

the words of co-editor Mandelker, "the collective wisdom of our field."

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***Anna in the Tropics. A play in two acts, by Nilo Cruz.***

In his Pulitzer prize-winning drama, *Anna in the Tropics*, American playwright, Nilo Cruz, heats up the debates of *Anna Karenina* by relocating the novel to the subtropical zone of Tampa Bay, the site of Cubo-American cultural fusion. The play is set in a cigar factory outside Tampa, Florida, in 1929, where the lector hired by the cigar-workers selects Tolstoy's novel to read aloud. As we learn in the course of the play, a tradition of the cigar factory is that a lector is hired at the workers' expense to read aloud to the cigar rollers:

I don't ever remember seeing a tobacco factory without a lector. As a child I remember sitting in the back and listening to the stories. That has always been our pride. Some of us cigar workers might not be able to read or write, but we can recite lines from *Don Quixote* or *Jane Eyre*.

The action of the play is punctuated with readings from the novel, in an atmosphere redolent with tobacco leaves and smoke, evoking the cigarette factory setting of the opera, *Carmen*. As the drama unfolds, key passages from *Anna Karenina* are read aloud, analyzed, quoted, and discussed by the men and women in the cigar factory, who use their interpretations as the means for construing their own relationships and their understanding of gender issues.

In the recent production (now headed for Broadway) which opened the new Berlind Theater at Princeton's McCarter Theater, Jimmy Smits performed the role of the lector in impeccable pressed white linen suits with an understated air of seductiveness. However, the brilliant performances turned in by the supporting cast were undermined

by the mispronunciation of the name, Anna Karenina. Although the emphasis on the penultimate syllable suggests a Latino reinvention of the heroine, the end result is to undermine the play's assertion of the workers' cultural understanding and insight. A more effective, visual creole is the result of the unveiling of the image on the cigar label for the "Anna Karenina" cigar: the heroine poses in black furs against a backdrop of palm trees, sun and beaches. For the student of Russian literature, that particular juxtaposition evokes Chekhov's Yalta setting for the most famous of his Anna stories, "Lady with a Dog." Further "the reframing of *Anna Karenina* adds one more image to the gallery of paintings inside the novel, where Anna is repeatedly framed and viewed. For the general audience, these details are probably as evanescent as the tobacco smoke which suffuses the stage in each act.

The play opens with three women, a mother and her two daughters, one married, one single, who anticipate the arrival of their new lector. The previous lector had departed with the wife of the factory manager, Chester, who is now bitterly opposed to the idea of a lector, of reading, and of love; his rejection of the lector tradition is underscored by his vision for a highly mechanized cigar factory. The first stage of his plan for modernization is to wrest control of the factory from the owner by gambling on cock-fights.

The reading and interpretation of the novel exposes the frayed relationships in the factory owner's family. The men of the factory, in a surfeit of machismo, assert that they hear a different novel than the women do, and in fact, most of the passages quoted refer to Karenin's suffering as a result of his wife's infidelity and his reflections about challenging her lover to a duel. The mechanism that tends to the destruction of the factory and the lector tradition is fuelled by the manager's personal tragedy, the loss of his wife who had eloped with the previous lector. His suffering reprises Karenin's unarticulated grief and humiliation. How to respond to the infidelity of a wife is debated noisily by the husbands in the play with the consensus being to shoot to kill, a restyling in machismo of Dumas fils's challenge "Tue-le! Tue-la."

If the novel poses this conundrum for the men in the drama—"What would be the sense of killing a man in order to define one's own relations with a woman..."—the argument among the women in the factory circles around the question of whether Anna is ecstatically happy or in agony.

A Freudian critic would have a field day with the persistent brandishing of cigars by the characters on the stage, while the constant, intentional perfuming of the stage with cigar smoke from the wings is reminiscent of the actions of a censor in a cathedral. And finally, the creation of the label for a new ten cent cigar named the "Anna Karenina," evokes the lines of e. e. cummings: "a woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke." In the words of one of the play's characters,

Men marry their cigars, my dear, and the white smoke becomes the veil of their brides. My mother used to say, "When a man marries, he marries two women, his bride and his cigar."

Similarly, the leaves of tobacco are kissed by the lector as he comments on the tradition of reading in the cigar factory. And in another scene, one of the rollers is accused of licking the leaves of tobacco as if they were a mustache on a young man's face. Although the reading of the novel, *Anna Karenina*, acts as a catalyst in the lives of the play's characters, in fact, the play itself has more in common with Chekhov's tragic comedies than with Tolstoy's novel. The younger sister's frequently stated desire, "I want to go to Russia!" recalls the three sisters' yearning for Moscow, while the failures in communication and the love affair between the married sister and the lector reprise similar family configurations in *Uncle Vanya*; the family's loss of the cigar factory to an interloper "from up North" who intends to rebuild it for profit and modernization evokes *The Cherry Orchard*.

her hair and take a lover and in doing so, win back her husband's love. Cruz uses the quotations from the novel to articulate the distance and lack of communication between men and women. In the adultery scene, the lector opens *Anna Karenina* at random and determines to place Conchita's hair inside the leaves of the novel; he even kisses her hair as he had earlier kissed the tobacco leaves. Yet the quotation, referring to Anna's self-deception, as is often the case throughout the play, strains the context of its derivation.

At first, the novel seems to drive a violent wedge between the husbands and wives who are listening to it, as one husband rages, "This book will be the end of us!" But by the play's conclusion, the words of the book become the only means by which husbands and wives can communicate with each other, yet, again, the quotation that closes the final act—Karenin's musings over his letter to Anna, which in the novel reflect his unemotional, bureaucratic ideas about their situation—is transformed by the reading given them by Conchita's husband into a husband's yearning desire to speak to his wife. Similarly, the love affair between Conchita is witnessed by the husband, who then begs his wife to teach him what she has learned in the course of this affair, as if the lector—possessing the book—has conveyed ordinary knowledge to his mistress in the course of the adultery.

By the last act, there is no dead, female, suicide—instead, it is the lector who is shot. The play makes an almost amusing use of Chekhov's dramatic principal that if a gun appears on stage, it must go off in the following act. In *Anna in the Tropics*, we first hear gunshots off stage (fired in celebration of the new cigar) while the gun itself appears only later. In a similar reverse causality, the quotations from the novel appear in backwards chronology as well.

