

## Brilliant Staging Bolsters Emotionally Hollow ‘Anna Karenina’

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on November 16, 2012 - 9:22am

- [Aaron Taylor-Johnson](#) [2]
- [Anna Karenina](#) [3]
- [Focus Features](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [Joe Wright](#) [6]
- [Jude Law](#) [7]
- [Keira Knightly](#) [8]
- [Leo Tolstoy](#) [9]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [10]
- [Movie Review](#) [11]



Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Though cinema is first and foremost a visual medium, too many modern directors have become prone to using it as a stage for long-winded exposition. No matter how polished the lensing is in a film like David Fincher’s “Girl With the Dragon Tattoo” remake, the picture basically amounts to a series of dense dialogue passages interrupted by violence.

Few filmmakers exploit the visual possibilities of cinematic storytelling with more verve and invention than Joe Wright. Though his critics have accused him of favoring style over substance, he has consistently proven adept at allowing his images to speak volumes. Consider his stunning tracking shot along the Dunkirk beach in “Atonement,” which conveys the hell of war with more poetry and immediacy than any monologue. Or the pulse-pounding sequence in “Hanna” that portrays a man’s mounting paranoia as a group of thugs gradually materialize before cornering him in the subway.

“Anna Karenina” is unquestionably Wright’s most ambitious effort to date, and it exemplifies his strengths and his shortcomings in equal measure. On one level, the film is a brilliantly surrealistic reinterpretation of the Tolstoy classic that externalizes many of the novel’s headiest complexities. Yet on another level, the film suffers from heightening its melodrama to such an extent that there’s precious little left to reveal beneath its polished surface. It’s an experience akin to sampling the holiday window displays at Macy’s. Each room exudes a warm, transfixing glow, but the hollow figurines fail to hold one’s interest for more than a few seconds. The characters in “Anna Karenina” prove to be equally tiresome, as they go through the motions of a familiar melodramatic plot like colorful cogs in an archaic clock. It’s the first Wright film that left me unmoved, though its first forty minutes are nearly worth the price of admission alone, as cinematographer Seamus McGarvey (“We Need to Talk About Kevin”) conjures some of the year’s most breathtaking imagery. Yet despite the efforts of a (mostly) first-rate cast, the picture runs out of steam in its last two thirds as it chugs toward its inevitable conclusion. In her third collaboration with Wright, Keira Knightly appears effortlessly comfortable in her period attire, but her performance is constrained rather than enhanced by the film’s intricate choreography (arranged by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui). In a way, Wright’s metaphor for the suffocating protocol of Russian society works all too well, since it ends up suffocating the drama itself.



Keira Knightly stars in Joe Wright's Anna Karenina, a Focus Features release.

*Photo credit: Laurie Sparham*

As adapted by “Shakespeare in Love” scribe Tom Stoppard, most of the scenes take place on an actual stage that blatantly illustrates how each character goes about playing their assigned role, which is harshly scrutinized by fellow peers with all the intensity of a spotlight. Wright doesn't hesitate in taking this conceit to surrealistic lengths by staging everything from an ice rink to a horse race in the claustrophobic confines of this artificial wonderland. So when socialite Anna (Knightly) cheats on her husband, the respected government official known as Karenin (Jude Law), by falling head over heels for a young cavalry officer, Vronsky (Aaron Taylor-Johnson), she suddenly sticks out like a scarlet-tinged outsider, as all eyes gaze judgmentally at her.

The most spectacular setpiece takes place in a ballroom when Anna and Vronsky first meet. In a staggering single take, the couple dances through a sea of frozen figures who begin to move once they've entered the would-be lovers' orbit. The sequence is a triumph of expert craftsmanship, but it's a hollow victory since Knightly and Taylor-Johnson have absolutely no chemistry. Most of the blame falls on Taylor-Johnson, who is utterly miscast in the role. His line delivery is so flat that it's impossible to decipher why Anna is so taken with him. With his natural magnetism deftly obscured by makeup, the nearly unrecognizable Law all but steals the show as the hopelessly stuffy, heartbroken husband who can't understand why he's been the victim of such an extravagant betrayal. It's not a showy performance, but it certainly shouldn't be overlooked.





Jude Law and Keira Knightly star in Joe Wright's Anna Karenina, a Focus Features release.

Photo credit: Laurie Sparham

The subplot that consistently derails the narrative involves Levin (Domhnall Gleeson), a country landowner who falls for a young women, Kitty (Alicia Vikander), and ends up finding his beliefs about life challenged. Tolstoy found provocative ways to parallel Levin and Anna's opposing arcs, but none of them are apparent in Stoppard's muddled script. The characters are of such little interest that when Levin attempts to propose to Kitty by spelling out his words with lettered blocks, the scene seems to last an eternity. In order to depict how Levin is a true man of the land unbound by societal artifice, Wright allows Levin's scenes to unfold in exterior locations, thus diluting the impact of his overall vision by returning to a more standard storytelling approach.

Some moviegoers may intend on seeing "Anna Karenina" simply to bask in the sumptuous eye candy, and for them, that may be enough. But for those seeking an emotionally involving experience on par with Wright's previous work, they will leave feeling very empty indeed. With the characters reduced to metaphorical ciphers, all that's let to admire are individual images, from the blaring train caked with ice to the torn shreds of a note that morph into a snowstorm. The picture is a surefire contender for various technical categories, but if it lands a Best Picture nod, it will solely be the result of an aggressive Oscar campaign. In a season stuffed with riveting gems, a picture that fails to stir the soul doesn't have a prayer of resonating past December.

*'Anna Karenina' stars Keira Knightly, Jude Law, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Domhnall Gleeson, Alicia Vikander, Olivia Williams, Matthew Macfadyen, Kelly Macdonald and Emily Watson. It was written by Tom Stoppard and directed by Joe Wright. It was released November 16th at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema. It is rated R.*



[12]

By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [13]  
Staff Writer  
[HollywoodChicago.com](http://HollywoodChicago.com)  
[matt@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com) [12]

**Source URL (retrieved on Apr 16 2024 - 2:24am):**

<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/20601/brilliant-staging-bolsters-emotionally-hollow-anna-karenina>

#### Links:

- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/mattmovieman>
- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/aaron-taylor-johnson>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/anna-karenina>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/focus-features>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/joe-wright>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/jude-law>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/keira-knightly>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/leo-tolstoy>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/matt-fagerholm>



[11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html>  
[12] <mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com>  
[13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#MATT>