

Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia*

By Peter Daniels
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Tom Stoppard's trilogy *The Coast of Utopia*, near the end of its six-month run at Lincoln Center's Beaumont Theater in New York City, is an unusual theatrical event. The aim of these three plays—*Voyage*, *Shipwreck* and *Salvage*—is nothing less than to depict the rise and early struggles of the Russian intelligentsia. This very small stratum, drawn largely from the most privileged layers of the population, was to play a seminal role in Russian and world history.

The Coast of Utopia spans the years from 1833 to 1868. It follows the lives of six friends, all born in the second decade of the nineteenth century, some of whom met at Moscow University in the 1830s and all of whom became prominent representatives of the "Generation of the 1840s," the newly radicalized intellectuals who launched the struggle against the Tsarist autocracy that was to end some seven decades later in the Russian Revolution.

The six include Michael Bakunin, born into a wealthy landowning family, later a founder of the anarchist movement and bitter enemy of Marx within the First International; Nicholas Stankevich, the leader of the students' philosophy circle at the university who first introduced his friends to the intoxicating theories of Hegel, Fichte and Schelling and died of tuberculosis in 1840; Vissarion Belinsky, who won fame as a literary critic and a courageous crusader against Tsarism, the Orthodox Church and Great Russian chauvinism, and also died prematurely, in 1848; Ivan Turgenev, who later gained international fame as a playwright and novelist and occupied a distinctly more moderate position than most of this group of radical intellectuals; and finally, the famous writer and thinker Alexander Herzen, along with his poet friend Nicholas Ogarev.

It is Herzen, the illegitimate son of a wealthy landowner, who is the central figure of *The Coast of Utopia* and whose life inspired Stoppard to write the trilogy. It is Stoppard's view of Herzen's role, however, that introduces a false and tendentious note into the work, one that seriously compromises its aim to be a significant play of ideas.

Alexander Herzen was born in 1812, shortly before the occupation of Moscow by Napoleon. Along with his friend Ogarev, he took an oath to fight the autocracy while still a teenager, in the aftermath of the unsuccessful Decembrist revolt of 1825. By the mid-1830s, Herzen had already fallen afoul of the authorities for harboring subversive thoughts, and was sent into exile for five years.

Famous for *From the Other Shore*, essays he wrote in the aftermath of the failed 1848 revolutions in Europe, and for his autobiography *My Past and Thoughts*, Herzen spent the last 23 years of his life in exile from his native land. In the 1850s, in Britain, he launched the Free Russian Press and achieved his greatest influence as the publisher and editor of *Kolokol* (*The Bell*), the opposition Russian-language paper that was successfully smuggled into the country and carried out a campaign of political exposures that laid the basis for new revolutionary opposition movements.

There is much to admire in *The Coast of Utopia*. To those who know little about the period it deals with, this lively nine hours of theater may seem like a worthy introduction. The critical reaction has been mostly favorable, but one has the feeling that most reviewers were somewhat awestruck by its ambitious scope, and not equipped to comment on Stoppard's grasp of history.

In the production at Lincoln Center, 44 actors perform more than 70 different roles. The plays have been performed in repertory on different evenings, but also consecutively at several "marathon" weekend performances beginning with Part I at 11 a.m. and ending, after intermissions and breaks, nearly 12 hours later. Credit must go to this production, led by director Jack O'Brien, for making many of the ideas, characters and great events that punctuate the action both intelligible and vivid.

A revolving stage at the Beaumont Theater, effective incidental music, the imaginative use of scrims to convey movement in time and space as well as the interior life of some of the characters, inventive sets and lightning scene changes—all play an important role. The cast, including Billy Crudup as Belinsky, Jason Butler Harner as Turgenev, Ethan Hawke as Bakunin and Brian F. O'Byrne as Herzen, as well as a number of actors, including Richard Easton, Jennifer Ehle, Amy Irving and Martha Plimpton, in multiple roles, is generally up to the difficult challenge of portraying these little-known historical figures.

The production and actors can do only so much, however. There is the problem of the plays themselves. To put it mildly, the material is very uneven. Stoppard too often skates along the surface of events and the lives of his characters, rather than probing more deeply. He has set himself an enormous task, but that does not mean that superficiality, distortion and misrepresentation should simply pass unchallenged.

A dizzying pace is set from the outset of Act I of *Voyage*, which begins with the introduction of most of the wealthy and somewhat eccentric Bakunin family, including Michael, his parents and his four sisters. Before long, others appear and display how a section of Russia's privileged youth became "infected" by Western ideas, especially the doctrines of Hegel. "The inner life is more real, more complete than what we call reality," declares Stankevich, as he spouts abbreviated versions of the ideas of Kant, Fichte and Hegel.

Soon Belinsky enters, and reference is made to his expulsion from university for writing a play against serfdom. The towering role of Pushkin is discussed, and his death is briefly dramatized offstage.

In Part II of the trilogy, the characters discuss Belinsky's famous letter to Gogol, with its denunciation of the older writer's embrace of Tsarist reaction. In the course of the repartee within Herzen's circle, one character, in an allusion to the extraordinary and in some ways unique role of the radical nineteenth century intellectuals in the Tsarist Empire, explains that "intelligentsia" is itself a Russian word. Herzen and the others discuss the failure of the 1848 Revolutions, the period of darkest reaction in Russia between 1848 and 1855, and the years of growing hopes for reform following the death of Nicholas I in 1855.

The defeat of the European-wide uprisings of 1848, taking place shortly after Herzen was finally given permission to leave Russia, was a major turning point in his life. Embittered by the exposure of the hollowness of the democratic pretensions of the bourgeoisie, he also became deeply skeptical. What Lenin later referred to as his "spiritual shipwreck" also found its parallel in personal tragedy. His marriage was shaken by his wife Natalie's affair with radical German poet Georg Herwegh. This was soon followed by the death at sea of his mother and his son, and then the

death of his wife herself only months later, in 1852.

After the death of the latter, Herzen made his way to England without clear plans for the future. Within a few years, however, he had launched the Free Russian Press and later *The Bell*. The successes of *The Bell* are accompanied by new conflicts, gathering clouds that would eventually erupt, many decades later, in revolutionary upheaval. A new generation of revolutionary intellectuals, whose leaders include Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov, attack Herzen for his increasing gradualism and appeals for reform. All of this finds somewhat sketchy depiction in *Salvage*, Part III of the trilogy. Noteworthy is an imagined meeting in London between Herzen and Chernyshevsky.

Many of the dialogues take on something of the character of monologues, giving the various historical figures the opportunity to present their ideas. Despite obvious weaknesses, the “monologues” succeed at least part of the time in presenting the grand sweep of events and of philosophical and political debate.

One critic, claiming to speak for many who did not want to admit they found the plays rough going, called *Utopia* “a bore,” and sarcastically declared that it would not have surprised him if final exams had been handed out at its conclusion.

The suggestion that great and even complicated ideas are not really compatible with theater must be rejected. In fact, *The Coast of Utopia* suffers from quite the opposite problem. The playwright cannot resist various efforts to “enliven” the history. He pays much attention to Herzen’s domestic life, but tends to place it on the same level as the political conditions that undoubtedly contributed heavily to his personal crises. There is also some misplaced slapstick and scatology, especially in Part I.

There are affecting moments, dialogue that captures some of the intensity, urgency and conflict in the life of the revolutionary intellectual, some of its camaraderie and collective pleasure and suffering. More often, however, as in Stoppard’s work overall, the impression left is that of cleverness, not depth.

Stoppard wants to make sure the audience knows that Belinsky was meek and awkward, for instance. This towering figure therefore becomes a shy, tongue-tied stumblebum who trips and falls in several scenes for presumably easy laughs. Will the audience be inspired by all of this to read Belinsky and Herzen, or will it go home snickering about their tangled family affairs or personal idiosyncrasies? It’s a close call.

Let us see how closely Stoppard’s depiction of Belinsky and Herzen corresponds to their actual history.

Isaiah Berlin quotes the Slavophile Aksakov (who is also one of the 70 characters in *The Coast of Utopia*) as follows: “The name of Belinsky is known to every thinking young man, to everyone who is hungry for a breath of fresh air in the reeking bog of provincial life. There is not a country schoolmaster who does not know—and know by heart—Belinsky’s letter to Gogol. If you want to find honest people, people who care about the poor and the oppressed, an honest doctor, an honest lawyer not afraid of a fight, you will find them among Belinsky’s followers....” Reading Stoppard’s text, it would be impossible to understand why Belinsky had such influence.

Trotsky, the co-leader of the Russian Revolution, described Belinsky and his role in *Literature and Revolution*, which he wrote in 1923, on the eve of the launching of the Left Opposition and the struggle against Stalinism. Writing about one of the left artistic groups and its misguided conception of “proletarian literature,” Trotsky explains that “The historic role of the Belinskys was to open up a breathing hole into social life by means of literature. Literary criticism took the place of politics and was a preparation for it.... But Belinsky was not a literary critic; he was a socially-minded leader of his epoch. And if Vissarion Belinsky could be transported alive into our times, he probably would be...a member of the Politbureau.” None of this comes through in Stoppard’s version either. In

fact, considering Trotsky’s portrait of the man, it is interesting to note that Stoppard writes, in discussing his writing of the plays, that “reading Belinsky was not much fun.”

It is Herzen, even more than Belinsky, who dominates the plays, and his role has been oversimplified and presented in a one-sided way. And Marx, kept very much in the background, is treated with ignorance and contempt.

The divisions between Marx and Herzen were undeniable, but Stoppard chooses to deal with them by silencing Marx for the most part, and distorting his role beyond recognition.

There are several scenes in *Shipwreck* and then *Salvage* where the founder of the modern socialist movement makes brief appearances. The man who by 1848 had already written *The Communist Manifesto*, not to mention *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *The German Ideology*, is portrayed as a virtual buffoon. He asks Turgenev whether the phrase “the ghost of Communism” in the *Manifesto* is “funny.” “I don’t want it to sound as if Communism is dead,” he says. This is Marx as comic relief, not as a serious historical figure.

Even more egregiously, Stoppard presents Marx as virtually indistinguishable from his mortal philosophical and political enemy Bakunin. This is summed up crudely in the issue of the Lincoln Center Theater Review issued in conjunction with the production, in an article by John Rockwell, the *New York Times* dance critic. Rockwell, clearly expressing his enthusiasm for Stoppard’s version of this history, writes that Marx “crops up in *The Coast of Utopia* as a most unsympathetic character, cold and dismissive, [wanting] to destroy and then worry about what might be done next.... Bakunin is the willful, destructive force that subverts Herzen’s liberal aspirations. He is the fount from which flowed Marx.” (!)

It’s difficult to take this sort of preposterous slander seriously. Stoppard’s effort to depict the Generation of the 1840s is deeply if not fatally flawed by this ignorant identification of Marx with Bakunin, revolution with nihilism, and Marx’s scientific socialism with its utopian precursors.

It must be said that Stoppard cannot help himself—his hostility for Marx is so overwhelming. However, this is not only a political weakness, it is an artistic limitation. A greater writer would not have stacked the deck against Marx so absurdly. First, he would have gone out of his way to give some of the best lines to the character he disliked the most, for “tactical reasons,” so to speak; second, he would have had the ability to put himself psychologically in the shoes of even someone he despised.

Stoppard has spelled out the genesis of *The Coast of Utopia* and his political motives in writing it. In an interview in the abovementioned Lincoln Center Theater Review, he explains that one book was more decisive than any other in his writing of the plays—Isaiah Berlin’s *Russian Thinkers*.

It is Berlin’s view of Herzen that Stoppard seeks to bring to a wider audience. The playwright wants to emphasize only one thing—the futility and danger of revolutionary ideas. Thus he explains, “Herzen and Isaiah [Berlin] would have joined forces against Bolshevism, there’s no doubt of that....”

Shipwreck and *Salvage* are dominated by the image of Herzen articulating the worldview of the disillusioned skeptic, a world-weary humanist and liberal who warns above all of the folly of revolutionary dreams and of revolutionary struggle.

In *Shipwreck*, Herzen, speaking after the death of his child, expresses his despair at trying to change the world: “His life was what it was. Because children grow up, we think a child’s purpose is to grow up. But a child’s purpose is to be a child.... It’s only we humans who want to own the future, too. We persuade ourselves that the universe is modestly employed in unfolding our destination. We note the haphazard chaos of history by the day, by the hour, but there is something wrong with the

picture. Where is the unity, the meaning, of nature's highest creation? Surely those millions of little streams of accident and willfulness have their correction in the vast underground river which, without a doubt, is carrying us to the place where we're expected! But there is no such place, that's why it's called utopia. The death of a child has no more meaning than the death of armies, of nations. Was the child happy while he lived? That is the proper question, the only question. If we can't arrange our own happiness, it's a conceit beyond vulgarity to arrange the happiness of those who come after us."

And he repeats this thought at the very end of the trilogy: "But history has no culmination! There is always as much in front as behind. There is no libretto.... A distant end is not an end but a trap. The end we work for must be closer, the labourer's wage, the pleasure in the work done, the summer lightning of personal happiness...."

The disillusionment articulated here was a very powerful part of Herzen's life. Stoppard's portrayal of him simply as a disillusioned skeptic, however, is extremely one-sided. A look at an article written by Lenin 95 years ago, on the occasion of the centenary of Herzen's birth, sheds light on this subject.

"Herzen came from a landlord, aristocratic milieu," wrote Lenin. "He left Russia in 1847; he had not seen the revolutionary people and could have no faith in it."

"The whole of liberal Russia is paying homage to [Herzen]," Lenin continued in his 1912 article, "studiously evading, however, the serious questions of socialism, and taking pains to conceal that which distinguished Herzen the *revolutionary* from a liberal...." (emphasis in original).

Herzen's "'socialism' was one of the countless forms and varieties of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois socialism of the period of 1848, which were dealt their death-blow in the June days of that year," Lenin continued. "In point of fact, it was not socialism at all, but so many sentimental phrases, benevolent visions.... Herzen's spiritual shipwreck, his deep skepticism and pessimism after 1848, was a shipwreck of the bourgeois illusions of socialism...."

Herzen vacillated between democracy, whose logic was socialism based upon the emerging working class movement, and liberalism, which defended bourgeois property relations against the working class. Lenin adds, however, "It must be said in fairness to Herzen that, much as he vacillated between democracy and liberalism, the democrat in him gained the upper hand nonetheless."

This is why Herzen defended the Polish insurrection against Tsarist rule in 1863. "The whole of 'educated society' turned its back on *Kolokol* (*The Bell*)," writes Lenin. "Herzen was not dismayed. He went on championing the freedom of Poland and lashing the suppressors, the butchers, the hangmen in the service of Alexander II."

Herzen represented the very beginnings of a revolutionary process. "At first it was nobles and landlords, the Decembrists and Herzen," Lenin wrote. "These revolutionaries formed but a narrow group. They were very far removed from the people. But their effort was not in vain. The Decembrists awakened Herzen. Herzen began the work of revolutionary agitation."

Lenin scorns the liberals "who magnify Herzen's weak points and say nothing about his strong points." This sounds very much like Mr. Stoppard today, the Czech-born playwright and writer whose social and political outlook is based on the identification of socialism with its Stalinist perversion.

It is interesting that in several interviews and articles on *The Coast of Utopia* Stoppard manages to avoid any comment on Lenin's article. Nor does he acknowledge that the very title of the second part of the trilogy, *Shipwreck*, comes from this article. All that he can manage is the misleading statement that, "in the fullness of time, [Herzen] received a casual endorsement from Lenin...." As the above passages indicate,

Lenin's article was neither casual nor an "endorsement," but rather a serious evaluation.

A recent article in *The New Yorker* magazine notes Lenin's views and takes a much more objective approach than Stoppard. Keith Gessen writes in his article, "The Revolutionary": "Alexander Herzen, the most noble, humane, passionate and touching figure of the Russian nineteenth century, gets dusted off every fifty years or so, when liberalism feels that it is in crisis." Herzen's contradictory outlook "makes it difficult to say what, exactly, Herzen was for. Berlin solved the problem by turning him into the ultimate skeptic of history and progress.... This is a Herzen of perpetual negation and disillusionment, a Cold War Herzen, a British Herzen, and, for the most part, this is Stoppard's Herzen, too."

Gessen concludes his article with a comment that indirectly demonstrates that it is Lenin, not Stoppard, who depicts Herzen more truthfully. Herzen, explains Gessen, "was never a liberal." In 1870, weeks before his death, he was in Paris when the streets were filled with protest. "History is being decided here," he wrote excitedly to Ogarev. In those final weeks of his life, Herzen "was seen going from meeting to meeting, like a young revolutionary."

What then is the sum, the balance sheet of *The Coast of Utopia*, more than 150 years after the events it depicts? The Cold War is over, but the eruption of American imperialist militarism, in Iraq and elsewhere, is propelling a new generation of young people and intellectuals into political struggle and throwing liberalism into deeper crisis. Stoppard seeks above all to warn them against fighting to change the world. The depiction of a "Cold War Herzen" fits in with what has been called the post-Soviet school of falsification, the repetition of the claim that Marxism is identical to Stalinism.

Stoppard is not simply the sum of his Cold War liberalism, however. *The Coast of Utopia* is more than a hack job. It tries to get something across about life, society and struggle, but Stoppard is crippled by his own outlook. The hostility to revolution, and the Russian Revolution in particular, overshadows everything. He has selectively chosen the history to make a polemic, often against the spirit and letter of the figures themselves. His considerable talents—the ability to draw quick portraits, to suggest relationships and emotions, are for the most part ill used. The messiness of the lives is contrived; it is part of the argument that the only meaning in life is to live for the moment and perhaps to make one's garden grow. Despite its interest and positive qualities, the play is being firmly pulled along by ideological concerns that undermine its artistic strengths and its integrity.

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