

On All We Can Do
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“Vanya on 42nd Street” is a 1994 film directed by French director Louis Malle. It was Malle’s last film, he died the next year. Eight actors and director Andre Gregory informally came together in the early 1990s, no money involved, to work on the classic Russian play by Anton Chekhov, “Uncle Vanya,” which was first performed in Moscow in 1898. The best known of the actors was Julianne Moore, who had gained fame for her part in the 1993 film, “Short Cuts.” The film “Vanya on 42nd Street” is a performance of the play in street clothes without a set before a few invited friends in an abandoned theater on 42nd Street in New York City. I saw the film when it was first released, twenty-five years ago. It had very little impact on me then. It certainly did this time; I was deeply moved. Of course, the film hasn’t changed, I have.

The actors were, all of them, superb. The one who most stood out to me, however, was Brooke Smith—twenties at the time, tall, slim, fair skin, light brown curls, a truly superb actress. I should qualify that by saying she stood out to me on the second viewing. Even though I was in my fifties in 1994 when I first saw the film, I didn’t pick up on anybody in the film, or, really, even relate to what the film was about; I was just there. I’d never heard of Brooke Smith before I watched the film earlier today. I Googled her and learned that she has done a lot of television, which I don’t watch, including the hit show “Grey’s Anatomy.” In the film, I was taken by her radiant, true, and so very touching portrayal of Sonya, Vanya’s niece.

Sonya has the last lines in the play, which she directs at her Uncle Vanya, late forties, played by the actor Wallace Shawn. Just the two of them sitting close together at a table:

What can we do, Uncle. All we can do is live. We’ll live through a long row of days and through endless evenings. And we’ll bear

up under the trials fate has sent to us. We'll constantly toil for others now and the rest of our days. And when we come to die, we'll die submissively. Beyond the grave we will testify that we've suffered, that we've wept, that we've known bitterness. And God will take pity on us, you and I, Uncle. God will take pity on us and we will live a life of radiant joy and beauty. And we will look back on this life of our unhappiness with tenderness. And we'll smile. And in that new life, we shall rest, Uncle. I have faith. We shall rest to the songs of the angels. In a firmament arranged in jewels, and we'll look down and see evil. All the evil in the world and all our sufferings bathed in a perfect mercy. And our lives grown sweet as a caress. I know you've not had joy in your life, but just wait. Only wait, Uncle. We shall rest. We shall rest.

And the play quietly ends. I won't soon forget this lovely and gifted young actress, who now is no longer young, and the speech she so beautifully performed twenty-five years ago that had been written a century before by a Russian playwright who died a mere six years after he wrote them. I had another twenty-five years to live after seeing "Vanya on 42nd Street" the first time; I never thought about it. I don't have anywhere near that amount of time left now — I'd settle for five or six years--and indeed I do think about that reality. As Sonya advised her uncle, all I can do for the rest of my days is live, and bear up under the trials fate sends to me. And when I come to die, die submissively. And then rest. Finally, rest. It's been so hard.