

Review

By Don Merrill

Napoleon and Josephine: A Love Story



In his continuing quest for the ultimate miniseries, producer David L. Wolper has brought us everything from *Roots* and *The Thorn Birds* to *North and South*. Never has he found a vehicle (it moves too fast to be called a mere "subject") as well suited to his talents as ABC's *Napoleon and Josephine: A Love Story*.

There is love—requited and unrequited. There is war. There is ambition, passion, adultery, thievery, intrigue, betrayal and all kinds of other stuff. There is beautiful scenery and a cast of millions; there are intimate bedroom scenes and exciting battle scenes; there are intimate and exciting bedroom battle scenes. There are officers in magnificent uniforms; there are heaving bosoms popping out of authentic Dolly Parton period gowns.

There is Armand Assante as a brooding, sometimes incoherent, complicated Napoleon; there's Jacqueline Bisset as the lovely, flirtatious Josephine; there's Anthony Perkins, on temporary leave from the Bates Motel, as the brilliant, scheming Talleyrand—all acting out the ever-popular "boy meets girl, boy conquers world, boy loses girl" story.

N&J:ALS opens with tasteful French Revolution guillotine shots and Josephine, the widow of an executed aristocrat, doomed to die the next day. The miniseries ends with Napoleon, defeated and sentenced to exile on Elba, visiting a dying Josephine, kissing her and leaving her with the memorable words: "I gotta go!"

In between we are treated to six hours of super-condensed European history serving as a backdrop for one of the all-time

great love stories. What fascinated us most about *N&J:ALS* was how writer James Lee, who also did teleplays for *Roots* and *Scruples*, and director Richard T. Heffron (*North and South*) managed to keep the love story believable and moving in the midst of such distracting incidentals as the Napoleonic wars, the Bonaparte family's jealousies and hatred of Josephine, Talleyrand's plotting and war profiteering and the royalists' attempts to restore the monarchy.

Sometimes the exposition that is so necessary to this story weighs down the dialogue. Listen to a turgid Admiral Nelson: "I must confess, Hardy, the fellow intrigues me. From all I hear he's a cathedral of ambition, of overweening pride—hubris, the Greeks called it. Now he dares to twist the lion's tail. He's reckoned without the English navy. Lay a course for Abukir Bay. We must see to it that he never reaches Egypt." Sometimes, too, the actors utter late 20th-century language in early 19th-century situations, but let's give credit where credit is due: at least no one tries to speak with a phony French accent.

The history is miniseries authentic—accurate up to the point that it interferes with the story. But let's not quibble: If you want history, go read a book. If you want to spend a reasonably entertaining few hours with some good actors, a lot of eye-filling scenes and an interesting version of a story that sort of happened this way, try watching *N&J:ALS*. It's got everything a miniseries could possibly want, except, maybe, Richard Chamberlain. (EJ)