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Series Synopsis

Widely regarded as one of the greatest novels ever written, War And Peace is a timeless story of three young people set against the epic backdrop of Russia’s wars with Napoleon. At the centre of it all stands Pierre Bezukhov (Paul Dano), a hot-headed newcomer in Russian society, brimming with ideas but hopelessly lost as he seeks meaning in his life. His sincere good nature is a comfort to his friend Andrei Bolkonsky (James Norton): a cynical prince who is sick of his stifling marriage and longs for glory on the field of battle. Both their fates are bound to the beautiful, captivating and kind-hearted Natasha Rostova (Lily James) – only a teenager when the series begins, but desperate to grow up and experience the world. Over eight years of peace and war that will change Russia and its people forever, we meet a vast cast of unforgettable characters, from peasants and soldiers to society hostesses and even Napoleon himself. But again and again, through marriages and affairs, battlefields and ballrooms, births and deaths, we will keep returning to Pierre, Andrei and Natasha as they confront life’s great questions of love and destiny.
How did you feel when you were asked to play Pierre?
War & Peace, the title in itself is quite seductive I think. But it was mainly the character of Pierre. He’s just a beautiful, beautiful person and spirit and he’s really special. I felt I had a lot to learn from him.

Initially I was daunted because of what the character requires – he goes on a big journey. He has a lot of high highs and a lot of low lows. He goes through a lot and has to work a lot out. That was daunting to begin with. But once I started, I loved it!

Plus we’ve always had the box set of Andrew Davies’ Pride and Prejudice because my girlfriend loves it!

Was it tough to get a handle on Pierre’s progress through such an epic story?
Yes. It was very hard to keep track because he has a major journey. He is trying to do something good with his life, but he keeps trying and failing to find a purpose. He’s attempting to find out who he is and why he’s here. We all do the same. We all want to have a purpose in life and to find love. And sometimes the things that we think will make us happy don’t. That’s why people relate to Pierre.

What are Pierre’s other qualities?
He’s very intelligent. He has a lot of flaws, but he also has a heart. Even though he goes to war, he’s not a soldier and he doesn’t know how to fire a gun or ride a horse, so luckily I didn’t have to be perfect doing those things!

Tell us about Pierre’s relationship with Andrei
The first impression we get of Pierre is that he’s not the same as the other people around him, but then Andrei Bolkonsky shows up. Andrei is not only his best friend but one of the people who sees what an interesting, intelligent and kind person Pierre is. And Pierre sees in Andrei someone he can
look up to and really talk to. Something that’s beautiful about the relationship too is that their friendship is deep enough that a couple of years can go by but they still love each other and are so happy to see each other.

Tell us about Pierre’s relationship with Helene
After Pierre comes into his inheritance he can pretty much have his pick of the lot of ladies, so he gets to marry the most beautiful woman in St Petersburg – Helene Kuragin. She is minxy and a little bit cunning and smart but it’s all lust and hope and dreams. Unfortunately he begins to learn more about her and struggles with the fact that maybe it isn’t true love.

Do you feel that playing Pierre is a departure for you after some darker roles in the past?
It’s certainly an interesting gear change. There’s a lot of love in this, and Pierre is so kind and whole-hearted. As an actor, you’re always trying to figure out why a character feels the way he does – and that’s something I’ve loved about this part.

How have you found it being the only American in an otherwise all-British cast?
It was super-easy. At first I was a little worried about doing an accent, but now I don’t ever think about it. I’ve made a lot of really good friends – we were all out in Lithuania together for quite a while. The only hard bit was that the Brits only have a two-hour flight home – mine was much longer!

I’ve been so impressed with everybody, truly. I’ve had more scenes with certain people so I’ve gotten to know them better as actors and people. In some ways there’s a summer camp element and we’re bunking together and discovering places. This is the longest project I’ve ever done and we were filming far away from home but it’s been such a lovely group of people to have this experience with.

Had you read the novel before?
No, but I was very excited to read it when I got the job as Anna Karenina is one of my favourite books and I’d always meant to get around to reading War & Peace. I wasn’t disappointed – it’s a wonderful novel. A few parts are hard, but the trick is that you have to just keep reading. You’re slogging your way through it, and then all of a sudden, something magical happens – as it does in life. The characters are so rich, and it’s ultimately a very life-affirming journey. Tolstoy has a lot to say about life – both good and bad are in there. But in the end, light prevails. It’s a beautiful novel.

Why does War & Peace have such universal resonance?
Because of the sheer humanity in it. It’s not just about history –it’s about people. Somehow Tolstoy manages to capture an interior world that is timeless. He has a window into how we feel and think. The book is as relevant now as it ever was. That’s why the human element is the most important part of the book – that’s the thing we can always relate to. The characters may be wearing different clothes, but people are people. We’re still feeling the same things. That’s why any great art endures.

It’s a very searching piece. The search is even stronger than the story in War & Peace – and that’s why its appeal has sustained for so long. Rather than telling us answers, Tolstoy asks some big questions, such as “Why are we here? How do we live? How do we deal with love and war?” People are still trying to figure out the answers to those questions.
What was it like wearing the costumes?
The clothes are beautiful; the opulence of them is crazy. That’s one of the things that is absolutely essential to trying to figure out how to be the character. When I put on a suit I feel different than when I wear my sweatpants. My favourite costume was the huge robe that I got to wear when Pierre was in the hallways of his huge palace.
Tell us about Natasha
I agree with Andrew Davies that Natasha is the most lovable romantic character in literature. As she goes on an enormous journey from child to woman, you can see all her flaws. She’s very unabashed but in spite of that, you still really like her because she has a huge heart and a beautiful soul. She lives in the moment and she’s completely uninhibited, but of course that leads to disaster. She’s such a vast character to portray—I love Natasha so much and it’s such a joy trying to bring her to life. I’m quite protective over her too! As an actor and as a woman it’s a part that’s going to stay with me. These big parts, these big heroines, they change you as an actor and as a person.

It was surprising that with War & Peace, it sounds so epic, but I really found myself relating to each of the characters.

What is her relationship with her family like?
Natasha loves her family and she is incredibly close to her brother and to Sonya. The only sadness is that when she gets so lost and wrapped up in her own world and her own trauma she loses her family for a while.

Natasha’s parents are amazing—the relationship with her mum is so beautiful, it’s an intimate mother/daughter relationship. Natasha’s relationship with her father again it’s a really fun one. He’s an extravagant father which she relishes, he’s over indulgent and completely wonderful.

How did you and Paul Dano play the scenes between Natasha and Pierre?
Paul is great to work with, but it’s still a difficult relationship to portray. How do we tap into the undeniable connection they have without them knowing it? When Pierre walks into a room, Natasha is instantly drawn to him.

What are Natasha’s costumes like?
They’re fantastic. I wouldn’t have been able to play Natasha without these wonderful costumes. How you’re dressed really impacts on how you feel. I’ve loved wearing her flowing dresses – funnily enough, you actually feel more freedom in those than you do in jeans. What item would I take home with me if I could? I wore a tiara for the Tsar’s Ball scene that was just amazing!

**Tell us about the locations you filmed in?**
The locations we’ve been to have been mind-blowing. When we were in Russia we filmed at Catherine’s Palace, outside the Winter Palace and in these huge churches. James and I also filmed a lot of beautiful romantic scenes in the snow. I’ve never seen locations like it that were actually real. When we filmed the ball in Catherine’s Palace, I walked in and was stunned and silenced.

**What were the riding sequences like?**
Riding side-saddle was difficult. It’s very painful – much worse than the way men ride. You have to trap your legs on the saddle – I’m very glad women don’t have to do that anymore!

**Why is Tolstoy such a great writer?**
Because he always finds the core of a character. He hones in on what’s important and universal, which is why War & Peace is such a classic. People always say this, but it feels very relevant. That’s why great books are great books. This novel has stood the test of time because the themes Tolstoy discusses are eternal. The things these characters are talking about – love and death – are never going to change.

**Have you read the novel?**
You have to read the novel! It’s so addictive! The characters are so rich and I adore Tolstoy’s tone and the humour with which he describes people. It made me laugh, and it made me cry.

I was reading it while we were filming Downton Abbey. I’d be reading between takes at the dining table. The director would call “Action!” and – bang! – the book would be back under the table. Everyone was laughing about that!

This is why Andrew is such an amazing writer and adapter because he manages to keep the essence of the story and the characters. It’s a huge book he’s condensed down into these scripts but he’s kept the vitality and it feels accessible. I think the audience will be really drawn in.
How would you describe Andrei?
The people I play are always searching for something. They are never passive, they are always very active and frustrated with their lot. Andrei is an extreme version of that. He is this conflicted young soul. He is hankering after something but he doesn’t know what it is. He tries lots of different things but none of them work. He tries running off to war and searching for glory, he tries a calm and simple lifestyle on his estate farming, and he tries St Petersburg society.

It’s a wonderful privilege to engage with this incredible character who is on his journey and compare your life with his. It teaches you a lot about yourself and your own past and what you are looking for. I am very, very lucky to be playing him.

Tell us about this adaptation of War & Peace
It’s about three families. The parents and their relationships with their children, and the children and their relationships with their lovers and their brothers and their sisters. They are totally recognisable, sympathetic and people that everyone can relate to. Most of them are Russian aristocrats of a very specific period, of a very specific class but they’re all shagging and fighting and flirting. It’s a big old soap opera which just happens to be set in the 1800s.

Why is the story seen as one of the all-time classics when the book is so hard to read?
I think ultimately what really makes it so special is that it’s a soap opera. It’s a perfect portrayal of humanity. It portrays a very specific class in the aristocracy, but it’s really about people falling in and out of love - revenge and jealously and loss and love. It is just about people.

Tell us about Andrei’s relationship with his family?
Andrei has a very close relationship with his family, particularly his sister, Marya. Because Old Prince Bolkonsky is such a difficult man to live with, and Marya and Andrei lacked a mother, they found a lot of solace in one another and they formed a very close relationship.
The relationship between Andrei and his dad is a wonderful one. Most of their scenes are just two men totally unable to show any emotion but the night before Andrei goes off to war they have this shouting match, but then as Andrei leaves he gently rest his hand on his dad’s arm and so much is said in that one little gesture, and it’s so moving.

Tell us about Andrei’s relationship with Natasha
Andrei, like everyone is very flawed and is ignorant of some things and very educated about others. One thing I don’t think he gets right is love.

It’s wonderful to see him go from the “Russian Darcy” as Andrew describes him in that first scene and then slowly softening into almost a love sick puppy when he’s with Natasha.

Tom Harper’s been telling me that I’m not allowed to smile. He keeps saying stop smiling because I have quite a smiley disposition! Andrei, particularly at the beginning, is so disillusioned with everything and everyone— a bit like his dad – that he’s cantankerous. Then when he’s with Natasha these smiles start to bubble through and Andrei’s humanity starts to come out. It is a wonderful story and it’s very touching and moving to see him melt and to see the effect she has on him but it’s also incredibly tragic.

Tell us about Andrei’s relationship with Pierre
It’s strange because although Pierre and Andrei have this incredibly close bond, we don’t actually have that many scenes together but when we do have scenes together they are really important big moments. They kind of punctuate both characters journeys throughout the story, they dip in and out of one another’s lives. When they find one another again it’s a big moment and they put the world to right. It’s a wonderful relationship.

What has been the hardest challenge of filming this?
Keeping a sense of the arc. We didn’t shoot in any chronology at all and I’ve never done a job like that. Also, Andrei changes so radically - he goes from being horribly cynical and blood-thirsty and glory-seeking to this kind of depression. Then he falls in love and goes to a high, and then he crashes again. So I had a book where I’ve tried to map out each year and each notion. But it was quite tricky!

Have you been taken aback by the scale of this production?
Absolutely. For me the real pinch-me moment was in Catherine’s Palace in St Petersburg when Natasha and Andrei waltz and they fall in love in the middle of this dance. We had this wonderful music being played by a live orchestra and we had about 200 Russian waltzing extras. We were in this huge hall of what is probably the biggest palace in the world - you know Russians don’t do anything by halves! It must have been 300 metres long with blazing candles, and Lily (James) and I stood in the middle with a camera on a crane. With the circles of dancers waltzing around and the live orchestra playing, it was heart-stopping, simply amazing.

Had you read the novel before doing this job?
No. Weirdly enough, when I did Happy Valley, I did carry War & Peace at one point, even though I hadn’t got this job! My character went into a charity shop to disguise himself and picked up this red book, and it’s War & Peace. So the only bit I’d read before was when I was sitting at that bus stop waiting for the cameras to turn around. I got through about ten pages. But now that I have read it all,
it’s brilliant - I love it. This job has actually been a great reason to read it and now I’m one of those smug people who can say they’ve read it!
Had you read War & Peace before you took on the role?
I’ve had the book in my iBooks for a long time, I decided one day to download it, but I had never read it before starting to work on this. Because I’d heard daunting things said about the novel I approached it with a certain amount of reverence and fear and actually have been pleasantly surprised that it’s incredibly readable and interesting. It’s also fascinating about real history and I feel like I’ve learnt quite a lot from it that I didn’t know.

Tom (Harper) is encouraging people to study the original and to use it to further delve in to characteristics of their character.

Tell us about this adaptation...
One of the things that Andrew is particularly good at is keeping the bulk of text and maintaining many of the characters. Andrew’s always reverential, he has a great respect for the pieces he takes on and you can absorb that from the text.

Even though the story is set in the 1800s, there’s still war and love, romance and betrayal running through it. It’s the same as with Shakespeare and other great novels in history, they stand up because they are about relatable subjects. War & Peace is chock full of relatable subjects. There’s also an extraordinary cast of young, very attractive and talented actors.

Tell us about Anna Pavlovna...
Anna Pavlovna is a socialite and holds salons during the course of the tale of War & Peace. A good deal of the action takes place at these salons, particularly matchmaking and politics with a small p. I like her brazenness and cheekiness, throwing balls, matchmaking and always with something to say.
**What attracted you to the role?**
The chance to work on a piece like War & Peace is extraordinary in itself. Having it made by the BBC and The Weinstein Company, Andrew Davies doing the adaptation and the cast that came together, plus the fact that my role happened to fit exactly in my schedule, was a very big part of it. Also being able to pop to St Petersburg for a few days of history and fun with fellow actors, and to get to work with Tom Harper, all of that really. It was fun.
Tell us about this adaptation...
Andrew’s made it very accessible. He’s obviously selected key elements and moments but essentially it is all there, everything you want and expect from the novel is there, presented in six episodes of television.

The whole period is rich and fascinating and the culture is really engaging. This story tells us so much about it. It’s gripping and there are numerous love stories going on, there’s life and death and there’s war. These themes are as relevant now as they were then.

Tell us about Prince Bolkonsky...
Prince Bolkonsky is the father of Andrei and Marya. He’s extremely wealthy and has a huge palace at Bald Hills, which is fairly provincial. He is something of an 18th century character and still wears a tie-wig. So he’s old school and very protective of his two children.

He gets very cross with Marya on many occasions and is very rude to her and unpleasant but deep down it comes from a love for her and his need to have her around. He wants her to be happy but it comes out in a very unpleasant way from time to time.

He wants his son Andrei to be a good reflection of him and become somebody he can be immensely proud of, particularly in the military field which is where he comes from.

With regards to Mademoiselle Bourienne he’s something of a dirty old flirt really.

What attracted you to the role?
I like Prince Bolkonsky enormously; I think he’s a very real and very recognisable character. He’s complicated because he’s caring but he can also be fairly unpleasant. He’s of the thinking that “you have to be cruel to be kind”. He’s always working, studying and keeping himself busy but at the
same time all his vulnerabilities come out, his anger and his frustration and his demands of both of his children. He’s a rich and three dimensional character and it’s a great one to be able to play.

What was it like filming in such amazing locations and wearing such amazing costumes?
It’s the joy of filming really. You get to work in fantastic locations like the palaces we got to film in for this. That does an awful lot of your character building for you, as does the beautiful costumes you get to wear. I think there were about twenty tailors in the costume department, who made the fantastic clothes and brought the period to life in a wonderful way. It’s great for actors to have that detail.

Did you have a favourite moment from filming?
It was great to be able to film Andrei and his father Prince Bolkonsky – myself – walking through the snow. The snow was real and stretched as far as the eye could see. It felt absolutely Russian and perfect in its delight. We were slipping and struggling through the snow and I loved that we could really get in to it.

One of Prince Bolkonsky’s hobbies is working on the lathe. I did my research and spent a few hours on a lathe, my brother has one and taught me, and it’s very addictive! You can transform a lump of wood in to something beautiful very quickly. The art department created a period lathe for me to work on and that sort of detail just makes it richer and better and more wonderful really.
ADRIAN EDMONDSON - COUNT ROSTOV

How would you characterise Count Rostov?
He’s described in the book as a man who loves life and knows how to live it. He’s always very positive. I based him on my father-in-law, a very positive man. That’s a very empowering attitude and it’s really nice to play.

The Count tries to ignore trouble and is a very generous human being. Whenever he’s presented with a problem, he just mortgages another part of his property, so he ruins the family single-handedly through his generosity but I really like his spirit. He’s also very generous with his heart and always making sure other people are having a good time.

Even though the Rostovs are aristocrats, will we be able to identify with them?
Yes. War & Peace is a very universal story about a family. The behaviour of the Rostovs is no weirder than the behaviour of a lot of families. They are not a peculiarly Russian 19th Century family; they are simply a very human family.

Were you daunted by the sheer scale of this production?
No, and it’s a testament to the director, Tom Harper, that it doesn’t feel intimidating. He’s very calm and knows exactly what he’s doing. He ensures that we make it all about the story. If the story is true and modern, everything else will follow. You don’t think about the palaces and the armies. You think about the story.

Tell us about the Count’s costumes?
He wears a smoking cap, and he’s by the far the most eccentric dresser. But it was a very flattering age of clothing for the older, slightly portly man! You look smart and it’s very comfortable. Pity we don’t dress like that now!

Why has War & Peace proved so enduring?
It’s just a fantastic book. I’ve never read anyone who writes so eloquently about people falling in and out of love. It’s a very modern story that just happens to be set in a 19th Russian aristocratic milieu. Andrew Davies has been faithful to the text in his script, but he has written it in a slightly more English vernacular.
After many highly successful years in comedy, you seem to be moving more into straight acting these days. What prompted that?
A year or two ago, I made a decision to do more acting, and I’m loving it. I really enjoy the discipline of it. It’s great fun trying to convince people that you’re someone else for a while.
GRETA SCACCHI – COUNTESS ROSTOVA

Have you always had a connection with War & Peace?
Yes. It’s one of those lovely moments where things have come full circle. I remember very vividly when I was 13 watching something that really impressed me – it was the BBC’s 1972 version of War & Peace. I’d never heard of the actor playing Pierre, but he was thrilling to watch. At first, I thought he’d forgotten his lines because his speech was broken up. But then I realised that what he was doing was totally fresh. It was Anthony Hopkins, and he was magnificent. That really inspired me and made me want to be an actor. I feel very chuffed to be part of the next round of War & Peace.

Tell us about Countess Rostova
Countess Rostova has had to deal with a lot of emotional hardship which has affected her health and made her quite frail. Her husband has been quite extravagant and overspent and their son has a gambling problem. It’s very difficult for her. But for all that, the Count and Countess are still very bonded. They’re a couple who really love each other.

What is the Countess like as a mother?
People are full of contradictions, so as a mother the Countess has to find a balance between warmth and love and anger and frustration. It’s very difficult and you inevitably make mistakes.

How have you found it working with this cast?
It’s been wonderful. I have a really warm relationship with the other actors on this drama. The young actors are so good. It’s terrifying how bright and quick and experienced they are. Lily (James), who plays my daughter, Natasha, is fantastic, as are Jack (Lowden) and Aisling (Loftus). They’re so well equipped. They’re remarkably well-prepared and quick to respond. When they have to be highly emotional they can do it in no time at all.

Has working on War & Peace inspired you to read the novel?
Yes. I’d never had the courage to read it before, but being in it now has been an incentive. It’s great being an actor – you get a Literature degree forced upon you by all the books you have to study as part of your profession. It’s a total page-turner. It’s thrilling because Tolstoy has such a flair for identifying with each character. It doesn’t matter the gender or age of a character, he gets right in there and observes the things that move that individual. Then suddenly he’ll move to a bit of action or a deep psychological debate or a big intellectual question. It’s rich in so many
different ways. I had to rip my copy of the book in half because my arm was aching from carrying the whole novel around all the time. So now I only have to carry half the novel around!
Tell us about Nikolai

Nikolai is fun to play. He’s who you wish you could be, he’s very well read, he can ride and fence to a high level, and he goes to endless parties. But there are also other sides to him, which are interesting to explore. He’s also very blunt and very proud. All in all, he’s just a joy to play!

What was it like working with Adrian Edmondson, who plays Nikolai’s father?

It was great. It was really cool having him as my screen dad. We both came out here to Vilnius in January. We had dinner together and sat talking for ages. I hadn’t seen a lot of Ade’s TV work from the 80s and 90s because I grew up after that era. But now I’ve watched a lot of it, and it’s brilliant. I’m a huge fan of Bottom! The great thing about Ade is that he doesn’t take himself too seriously. At one point, Nikolai loses the equivalent today of £1m in a card game and it destroys the Rostovs. I had to confess to losing all that money. It was twice as heart-breaking to have to confess that to Ade.

How did you find the dancing scenes?

My brother is a ballet dancer with Royal Swedish Ballet, so he’s got all the dancing genes! I go to watch him perform as often as I can. But he didn’t help me at all with this! What did help, though, was that Scottish country dancing classes were compulsory when I was at school. So I found a lot those dances very similar.

Did you enjoy wearing the military uniforms?

Absolutely. We shot at Catherine the Great’s Summer Palace in St Petersburg. That was something else. I was amazed by the number of mirrors they had. The amount of time they must have spent looking at themselves! They wore their military uniforms over one arm – they must have been so vain! They even rode into battle like that, with their coat over one arm. They just didn’t care – they were that cool. I’d definitely think about wearing that now!

Have you read the novel?

Yes. I’m not normally a big fan of novels, but War & Peace is amazing. It takes ages to read – it’s about a foot thick! We’re all carrying it around and it’s so heavy that our posture is now lop-sided!
You take it out to read on the tube, and you can see the people next to you thinking, “How pretentious!” But it’s well worth it. It’s such a rich novel – it’s incredible that one man wrote it. It’s also very useful as an actor to go back to it to refresh your ideas about your character.

Andrew’s done a heck of a job on it as every single scene is so exciting.
Tell us about Sonya?
I read in the book that she starts off like a lovely kitten, but by the end she’s like a withered tree. She’s also described as selfless. I don’t know if she is completely selfless, but she certainly has a profound belief that everything will come good with Nikolai.

Sonya is the orphaned niece of Count Rostov and Countess of Rostova. Does she feel accepted by the family?
Not entirely. She joins the family when she’s very young but she still feels “other.” It’s a horrible feeling for her to live with – she is never fully invited into the family.

Why does War & Peace continue to strike such a chord?
Some people say the characters in period dramas felt emotions in a different way from us. But I think that’s a real mistake. Humans have always been humans. People didn’t access their emotions in a more polite way just because they lived hundreds of years ago. Modern audiences will relate to this because it covers the eternal themes of love and loss and heartbreak. Those themes are infinitely fascinating.

How does the drama help us understand the horror of war?
By focusing on individuals. It’s much easier to feel sorrow for an individual than for thousands of people. You can’t connect so easily with the fate of so many. But focusing on these individuals in the war makes it very real.

Have you enjoyed immersing yourself in this period?
Yes. When, for instance, you see all the soldiers in their uniforms, it looks beautiful. It blows your mind. And the Summer Palace in St Petersburg was like stepping into a dream. It’s so far from what I know. I couldn’t imagine living back then. We have so many things to distract us now – we can be on our phones for hours. I have no idea how they filled their time!

Has it been fun filming in Vilnius?
Yes. It’s a very funny cast – Adrian in particular is hilarious! We all got on so well and made each other laugh all the time. Also, Vilnius was a wonderful place to be. It’s really beautiful!
What has been the biggest challenge for you on this production?

Reading the book! I’d never have read it otherwise. But I loved it. I was very surprised that Tolstoy was able to access so many characters’ emotional landscapes in such subtle detail. He is capable of tapping into loads of different psyches. There is a real joy in that. Who isn’t fascinated by other people’s interior lives? I absolutely understand now why people say you must read War & Peace before you die!
**ANEURIN BARNARD – BORIS**

Had you read War & Peace before you got involved in the adaptation?  
No I hadn’t but as soon as I was involved in the project I read it. It’s great writing but it’s a hell of a task! There’s so much information there!

The book is a great read though and I was happy that I had to put my time into reading it. I took a lot from it actually. Normally if I’m doing anything for an adaptation, I try and stay away from the original works but with this there was a lot of knowledge to be gained from reading it.

Tell us about this adaptation of War & Peace...  
One thing that surprises me always is that as soon as you step back 100 years, people expect that people lived a completely different way. But people are people and nothing has changed really. Power was the thing a lot of people were trying to strive for, wealth and survival. It’s the one thing that really hit home with me from reading the book and then filming this, it’s a huge survival story of people just trying to live and get by. It was happening then and it’s still happening now.

Tell us about Boris...  
Boris is the son of Anna Mikhailovna, who Rebecca Front is playing. He is a very ambitious young man. He doesn’t come from the most wealthy background – of course there’s different levels of wealth within War & Peace – so he wants to make himself known to people and seem important. Throughout War & Peace he rises in stature, mostly through military ranking and a lot is from his mother pushing and asking favours from lots of different people.

One of his first relationships is with Natasha, who is very naively convinced that they’re engaged. I’m not sure how much he believes they’re engaged as she doesn’t have enough money for a start! She grows into this beautiful young woman and every man is after her and it’s too bloody late. He’s lost his opportunity.
It was a lot of fun to play – to be this cocky, ambitious, power-driven young man who isn’t scared to talk to anyone or sleep with anyone!

**What were the locations you filmed at like?**
The greatest gift you get as an actor is you get to travel around and see different parts of the world. We were in Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia and I’d never been to any of these places before. In my young career I’m very quickly being able to see the world but doing something I love. Some of the places we filmed in were connected to the actual people that are within the story of War & Peace, so it almost felt like you were walking in their shadows. Especially when you put the costumes on. It was also amazing to meet the local people, for whom the book is a historical piece of work and something they are proud of. Retelling that story is a very respectful process to be a part of.

**What was it like working with the rest of the cast?**
There was a great community within the cast. There were a lot of the big scenes that everyone was in and we could all mingle with one another, the young and the old. It felt like you had a great support. There were so many different people with different knowledge, which kept it fresh. It was just a pleasure to work on such a big epic story with people of such credibility.
Tell us about General Kutuzov

General Kutuzov is an extraordinary man. He was really a military genius, because he knew that the further the Napoleon forces were away from their supply lines, the weaker they’d become. It was Kutuzov who said that retreat was the best strategy, because the more you retreat, the more your enemy is obliged to follow you and the more you lure them in. That’s what happened with Moscow. Everybody disagreed with Kutuzov about his strategy, and he said, no, it’s the only way. And he was proved right.

Is this old soldier disdainful of the younger troops’ fixation on the glory of war?

Yes. He’s quite practical. He is also slightly contemptuous of Andrei’s “death or glory” approach and all that nonsense, the nobility of war and all that. Kutuzov doesn’t see it that way. He doesn’t buy it into the way that these youths go for the glory of it, because war isn’t like that. War isn’t glorious - it’s horrendous and horrible.

I’m a bit of an old soldier myself, I suppose, especially in this game!

Kutuzov has been badly injured in the past, hasn’t he?

Yes, he’s only got one eye. The make-up team did fantastic work. It was long, I tell you. It took about an hour to do it in detail. Then once I’d got the makeup on, I couldn’t get the false eye out, so it had to stay in all day. I couldn’t see anything out of that eye, which was problematic!

Why do you think War & Peace is such an enduring classic?

I think it’s the original war story. I mean, if you look at anything, you see its influence; Gone with the Wind, for instance, is basically a retelling of War & Peace. There are variations on that particular theme, but Tolstoy’s scope is unique.

Tell us about your unusual link with Tom Burke, who plays Dolokhov?

I’m directly responsible for him being here! I was the matchmaker of his parents!
Tom Burke – Dolokhov

Tell us about Dolokhov?
It’s a gem of a part. I asked to go up for Dolokhov because he’s such a fascinating character. He’s vitally important when the Russians are at war because he helps win battles. He’s absolutely fearless – he simply runs at the enemy and hacks everyone to death! He has been described as a “soldier psychopath”. I don’t know what it is to be a psychopath, but Dolokhov clearly loves killing people, so arguably there are psychopathic tendencies in him.

The moment he’s not fighting, he creates trouble. At one point, he is demoted from his rank because he’s tied a policeman to a bear. He’s chaos!

His philosophy is, “Don’t get married – only have affairs with married women”. He’s a nemesis to both Pierre and Nikolai. He creates catastrophes that unravel people.

Can you defend Dolokhov’s actions?
He’s like Onegin – he’s another of those Russian Byronic anti-heroes. He sees normal society as death – and therefore has no respect for it. He only cares about appetite. He has this insatiable urge to consume things. I’ve tried to play him as someone who feeds off other people, rather than a cool observer of it all.

Does Dolokhov feel like a contemporary character?
Definitely. He’s very modern. I knew a guy like him when I was growing up. Dolokhov is the ultimate survivor. He’s always got somewhere to go and someone to get money off. He’s an interesting paradigm to take on – and a dangerous one! The obsession nowadays is that everything has to be utilitarian. But playing Dolokhov, you start looking at society and thinking, “Why do you need that?”

What makes Andrew Davies such a good adapter?
He’s very good at not writing “period speak.” I saw a Victorian-set drama recently where one of the characters said, “I have of late” – that’s straight out of Hamlet! In this, you can’t say, “Okey-dokey,” but Andrew strikes a very good balance in his dialogue. He’s an incredibly intuitive writer – it just pours out of him.
Tell us about your connection with your co-star Brian Cox. ..
Brian match-made my parents. He had been to drama school with my mum and was like an older brother to her. A few years later, before they got together, my mum and dad were in a production of The Wild Duck with Brian at the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh. Brian could see there was a spark between my parents, so he invited them to the pub. The rest is history. It’s thanks to Brian that I’m here!
**ANDREW DAVIES – WRITER**

**What appealed to you about adapting War & Peace?**

I’d never read it before the BBC suggested it. I’d been saving it up. But I thought, “Gosh, it’s about time I read it now.” I was absolutely surprised to find out how fresh and lively and modern it felt. I thought it was going to be this great solemn tome. But there’s a lot of humour and affection in it. Once you’ve cut out the bits where Tolstoy is arguing with himself about theories of history, it’s such a vibrant, fun and very moving story with really, really interesting characters. He’s just so good on different sorts of family dynamics. I just fell in love with it.

**Which characters in particular leapt out at you?**

I particularly fell in love with Natasha because she’s such an appealing character! Natasha is the one who has to do the most growing up in the whole novel.

**Are you pleased with the casting?**

Absolutely. It’s staggering we’ve got all these really big names. It’s great to have people like Jim Broadbent and Brian Cox. I was delighted that Gillian Anderson is in it, too. She was in my adaptation of Bleak House as Miss Havisham, so it’s lovely to work with her again. She’s so remarkable. She’s not one of those actors who just does her usual thing every time. She’s completely different in everything she does – she even has a different voice in every role. The young ones are just terrific, too; Lily James and James Norton are wonderful. We’re also very lucky to get Paul Dano – he’s a very, very subtle actor.

**How did you approach this adaptation?**

When I’m reading the novel, I’m looking for whose story is it really, who we go on the journey with. In War & Peace, it’s very much Pierre, Andrei and Natasha. I try to make everything a scene with them in it or a scene that relates to them. So that we never lose touch with them and make sure we come back to them regularly. We get on their side and stay there.

**Was the adaptation hard to structure?**

Not especially. I haven’t felt any need to change War & Peace. Occasionally I have written one or two things that Tolstoy forgot to write!
How did you divide up the story?

It helps that War & Peace is organised into families. There is Natasha’s delightful family, in which everyone is very fond of each other. They have loving and indulging parents. The dad’s hopeless with money and very generous to everybody. Then you’ve got Andrei’s very austere family. The mother’s dead, and you have this rather terrifying old dad, who loves his children but is very, very strict with them. There is Andrei and his rather cowed, timid younger sister and father — and that’s it. Then you have the interesting set-up with Pierre, who is the illegitimate son of the richest man in Russia and very much at odds with his relatives. You’ve also got his crafty uncle with his own two children. The uncle is corrupt and his two kids, Anatole and Helene, are charming and totally amoral! I very much enjoyed writing them!

Were you daunted by distilling War & Peace into six episodes?

Not really. We talked about it quite a bit, and we thought that six episodes was the tightest time in which we could do what we wanted to do. We did manage to tell the story in six episodes. It’s very compressed, as real life is. I don’t think anyone’s going to feel we’re rushing through it. In fact, it’s quite a compressed period of time, from 1805 to 1812, and over that period, we see these young people really growing up.

Is the BBC the natural home for War & Peace?

Yes, the BBC does this sort of thing better than anyone else. It’s a huge iconic title. I’m hoping viewers will fall in love with War & Peace in the same way that I did.
Did you want to avoid making War & Peace a typical period drama?

Definitely. The danger - that I hope we’ve managed to avoid – is that when you put on period costumes or film in museums, you treat everything a bit too respectfully. So I’ve encouraged people to put their feet on the furniture wherever possible, just to loosen up. So, we’ve actively tried to break that formality down.

Does it feel a very contemporary story?

Yes. One thing that I love about the book is that I felt, despite the fact that these characters lived 200 years ago, I had an amazing connection with them. They feel like very modern people. They feel very human. Actually you realise that we haven’t changed that much in the last 200 years. Of course, we share the same loves and guilt and passions and lust. All these characters mess up all the time and do things wrong. But they feel very human, and for that reason you really empathise with them and love them. That’s part of Tolstoy’s genius, I think.

Have you managed to secure your dream cast?

Absolutely. They’re all brilliant. Actors are always looking for great parts, and we’ve got them in spades in War and Peace, so I think that helps. And I also think that the fact that it’s a high-quality BBC period drama counts. People want to be involved with it. They know that it has a great reputation.

What are the major difficulties when you are shooting a period drama?

The modern world! When we went to St Petersburg, for example, because a lot of those period buildings are still there, I naively thought we’d go and it’d be more or less how it should be. But of course, that’s not true. I don’t know what I was thinking! There are tramlines and signposts and traffic lights and security cameras and all the modern stuff you’d find in any city today. Doing a period show on any sort of scale is hard, because wherever you go, there is evidence of the modern world. Even museums have got cameras and modern parts of them, access ramps and smoke detectors and all sorts of things. So a lot of it is being clever about what you paint out and where you look and how you get away with it.
Does it help that special effects have advanced so much?

Yes, definitely. Visual effects are achievable in a way and on a budget that hasn’t been possible up until this point. You can, with a relatively modest television budget, achieve something that wouldn’t have been possible just a few years ago. So, definitely technology enables you to tell the story like this, with such scale, in a way that wouldn’t have been possible before. Also, it feels like a good time for television at the moment, and therefore these big stories can be told and there’s an audience for them.

Can you sum up your experience on War & Peace?

A: It’s been amazing. Our cast are sensational, Andrew’s scripts are sensational, and the novel is sensational. You couldn’t ask for a richer project with a more talented group of people really. Every day I had my moment of “I can’t believe how lucky I am!”
Character Biogs

**Pierre Bezukhov (Paul Dano)**
Pierre is an outcast. The awkward, illegitimate son of a dazzlingly wealthy Count, he was educated abroad but returns to Russia now his father’s health is in decline. Polite society shuns him for his hero-worship of Napoleon and enthusiasm for the politics of revolution. But his blundering sincerity charms Andrei, his truest friend; and Natasha, who delights in his presence.

**Andrei Bolkonsky (James Norton)**
Prince Andrei is a brilliant young man from a noble family. His beautiful wife, Lise, is pregnant with their first child. Yet he despises the silly, shallow world of St Petersburg society. When war breaks out, he enlists as an adjutant on General Kutuzov’s staff and leaves his wife at his fierce father’s remote country estate. For Andrei, it’s the chance he has been waiting for to find glory and purpose.

**Natasha Rostova (Lily James)**
Natasha is a breath of fresh air and laughter who knows instinctively that life is for living. As the beloved only daughter of Count and Countess Rostov, she has been raised in Moscow with all the love of a close family. Now, though, she is growing into a spirited teenager. When she sees romance blossoming between Nikolai and Sonya, she knows at once she must experience it for herself.

**Prince Nikolai Bolkonsky (Jim Broadbent)**
Prince Nikolai was one of the most celebrated army generals of his generation. But that was a long time ago – and for many years now he has shut himself away on his remote country estate of Bald Hills. He is a demanding father to Andrei, who he wishes to see carve out a brilliant military career of his own; and his daughter Marya, who loves him but lives in terror of his sudden, nasty temper.

**Anna Pavlovna (Gillian Anderson)**
Anna Pavlovna is a glittering society hostess. Her salon in St Petersburg is the place to be for gossip, scandal and speculation. Unmarried herself, Anna is much more interested in other people’s affairs.
She knows everything about everybody – and is more than happy to help her friends and allies Vassily and Helene in their schemes.

**Prince Vassily Kuragin (Stephen Rea)**
Prince Vassily is a rich and influential player in society, and expected to become wealthier still on the death of his relative Count Bezukhov. He will go to great lengths to secure the inheritance, even allowing Pierre to stay with his family as a favour to the dying old man. But his other priority is his own children, Helene and Anatole – not so much to see them happy, as to see them marry into vast amounts of money.

**General Kutuzov (Brian Cox)**
General Mikhail Kutuzov is a celebrated military leader with many decades’ experience. He has been chosen by the Tsar to lead Russia’s army against Napoleon. Kutuzov is wise and battle hardened and knows that no amount of glory is worth needlessly risking the lives of his men. An old friend of Prince Bolkonsky, he happily accepts Andrei on to his staff for the campaign in Austria.

**Napoleon Bonaparte (Matthieu Kassovitz)**
Napoleon is one of the most famous military commanders in history. He used the chaos of the French revolution to rise through the ranks of the army and seize political power in France. After defeat against Britain at the Battle of Trafalgar, his thirst for military expansion sends him east into Austria, and towards Russia – where the aristocratic establishment fear and hate him.

**Marya Bolkonskaya (Jessie Buckley)**
Marya is Andrei’s kind, gentle sister, living with their father on his remote country estate. Unlike other wealthy young women her age, she has never gone out into society; and her only companion is a young French woman, Mademoiselle Bourienne. She lives in terror of angering or upsetting her father, but takes great comfort in her strong religious faith and deep love for her brother.

**Nikolai Rostov (Jack Lowden)**
Nikolai is the headstrong oldest son of the Rostov family. Eager to get out and see the world, he is excited to join the Russian army against the French and show he is a man. Along with the rest of the family, Nikolai has grown up with his impoverished cousin Sonya. Now they are older and falling in love, his attachment to the poor young relation is a growing concern for his mother.

**Sonya Rostova (Aisling Loftus)**
Sonya is good-natured and endlessly patient. As a young girl with no money, she was taken in by the Rostov family and has grown up with her cousins Nikolai, Natasha and Petya. Over time, she has fallen in love with Nikolai. But she knows that without a fortune behind her she is far from Countess Rostova’s first choice to marry her son.

**Count Ilya Rostov (Adrian Edmondson)**
Count Rostov is a warm-hearted, genial man more comfortable with his family in Moscow than in glittering Petersburg society. The only thing that could be said against the Count is that he is generous to a fault: with so many people to look after and entertain, he isn’t always as careful as he could be about the family finances.
**Countess Natalya Rostova (Greta Scacchi)**
Countess Rostova is a devoted mother to her three children Nikolai, Natasha and Petya. She wishes to see them all happy, but the Countess is more hard-headed than her husband, and understands that financial security is important too. Perhaps that’s why she is not fond of cousin Sonya – whose love for Nikolai threatens difficult choices ahead for her son.

**Helene Kuragina (Tuppence Middleton)**
Helene is the toast of society: a beautiful, witty and charming young woman from a great family. She is not yet married, but her father Prince Vassily intends to find her a brilliant, wealthy match. Helene is grudgingly willing to help him – but will still happily make the most of the male company around her.

**Anatole Kuragin (Callum Turner)**
Anatole is a dashing, wealthy young man at the centre of a set of drinkers and womanisers with a very bad reputation. His father’s influence has always kept him out of trouble, but Prince Vassily is now determined that his son should find a young heiress to marry. Anatole is happy to play along, although he might not yet be ready to settle down ...

**Fedya Dolokhov (Tom Burke)**
Dolokhov is a wolfish young man with a dangerous glint in his eye. His family is not hugely distinguished, but he makes up for it in Anatole’s hard-living set by being the most extreme and reckless member. He can cause plenty of trouble for the people around him, but nothing seems to stick to Dolokhov himself. He makes his own luck.

**Anna Mikhailovna (Rebecca Front)**
Anna Mikhailovna wants the best of everything for her beloved son, Boris. Unfortunately, she isn’t the wealthiest or best connected member of Petersburg society. But Anna Mikhailovna is a great opportunist, and by keeping her eyes and ears open and applying the right pressure to the people around her, she hopes to secure a brilliant future for her son.

**Boris Drubetskoy (Aneurin Barnard)**
Boris is the only son of Anna Mikhailovna and the apple of her eye. While he winces at her schemes for his advancement, he also reaps the rewards – winning an impressive position on the Russian Tsar’s staff in the campaign against Napoleon. A distant cousin of the Rostovs, Boris has grown up around the family as a friend for Nikolai and perhaps even a suitor for Natasha.

**Mademoiselle Bourienne (Olivia Ross)**
Mlle Bourienne was taken in by the Bolkonsky family as a penniless orphan and has lived ever since on the old Prince’s remote country estate as a companion for his daughter Marya. In many ways they are an unlikely fit – where Marya is shy and devout, Mlle Bourienne is girlish and eager to socialise, with a flirtatious streak that soon catches the attention of the men in her life.