

## Just a Moment in Stoppard's *Utopia*

Maurice Yacowar

A single moment in Tom Stoppard's new 9-hour trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*, concentrates its major themes and strategies. Before we turn to that moment, however, perhaps a detailed overview is in order, because *The Coast of Utopia* may well prove an instant monument. With its *sitzfleisch*-challenging length, buoyant Stoppardian density, and need of massive resources, who but London's subsidized National Theatre could ever afford to mount it?<sup>1</sup> The Olivier's rotating stage and William Dudley's brilliant design for sets, costumes, and the cyclorama slide and video projections managed to make the debates theatrical. But that budget would likely preclude any production in Russia (where, of course, Stoppard used to be banned anyway). Yet where else is there a sufficient audience for such a laborious anatomy of the politics of the Left? Hardly in America, where "liberal" has become a pejorative closer to "traitor" than to "ratfink." In short, the Olivier audiences had a rare privilege indeed, for this ambitious triumph is likely to prove more often honoured in the read than in the performance.

At the National it worked. As John Peter reviewed the first all-day performance of the three plays, "With intervals, it lasted nearly 12 hours, but the 1,100-seat Olivier theatre was packed to the rafters and the sense of intense attention was palpable."<sup>2</sup> The trilogy is, as Rosencrantz—or is it Guildenstern?—might say, "a hit, a palpable hit."

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First, then, the trilogy, on which Stoppard worked from 1997 until its August 2002 premiere at the London National's Olivier Theatre directed by Trevor Nunn. In three sequential dramas, Stoppard explores the revolutionary philosophy, politics, and personalities in Russia between 1833 and 1865, the seeds for the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>3</sup>

The first, *Voyage*, demonstrates the effects of German Romanticism on the Russian upper classes. *Shipwreck* chronicles the development of social criticism in Russia, 1846-52, and the failure of the 1848 Paris Revolt. Here the radical writer Alexander Herzen, who will prove the trilogy's hero, loses his mother and son in a shipwreck, and his wife thereafter. In *Salvage*, Herzen launches the revolutionary newspaper *The Bell* and reaches his own measured conclusion about the nature of revolution.

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Stoppard's point is that human nature is too flawed ever to achieve any Utopia. Any glorified abstraction—whether a political ideal or a work of art—is as likely to obscure the quest as to advance it. As we *Voyage* toward Utopia, through the manifold dangers of *Shipwreck*, with humanist compromises, we may *Salvage* some of our mission, but, at best, we cannot get closer than *the coast* of Utopia. Like that other unachievable ideal, Christianity, the political ideal is necessarily an unending process. Ultimately Herzen rejects Utopianism: “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 . . .” (*Salvage* 118).

Ironically, Stoppard's last father figure (Herzen) here echoes the first, also named Alexander, the senior Bakunin: “Philosophy consists in moderating each life so that many lives will fit together with as much liberty and justice as will keep them together—and not so much as will make them fly apart, when the harm will be the greater” (*Voyage* 24). But with his selfishness, and his cruelty to his serfs, Alexander Bakunin resembles his antagonistic son, Michael: “Revolution is his new philosophy of self-fulfilment” (*Voyage* 109), not the service to his country Michael professed as a soldier. Herzen is Stoppard's hero: he lives his values selflessly and generously and has a knack for aphorism and paradox.

Our required values begin with the unstrained “quality of mercy” that Tatiana Bakunin quotes in the first scene. Stoppard values the individual human act of charity above the large, ostensibly generous sweeps of history. Hence, little Olga's malapropism about a woman's hysteria: “When she gets historical the only thing that calms her down is intimate relations” (*Salvage* 84).

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I turn now to the individual plays, with the preface that, though Stoppard has said they can be seen in any order, their meaning and emotional impact would be much diminished if taken out of sequence.

*Voyage* begins as a Chekhovian drama set on the Bakunin country estate 150 miles northwest of Moscow. The action of the first act centers on Michael Bakunin and his four educated sisters (presumably that's Chekhov's three plus VAT!): Liubov, Varenka, Tatiana, and Alexandra. Act II covers the same time period—March 1834 to Autumn 1844—but from the larger context of Moscow and St. Petersburg, before returning to close on the twilight of the aged, blind Bakunin senior. Domestic situations or personal impulses limned in act I are explained or redefined in act II. These range from the career of a vagrant pocket knife to the Bakunin girls' romances. High passions and mortal blows are reported in passing, as if they were incidental to the political focus. But Stoppard's point is that individual lives are more important than the lofty abstractions in whose name people are devoured. Self-serving causes are embodied in the fat, cigar-smoking Ginger Cat at the fancy dress ball, “this Moloch that eats his children” (106).

Though Michael Bakunin's radicalization seems supported by his parents' arrogance and cruelty, all he does is scrounge money and suppress his sisters. He has them do the translation he is paid to write. He is as selfish and unproductive as the tradition he seeks to overthrow for "the great discovery of the age! The life of the Spirit is the only real life." Professing that "The outer world of material existence is mere illusion" (9), he constantly entreats his dad and friends for money.

In *Voyage*, Michael moves from dashing soldier to exiled renegade. He resigns his commission, "On grounds of ill health . . . I'm sick of the Army," having been shocked to find "the whole Army's obsessed with playing at soldiers" (14-15). As he fervidly sweeps from Kant to Schelling to Fichte to Hegel, one appreciates his father's summary: "You've changed windbags, that's all" (46). In a parody dialectic, his colleague Belinsky lives above a blacksmith's forge and beside a laundry; respective images of a harsh, contaminating material reality and the philosopher's doomed compulsion to sanitize it confront each other.

In *Shipwreck*, Stoppard explores the effects of the *intelligentsia*: "A uniquely Russian phenomenon, the intellectual opposition considered as a social force" (17). Now Bakunin argues against putting "ideas before action. Act first! The ideas will follow, and if not—well, it's progress" (37). The fool grows dangerous. For acting on abstract principles can have harsh consequences, whether politically—as in the thousands gobbled up by the Moloch revolution—or personally—as with the first Natalie's destructive infidelity to Herzen. Natalie and Herzen never recover from her rationalized self-indulgence. Across the trilogy, Stoppard prefers Herzen's rational humanism over Bakunin's irresponsible "action." Herzen's generosity emphasizes Bakunin's parasitism.

Again, political debate pales beside the characters' heartbreaks, such as Herzen's loss of his family. Preferring people over abstractions, news of Belinsky's death ends Herzen's discussion with Turgenev: "No, no . . . oh, no, no, no . . . No! . . . No more blather please. Blather, blather, blather. Enough" (56). Earlier Herzen rejected the "ceaseless March of Progress": "Oh, a curse on your capital letters! We're asking people to spill their blood—at least spare them the conceit that they're acting out the biography of an abstract noun!" (18).

As our perfection is impossible, even the esteemed Turgenev foolishly pursues an uninterested opera singer. After the overthrow of Louis Philippe's monarchy, "In a free vote, the French public renounced freedom" (62). As poet George Herwegh is shocked to learn, "history has no respect for intellectuals. History is more like the weather. You never know what it's going to do" (63)—like the shipwreck that shatters Herzen's life. More practical than the revolutionary's hands-on politics is the Herzens' hands-on attempt to teach their deaf son Kolya speech. As the dashed Herzen concludes, "If we can't arrange our own happiness, it's a conceit beyond vulgarity to arrange the happiness of those who come after us" (100-101).

The more intimate finale, *Salvage*, centers on the wise Herzen from 1853 to 1868. At forty, he avers, he has “lost every illusion dear to me” so “the world will hear no more of me” (18). But even as his London estate slides from Hampstead to Finchley to Fulham, it remains the vital hub for revolutionary rhetoric and European gossip. The idea of starting an expatriate Russian press and an affair with another Natalie (née Natasha) revitalize him.

The title points to a range of salvage operations. Herzen’s publication salvages him from despondency. Malwida saves the children and Herzen from chaos, then Natalie saves them from Malwida’s order. Natalie salvages Ogarev from his misery after his wife leaves him. After losing Natalie to Herzen, Ogarev salvages the prostitute, Mary, and her young son, Henry. The latter familiarly helps Ogarev through an epileptic fit. Ogarev lives Herzen’s/Stoppard’s values. Serving an individual life outweighs any abstract ideal.

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Finally, to that promised moment in which the trilogy’s themes and strategies concentrate. In *Shipwreck*, a scene set in June 1849 opens with an explicit allusion to Manet’s famous painting *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*.<sup>4</sup> Two fully dressed men frame the nude Natalie Herzen: her husband Alexander and the German poet George Herwegh. The latter’s wife, Emma, dressed and obviously pregnant, stoops to pick a flower behind Natalie. Another dressed man, Turgenev, sits stage left, drawing on a sketchbook. Natalie appears to be posing for him.

As the scene unfolds we learn that Natalie is instead exposing herself only to George, whom she is about to take as a lover. Turgenev is actually sketching Emma, who is uncomfortable from posing stooped over. As Stoppard explains in his notes, this tableau overlaps two locations, Natalie and George in the bush alone—ostensibly hunting mushrooms—and their spouses’ more open space.<sup>5</sup> Of course, in *Arcadia*, Stoppard played two different time periods (1809 and 1989) in the same space. Here he plays two physical spaces together at the same time. The context of art, i.e., the specific Manet composition, seems to perform the deception.

As if to prove Bakunin’s early assurance that “the outer world of material existence is mere illusion” (*Voyage* 9), Stoppard collapses two physical spaces into one. The material illusion denies the two locales’ integrity. Conversely, this illusion conveys greater truths: for showing the lovers in the context of their respective mates more accurately represents their situation than their physical separation would, and for their mates’ affair will affect Herzen and Emma calamitously. The illusion that combines two physical spaces contradicts the lovers’ naïve rhetoric of romantic freedom.

Yet the image remains misleading. The Manet parody initially implies that Natalie addresses her nudity to the group and that her husband accepts that exposure. This art image does not harmonize its divergent components and tensions, but creates a false impression that it does. The marriages’ turmoil will prove the real

human cost when fervid idealists abandon themselves to an abstraction, whether it is art (*pace* the Manet) or political philosophy (the radical free love and spiritualism by which Natalie rationalizes her affair with Herwegh).

Moreover, as this scene occurs fourteen years *before* Manet made this painting, the characters seem to inhabit an as yet unrealized pattern. This posits art as a parallel to politics and philosophy: an abstraction intended to improve the human lot, but which can prove disastrous instead. In *Voyage*, Belinsky collates art and politics: “If something true can be understood about art, something will be understood about liberty, too, and science and politics and history—because everything in the universe is unfolding together with a purpose of which [his criticism] is a part” (39). In *Shipwreck*, Turgenev agrees with Herzen that “a single-minded conviction is a quality of youth, and Russia is young. Compromise, prevarication, the ability to hold two irreconcilable beliefs, both with ironic detachment—these are ancient European arts . . .” (55). Far from not taking sides, “I take every possible side,” Turgenev explains later (*Salvage* 96). For Stoppard, any exclusive abstraction—whether in art, politics, or philosophy—represents the dangerous delusions of Utopianism.

Similarly, Stoppard’s characters often unwittingly echo lines from literature, whether the Russian classics—e.g., Liubov’s wail for “Moscow!” (*Voyage* 42) and Michael’s (then Herzen’s and George’s) “What is to be done?”<sup>6</sup>—or the modern colloquial—“What is wrong with this picture?” (asked variously by Stankevich, Turgenev, and Herzen). As they are not knowingly quoting a text, they operate in a context beyond their apprehension, just as they plan and theorize completely unaware of their situation. Hence, the structure of *Voyage*, where the scenes of act II interlock with and explain the scenes of act I. The Manet image reminds us that one’s vision is inevitably partial, restricted by one’s own perspective and experience. This notion argues against imposing any theory about human society and how best to serve it.

As Stoppard always relishes reminding us, a *lot* of learning can also be a dangerous thing. It can breed vanity, selfishness, lack of scruple, as Belinsky properly charges Michael, “and above all your permanent flight into abstraction and fantasy which allows you not to notice that the life of the philosopher” depends upon exploiting the serfs “who somehow haven’t managed to attain oneness with the Absolute” (*Voyage* 101). Michael is shocked to learn that the family’s food comes through some profession called “Agriculture,” and he demands that the blacksmith below Belinsky’s flat hammer more softly. Similarly, our *knowing* the Manet makes us believe the illusion that the characters are all in the same space.

The Manet image also exemplifies the presence of absence and the ambiguity of physical presence. Belinsky describes the artist’s power:

A poem can't be written by an act of will. When the rest of us are trying to be present, a real poet goes absent. We can watch him in the moment of creation, there he sits with the pen in his hand, not moving. When it moves we've missed it. Where did he go in that moment? The meaning of art lies in the answer to that question. . . . Every work of art is the breath of a single eternal idea breathed by God into the inner life of the artist. That's where he went. (*Voyage* 39, 41).

In *Shipwreck*, with the monarchy replaced by a republic that acts like it, a tattered "Blue Blouse" (worker) appears motionless and invisible to the lazing Natalie, Natasha, and George. He is only seen by Herzen, but even his address is rhetorical: "What do you want? Bread? I'm afraid bread got left out of the theory. We are bookish people, with bookish solutions" (51). In *Salvage*, Bakunin seems to appear to Herzen in the flesh on page 90, having just escaped from Siberia. This action means that his otherwise naturalistic appearance on page 35 was Herzen's fantasy. This notion is supported by Bakunin's sudden materializing behind him ("I thought it was [his dead wife] Natalie") and by this jocular exchange: "BAKUNIN (*happily*): You faintheart. You need me to remind you what it is to be free. / HERZEN: But you're in prison. / BAKUNIN: That's why you aren't free" (36). Herzen's capacity to see the absent, to apprehend beyond his own personal situation and desires, enables him to transcend the self-serving rationalizers.

Stoppard provides a verbal equivalent to visualizing the absent. He deals strictly with unspoken inferences, not implications, in Turgenev's exchange with Emma, when she is properly concerned about her husband's fidelity:

EMMA: I want to ask you something but you might be angry with me.  
 TURGENEV: I'll answer anyway. No.  
 EMMA: But how do you know the question?  
 TURGENEV: I don't. You can apply my answer to any question of your choice. . . .  
 EMMA: Devotion such as yours should not go unrewarded.  
 (*Pause.*) Now I want to ask you something else.  
 TURGENEV: Yes. (*Emma starts to weep.*) I'm sorry. (78)

The theme of present absence includes Stoppard's doubling characters' names. The two father figures are Alexanders—Bakunin and Herzen. Herzen's wife is Natalie, but so is her friend (introduced as Natasha) whom he later loves. Ogarev was married to the unfaithful Maria and ends up with the devoted prostitute Mary Sutherland. In *Voyage*, five radicals are Nicholases (Nikolai?)—Stankevich, the

silly editor Poleyev, and the three young members of Herzen's circle. Add another radical Nicholas, Sasanov, in *Shipwreck* and a Chernyshevsky in *Salvage*. The shared name may suggest the lack of individuation among the radical "thinkers," especially in *Voyage*, from which only Ogarev remains significant. Also, the presence of one of these characters provokes a distinction from the other; the presence evokes the absent. Natalie makes this explicit in the last scene, when she tells Herzen she is only a replacement for the Natalie who died in *Shipwreck*: "I am not the real Natalie. The real one is in the sky" (*Salvage* 112).

At the National Theatre, this doubling was augmented by the casting of the strong actor Eve Best as Liubov in *Voyage*, Natalie in *Shipwreck*, and Malwida in *Salvage*. Here Best projected a spectrum from destructive romanticism to responsible practicality. John Carlisle played the aristocrat Alexander Bakunin, Leonty Ibayev (the Russian consul in Nice), and Stanislaw Worcell (an exiled Polish nationalist), characters that diminish in power as they increase in political status. In this meta-theatre, the characters live in another pattern beyond their comprehension, their performer, so again any absolute understanding is impossible for them.

All this suits Stoppard's familiar stock and trade—dramatic irony. The characters' understanding is undermined by our broader vision. Thus, after the Manet exposure of the affair, George blithely tells Emma they will be sharing a house with Herzen and Natalie, and Herzen tells Emma her husband is "kindness itself" for offering to escort Natalie and the children south. In *Voyage*, Mother Bakunin's apparent *non-sequitur* about Michael—"STANKEVICH: Is he studying philosophy? / VARVARA: Yes, he's at the Artillery School" (63)—is validated first as a metaphor (Michael will make a weapon out of his radical philosophy) and later by Michael's observation: "Study is difficult in the Artillery, owing to the loud explosions which are a regular feature of Artillery life" (70). In *Shipwreck*, Herzen calls Ogarev "a free man because he gives away freely" (65)—as Ogarev's wife Maria poses nude for an unseen painter. Ogarev seems more giving than he realizes.

Re-enforcing the theme of limited comprehension, Stoppard continually upsets our plot expectations. In the first scene of *Voyage*, Liubov is engaged, but "the newlyweds" referred to at the start of act I, scene 2 turn out to be Varenka and her Dyakov. The gunshot that disturbs the crows on page 42 kills Pushkin on page 95.

Finally, lest anyone think Stoppard's portrait is of an exclusively Franco-Russian picnic, clearly his epic addresses the contemporary West, especially Britain. His analysis of the Left's need for compromise and conciliation applies equally to Tony Blair's New Labour government and to George Bush's Right in/to America. Thus Ogarev: "With all this liberty, there's no beggar in France or Russia as destitute as the London poor, and with all this poverty, no Frenchman or Russian has his liberty guarded like a London beggar. . . . What exactly is going on here? Do

poverty and liberty go together, or is it the English sense of humour?" (*Salvage* 77). The characters' bewailing the lack of a national literature and a rational, just government can be heard even more widely. Stoppard's assault on Utopianism is a response to the firebrand, revolutionary idealisms across our globe. Herzen's last words address all bellicose idealists, whether they are suicide bombers or their avengers:

We have to open men's eyes and not tear them out . . . and if we see differently, it's all right, we don't have to kill the myopic in our myopia . . . We have to bring what's good along with us. People won't forgive us. I imagine myself the future custodian of a broken statue, a blank wall, a desecrated grave, telling everyone who passes by, "Yes—yes, all this was destroyed by the revolution." . . . [*in Russian:*] Will you give me a kiss? (118-19)

The translated revolution is less important than one honest kiss. Stoppard privileges the individual human exchange over any political, philosophical, or aesthetic abstraction. The Manet trick is an example. For intimate relations are our only cure for the hysterias of history.

### Notes

1. The cast of thirty played seventy characters and wore ninety-six wigs, forty face-sets (moustaches and beards), and 416 costumes. Of the latter, 271 were for the actors, sixty for their understudies and eighty-five for the stagehands.

2. "Culture," *Sunday Times*, August 11, 2002, sec. 9: 17.

3. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from the plays are from the Faber and Faber editions of the trilogy (London, 2002).

4. The Manet image in the setting is de/pre-scribed on pp. 73-4.

5. The scene reverses the situation that opened *Shipwreck*, where Ogarev read to Natalie while Herzen and Granovsky were off picking mushrooms. There Ogarev suggests his love for his wife Maria has waned.

6. This latter quote is also the title of a political novel that Nikolai Chernyshevsky (a minor figure in *Salvage*) wrote in 1863 as a rebuttal to Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862).



## **SUPPLEMENT**



*The value of art is defined by its spiritual contents.*

– Konstantin Stanislavkii

In our present scientific and postmodern era, materialistic sensibilities drive us to value understandings of the world that come from empirical and “positive” evidence, while claims of essential truth are called into question as the construction of knowledge is explored. The actor’s art has come to be spoken of in terms of psychology and physiology (and the relation between the two) or as a semiotic or semiological moment in a greater discourse. Although the theoretical standpoints of scientific materialism and the postmodern form of skepticism seem to be engaged in a constant critique of each other, they do share a common rejection, or at least an assertion of the impossibility of understanding, of the idealistic and the speculative. As a result, academic scholarship on acting treads lightly when it approaches spiritual turf, while the works of theatrical practitioners such as Stanislavsky, Grotowski, Chaikin, Brook, Suzuki, and Bharucha unabashedly place spirituality at the center of the actor’s art.

The recognition of this distance between much of the work of critical theory on acting and the theoretical work of actors led to this supplement. I wondered, and still wonder, how we can talk about spirituality with current theoretical vocabularies. The three articles presented in this supplement each approach the discussion of spirituality in different ways and with different ends, but they all explore how vocabularies based on indigenous theories of spirituality interact with the dominant “modern” vocabulary of acting as Stanislavsky and his interpreters in the West represent it.

Evan Winet in “Interpolating American Method Acting in 1950s Indonesia” explores the complex interaction of spiritual and political power in Indonesia through the lens of the Indonesian adoption and adaptation of Stanislavsky’s ideas—ideas that were transmitted through English translation, which were translated once again into the Indonesian context. He explores how the inner discipline of the performer translates into a spiritual power that is also a political power, the revolution of the spirit of the actor as a part of the broader project of the political revolution in Indonesia.

In “Stanislavsky, *Smarana*, and *Bhāv*: Acting Method as Religious Practice in Vrindavan, India,” David Mason sets Stanislavskian theories in a conversation with the construction of *rās lila* theatre. His discussion challenges Western conventions of what is “realistic” and “believable” in performance and explores how religious practice and spirituality play a role in the aesthetics and power of theatrical performance in the community of Vrindavan.

Kathryn Wylie-Marques focuses on the development of a *nō* actor’s personal spiritual power through performance practices that share a common theoretical

foundation with zen religious practices in “Opening the Actor’s Spiritual Heart: The Zen Influence on *Nô* Training and Performance with Notes on Stanislavski and the Actor’s Spirituality.” While exploring the praxis of spirituality in this performance tradition, she also offers some commentary that relates the fundamentals of *nô* performance to Stanislavsky’s writings on performance and actor training.

I find it interesting to note that these papers (as well as other submissions) pick what may be broadly defined as an Eastern tradition (Indonesia, India, and Japan) from which to explore the idea of spirituality. I take this not as an indication that spirituality does not exist in Western acting traditions, but rather that the words we have to discuss this spirituality have been devalued in academic discourse on the subject (at least in English).

—Patrick Carriere