles, he would long ago have been Sir Christopher. On the other hand, such notables as Aldous Huxley, C.S. Lewis and Ralph Vaughan Williams have declined knighthoods.

As to the real Tolstoy, after an aristocratic education by French tutors and later military service in the 1853-6 Crimean War, he lived the life of what he called a prosperous, unreflecting land owner. In late mid-life he rejected bourgeois values in favour of non-violence and mutual love. Organised society's injustice, exploitation and hatreds were represented equally, he said, in Russian autocracy and in Western democracy. The

Russian Orthodox Church accused him of heresy, polite society rejected his views and many thought him to be demented.

His heresy was an effort to redefine radically traditional social standards and beliefs. He thought that the 'freedom' to amass great personal wealth underlies the power struggles and poverty that must be eliminated from the world. He said that while love is the most powerful force in the world, the poor are forced to believe that it is money and think that only violence can improve their lot.

His own income was considerable but Tolstoy adopted a simple life style, dressed and worked like a peasant. Sofiya did not share his will to renounce his worldly possessions. She guarded jealously the inheritance of her children which he seemed too ready to give away.

The Last Station is "a dance between fact and fiction". Although the family diaries and many biographies tell the longer story, both the book and the film focus on Tolstoy's last year. Having decided the escape the tensions of home, he set out at age 82 with his youngest daughter, Aleksandra, in search of a more spiritual life style. "My position has become intolerable. I can no longer endure luxurious conditions. What I now wish to do is to leave a worldly life behind and spend my last days in peace and solitude".

Although there had been mounting arguments and a growing estrangement between Leo and Sofiya, there was a continuing affection the details of which both Parini and Hoffman "freely imagine".

The countess could be from time to time hysterical, affectionate, demanding and shrewish. Moreover, the family was constantly at odds with a community of their father's admirers and disciples who lived not far from Yasnaya Polyana.

The old man's life and search for inner peace ended at Astapovo. Ill, he detained and was taken to the station master's house. The news soon spread. With townsfolk, reporters and photographers crowding outside to know his condition, he died there on 20 November, 1910. Leo Tolstoy rejected the idea of personal immortality but his name and fame live.

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And who, pray tell, is being 'hateful' here?

Martin Luther King and his wife Coretta Scott King understood "hate." They not only lived through it, they overcame it in spectacular fashion. So we should take notice when Coretta said, "hate is too great a burden to bear. It injures the hater more than it injures the hated."

Which brings us to the raging controversy over an anti-abortion ad for Sunday's Super Bowl, featuring college football star Tim Tebow and his mother Pam.

Pam, you may know, became seriously ill during a missionary trip to the Philippines in 1987 and was strongly advised by her doctors to abort her fifth child. She refused. The result? 2007 Heisman Trophy winner Tim Tebow.

Her story - and Tim's life - are captured in the 30-second ad, sponsored by the conservative Christian group Focus on the Family, with the theme of "Celebrate Family, Celebrate Life." The word "abortion" isn't used.

Tebow, a deeply religious man, says, "I know some people won't agree with it, but I think they can at least respect that I stand up for what I believe...."

Apparently not. If ever the "pro-choice" tag was revealed for the non-sequitur that it is - i.e. they only believe in one "choice" not the right to choose - check the published reaction to ad from Kierra Johnson, executive director of Choice USA, who said, "This un-American hate doesn't have a place in this all-American pastime."

"Un-American hate?" Really? To begin with, a comprehensive 2007 poll of Americans by the New York Times (hardly a bastion of conservative values) and CBS (ditto) showed American opinions on abortion have remained fairly constant since they began this poll in 1989, with just 34 percent agreeing that abortion should be available without restrictions.

The largest group, 41 percent, would allow abortions, but under much stricter laws than currently exist, while 23 percent oppose abortion, period. Apparently that makes 64 percent of Americans "un-American" and full of hate, according to Johnson.

In all categories, there was not much difference in the views of males and females. When it came to unfettered abortions, Democrats and Independents were both far more likely to say yes than Republicans. Among those opposed to all abortions, it was the opposite, although we note that even here, men and women were represented equally, putting the lie to the oft-repeated claims by pro-abortion groups that the pro-life position is held chiefly by patriarchal bigots.



National Affairs

Claire Hoy

self-evident, but doesn't seem to be - that makes it difficult to argue that only the mother's rights are at play in this issue.

And who, pray tell, is being "hateful" here? The one who accuses the Tebows of "Un-American hate" for stating their case, or the one who spouts "hate" at the very notion that somebody would dare disagree with her? In a protest letter to CBS, the New York-based Women's Media Center wrote, "By offering one of the most coveted advertising spots on the year to an anti-equality, anti-choice, homophobic organization, CBS is aligning itself with a political stance that will damage its reputation, alienate viewers, and discourage consumers from supporting its shows and advertisers."

While they were at it, it's a wonder the WMC didn't accuse Focus on the Family of being racist, along with all their other hateful charges - none of which, by the way, are sustained by the facts, other than the "anti-choice" tag, which puts the two groups in the same category - one wants to end the "choice" of having abortions, or at least modify it, the other promotes only the "choice" of performing them, no strings attached.

What's more, CBS isn't "offering" the spot. They're selling it - for about \$2.5 million. They'd sell it to the WMC too.

Tebow's critics are free to disagree. But, if they really think promoting respect for the unborn makes him a "hate-monger," well, they'd better look in the mirror.

Had their own mothers held those views, that would be impossible now wouldn't it?

Partners in Governance

Jeffery Simpson, in a Globe and Mail article, noted that the liberal party appears to lack an independent vision for a Canadian government. I see government/public partnership as providing economic and social gain. I can't understand why political leaders fail to listen to the voice of the Canadian people. Polls are constantly emphasizing the need for government to listen to people. This is not an issue between the liberals and conservatives but political vs. people power.

One poll indicates that 63% of Canadians are opposed to government action in proroguing parliament. Readers are reminded that in a parliamentary democracy people vote for representatives to parliament not government. Proroguing of parliament should be a responsibility of elected representatives as in the British House of Commons, not of the prime minister. A simple resolution of parliament would require that the prime minister have the approval of our elected representatives before he/she can recommend that the governor-general take such action. Only our M.P.s should decide when parliament should be prorogued.

An earlier poll at the time of the Copenhagen conference has shown that Canadians are discontented with the failure of our government to take a leading and independent role in the climate change debate. At least eight climate change programs by the last three Canadian prime ministers have failed to make any positive change in combating this crucial global problem. In fact Canada has the worst record of any industrial nation for addressing the issue.

The need is not so much that of government policy but social revolution. Dr. Elinor Ostrom, an American political scientist was awarded a Nobel Prize for her work supporting grassroots action in achieving social goals. The successful political leader

will be one with policies supporting people's organizations towards solving such problems as climate change. This can be done through tax incentives or grants for individuals and institutions to invest in reduced energy consumption and particularly the use of fossil fuels.

One of the strongest arguments of opposition parties is the fact that the present government inherited a 12 billion dollar surplus, turning this into a deficit situation even before the global downturn in the economy. Will our government tackle our current massive deficit by placing greater emphasis on program cutbacks than on job creation? Increasing revenues would appear to be more effective through creation of new employment (hence taxation revenue) which would undoubtedly occur with development of alternative energy production. Policies supporting conservation activity to reduce consumption in home heating and cooling are the least costly direction to take along with grassroots environmental efforts such as increasing forest cover. These are less disruptive to commerce without significant requirement for increased taxation.

Anti-carbon investment measures appeal to Canadians more than carbon taxes. The emphasis must be on tax incentives for, and investment in, alternative energy such as research measures in cellulosic biodiesel production. We are a forested nation with vast wood resources. Utilization of waste wood such as sawdust piles and home heating with firewood are well worth supporting. While this is in the private sector, incentive policies such as promoting energy plantations would certainly encourage the use of such alternative energy sources and help bolster the economy.

Internationally, goals of poverty alleviation, creating local employ-

equal to that felt by the boys who cut and split the poor widow's half-cord of wood, instead of building a great snowman on her doorstep."

The tea meeting in Riverview Church on Tuesday evening last was a grand success both in point of the number of people present and financial results. The ladies furnished an abundance of choice edibles, and the program of speeches, music, etc., which followed, was pleasing and entertaining. Mr. Theo. Hall, the Dundalk editor, made an excellent speech and quietly prompted the chairman to call upon the Economist editor to beat it. Revs. Snowdon and Shaw gave instructive addresses, the whole being interspersed by vocal and instrumental music. The proceeds amounted to \$52.35 and as a huge quantity of provisions was left over, a similar entertainment was announced for last evening.

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100 YEARS AGO
Thursday, February 3, 1910
• At its first meeting of 1910,



From the Global Classroom

Doug Skeates

ment and land reclamation should be a priority aid development policy while at the same time benefiting Canada's energy requirements. Canada imports vast quantities of oil. Support for planting of such species as *Jatorpha curcas*, an oil-nut producing tree helps meet social goals while addressing our need for energy. The tree has considerable potential both for cooking and home lighting as well as a source of renewable transportation biofuel. At home, support for developing biodiesel production from waste wood would help accelerate our independence from imported fuel in the transportation industry. Enhanced policies to encourage local food production will reduce long range transportation, hence reducing emissions from fossil fuel utilization.

Many such measures will help to meet citizens' goals in a relatively economical fashion while enhancing local employment. They will also contribute to cooperative governance with action in the field by grassroots institutions supported by government grants and tax incentives. Working together to develop a more promising future economy.

Your Weekly Chuckle . . .

By KEITH HUNTER

On hearing her son use a four-letter word, Mrs. Flaherty ran to his room and roared, "Jason, I don't ever want to hear that kind of language again!"
"But Mom," he replied defensively, "J. D. Salinger uses it."

Dipping Into the Past

County council asked to make donation to proposed new hospital

Dufferin County Council was approached by a deputation from Lord Dufferin Chapter Daughters of the Empire. Mr. C. R. McKeown, MPP, who acted as spokesman, gave an outline of the work done by the Chapter in raising a fund for the erection of a hospital in Orangeville and appealed to the Council for a grant in aid of the project. The matter was presented to a special committee which will likely report during the present session.

A party of eight young people left Orangeville for Caledon Friday evening to attend a ball, but came to grief four miles from their destination



by the enveloping of horses, rig and human freight in a huge snowdrift into which they plunged. The service of 10 stalwart farmers, with horses and ropes, saw the party and equipment freed from the predicament several hours after the accident. The four young ladies were escorted to a kind-hearted farmer's. All arrived home Saturday morning, heads up.

Shelburne curlers are taking into very serious consideration the question of a new skating and curling rink for the village that would be centrally situated, with a large area for curling and skating and spacious waiting rooms.

75 YEARS AGO
Wednesday, February 7, 1935

Officers for Dufferin Farmers' Mutual Fire Insurance, the head office of which is located in Shelburne, will be the same in 1935 as in 1934: President, William Jelly, Shelburne; vice-president, Josiah Marshall, Orangeville; secretary and manager, J. Austin Richardson, Shelburne; auditors, Samuel Patterson and William Reid, Shelburne.

John Reburn, of Whitfield, will continue as President of the Dufferin Central Agricultural Society for 1935 and have the same officers and directors to assist him, the only change being the addition of Ed Oldfield, of Shelburne, as an honorary director. Postponed by a storm on Jan. 17, the society's annual meeting was held in the council chamber of Shelburne Town Hall last Thursday.

50 YEARS AGO
Wednesday, February 3, 1960

Three Hillsburgh girls, students at Erin District High School, died in

the blazing wreckage of their school bus last Thursday afternoon, after it was struck by a CPR freight train at the level crossing south of Hillsburgh. The train was on its way from Elora to Orangeville. Eleven other students and the bus driver, Calvin Leitch, 28, of Erin, were taken to hospital in Guelph, five being released after treatment.

Dufferin County Council has authorized the issuance of \$250,000 in debentures for the construction of the Dufferin County Home for Senior Citizens, to be located in Shelburne.

25 YEARS AGO
Wednesday, February 6, 1885

Judge Kechim Wang has disqualified himself from the case of the 13-year-old boy accused of murdering Daniel and Monique Babineau on November 4, 1984.

A strike by Dufferin's secondary school teachers has been averted.
Dufferin-Simcoe MPP George McCague has been named Ontario's Minister of Transportation.