

British Theatre Guide

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The Kreutzer Sonata

Leo Tolstoy adapted by Nancy Harris

The Theatre Chipping Norton

Arcola Theatre

6–23 July 2016

When it was first published in 1889, Tolstoy's novella fell foul of the Russian censorship and, when serialised in a newspaper, the US Post Office banned its distribution. Its discussion of marriage and sex was too uninhibited.

It is still pretty strong stuff when delivered with the energy of this production in which John Terry directs Greg Hicks as the Russian civil servant who, in a fit of jealousy, has committed a murder.

In the novella—written when Tolstoy was sixty, had fathered 13 legitimate children and was disillusioned with the idea of marriage—its leading character is travelling by train when he hears people arguing over marriage and love, of fidelity and the fading of physical attraction. He joins the conversation but, when one of the others mentions the notorious case of a husband who killed his wife, he reveals himself as being that same Pozdnyshev. Left with just one fellow passenger, the book's narrator, he tells him his story.

Here, the audience are the passenger to whom he unburdens but, though the sound of the train comes and goes in the background, the setting is not naturalistic, just two black benches, while above angled metal beams focus down on the actor and behind him on a raised platform a pianist and violinist play snatches of music.

Absent-mindedly playing with a yo-yo he pulls out of his pocket, he launches into his history, his confession. He tells how, as a sixteen-year-old boy, school friends took him to a prostitute to lose his virginity, sex as a commercial transaction. Thereafter, despite high ideals, he finds himself sex-driven by a need that is matched by revulsion.

At thirty, following a romantic moonlit boat trip with a girl, he proposes and marries. She plays the piano but, after marriage, ignores it until, after having five children and deciding against more, she takes it up again and begins playing duets with his friend Troukhatchevsky, a talented violinist, including Beethoven's passionate *Kreutzer Sonata*. Distrust and jealousy fester.

The musicians (Alice Pinto and Phillip Granell), in the shadows behind Greg Hicks as Pozdnyshev, don't actually play the sonata but music drawn from it arranged by composer Harry Sever. You could see them as being the wife and her presumed lover, ever present, but from where I was sitting they were unnoticeable except when lit for a few moments when playing the music.

Hicks's dynamic performance commands all the attention; they added to the atmosphere and provide a chance to draw breath, a brief respite from his increasingly manic exposition. They never seem to become part of the action: seen front-on, they would be more noticeable, perhaps an ominous presence (perhaps a distraction, though it would surely take more to upstage this Pozdnyshev).

This is a staggering performance from Hicks, harsh-voiced and demanding, fraught with tension, its timing and modulations precisely tailored, its diction crystal clear yet, though so carefully created, given a compelling reality by naturalistic details, occasional flashes of wry humour and the sheer presence of the actor.

Acquitted of murder (on account of his wife's adultery), Hick's Pozdnyshev does not seem guilt-ridden so much as still seething with jealousy.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)