

Show Stoppard - Timothy Frye - The American Interest Magazine

Timothy Frye

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The Coast of Utopia by Tom Stoppard

Imagine the writer's pitch: "It's a trilogy of plays about 19th-century Russian intellectuals with little action, long debates about the peasant question and references to Schelling, Fichte, Hegel and Marx. And did I mention that the plays are best seen in one 12-hour sitting?" But the pitcher is Tom Stoppard, author of such treasures as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Shakespeare in Love*, so all is forgiven. *The Coast of Utopia* features Russian liberals, radicals and nationalists discussing Russia's place in the world and the nature of liberty. These ruminations are a bit of "windbaggery" as one character notes, but what splendid windbaggery it is.

Not that the plays are devoid of a larger narrative. The trilogy traces the personal and political struggles of three Russian intellectuals who promote reform of the autocratic Czarist government. Each faces repression by the authorities and seeks relief abroad, but is ultimately disillusioned by the West. Only with the freeing of the serfs in the final act do our heroes get a measure of satisfaction.

Coast has all the Stoppard trademarks that made *Shakespeare in Love* a hit: shimmering language, a dash of slapstick, love against the odds and a keen appreciation of history. Only a curmudgeon could fail to enjoy Stoppard's ferocious talent as a playwright and stylist. The public has agreed. The play has been popular; tickets sold so fast that two months were added to the Lincoln Center run. For the most part, too, the play has been a critical success, despite its esoteric subject matter. But beyond the wit and wordplay, what does Stoppard's play have to say?

Stoppard's take on Russian history is entertaining but familiar. Anyone who has taken an undergraduate course in Russian history will recognize the themes and characters: the moral authority of Russian writers in the face of oppression; Russia's backwardness before Europe; debates between Westernizers and Slavophiles; heartless revolutionaries; faceless serfs and brainless bureaucrats. Stoppard's defense of individual liberty in the face of nationalism, anarchism and other utopias is more engaging, but here he tilts the floor so that even where you agree with him, you feel guilty pleasure rather than deeper satisfaction.

Stoppard was born Tomas Straussler into a Jewish family in Prague in 1937. The family fled from the Nazis to Singapore in 1939, and then again from the Japanese to India in 1941. His father stayed behind in Singapore, only to be killed, and the family eventually settled in Britain. Stoppard left school at 17 to work as a journalist before becoming a playwright in the early 1960s. Long active in the human rights movement, Stoppard showed a special interest in the persecution of dissidents in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In 1977 he traveled to Moscow with a member of Amnesty International before meeting in Prague with banned writers, including Václav Havel (some of whose works he later translated into English). The persecution of writers and their special relevance as moral arbiters in autocratic states is a central theme in *The Coast of Utopia*.

The germ of the play came from Isaiah Berlin's *The Russian Thinkers* (1978), a monumental collection of essays that interpreted Russian intellectual thought. Prior to Berlin's essays much of Russian social theory was seen as derivative of European philosophy, but Berlin identified the unique contributions of Russian intellectuals as they sought to find a path for Russia that neither imitated nor rejected the West. One testament to the popularity of *The Coast of Utopia* is that it sparked a run on *The Russian Thinkers* that forced bookstores in New York to restock the classic.

As in Berlin's essays, the central figures in Stoppard's trilogy are Vissarion Belinsky, a literary critic largely unknown outside of Russia; Mikhail Bakunin, the legendary anarchist; and Alexander Herzen, a Russian liberal who edited *The Bell*, a muckraking journal published in mid-19th-century London that was highly critical of Czarist rule in general and serfdom in particular. Along the way, we meet thinkers who posit utopias of the Left and Right, but all pale before Herzen's evocation of individual liberty.

The first play, *Voyage*, begins in the 1830s after the failure of the Decembrist revolt, which had called for a constitutional monarchy in place of Czarist rule. In reaction, Bakunin and other Russian intellectuals turn to the French and German Romantics, but they find little satisfaction. Stoppard is clearly sympathetic to Bakunin as a character, less so as an intellect. He brilliantly depicts Bakunin's tortured relations with his sisters and his wealthy father and gives Bakunin some of the best lines in the play. The young Bakunin explains his decision to leave the army by noting: "March here, march there, present arms . . . the whole army is obsessed with playing soldiers." In his youth, Bakunin flits from Schelling to Fichte to Hegel with equal passion, each time declaring: "Now I know where I went off track." Stoppard's depiction of Bakunin's immaturity comes through again in his constant sponging off his friends for money once his father cuts him off. At one point Herzen notes to Bakunin:

I delight in the fanfare, no, the funfair of your pronouncements, I would name my child for you, but equally I would name you for my child because everything which is simple you make difficult and everything which is difficult you make simple.

Bakunin's thought is treated in a similar fashion. His anarchist ideas become increasingly radical until they are boiled down to two sentences: "Our first task will be to destroy authority. There is no second task . . ." And to destroy authority, he adds, "a dedicated group of revolutionaries under iron discipline, answerable to my absolute authority" is needed. This is a bit of a cheap shot, and based on Stoppard's depiction it is hard to see how anyone could have followed Bakunin into battle and taken his thought seriously. But should a leading figure of anarchist thought be dismissed so lightly?

Voyage also introduces Vissarion Belinsky, a poor, bumbling literary critic with few social skills who is obsessed with helping Russia create a national literature distinct from the "folk tales and foreign models" that dominate the writing of the time. Stoppard has Belinsky declare:

Look at us—a gigantic child with a tiny head stuffed with idolatry for everything foreign . . . and a huge inert body abandoned to its own muck, a continent of vassalage and superstition, an Africa of know-nothings have-nothings without a notion of a better life or the wit to be discontented drunk or sober, that's your Russia, held together by police informers and uniformed flunkeys—how can we have a literature?

Belinsky's quest to find a true Russian literary genius beyond Pushkin leads him to plum the source of literary inspiration which, in his view, is a magical and spontaneous moment beyond comprehension. As such, it is inherently dangerous to the Czarist authorities. For Belinsky it is not the great philosophers and utopians who will pull Russia from its backwardness, but the writers and artists who will make Russians proud to be Russian. Stoppard can hardly oppose this idea, but this is an easy case for a writer to make.

The second and strongest play, *Shipwreck*, takes us to Paris during the Revolutions of 1848, where the cause of liberty is again crushed. But this time the foes are the peasants and middle class who return

the autocratic King Louis Napoleon to power. Herzen takes center stage here as he chastises the French for posing as revolutionaries without having the commitment to follow through: "They're building prisons out of the stones of the Bastille. There's no country in the world that has shed more blood for liberty and understands it less."

Tom Stoppard

The failure of the revolution leads some to turn to Orthodoxy and Russian nationalism, here epitomized by Konstantin Aksakov, a Slavophile writer who preaches that Russia is morally superior to the materialists and skeptics of the West. But Herzen has none of it:

The history of other nations is the history of their emancipation. The history of Russia goes the opposite way, to serfdom and obscurantism. The Church of your infatuated icon-painter's imagination is a conspiracy of pot-house priests and anointed courtiers in trade with the police.

For Herzen the resort to religion in the face of injustice is just a flight into fantasy. But Aksakov is again treated with such derision that he is hardly a match for Herzen. Aksakov dresses in a peasant shirt and knee-length boots because he is "proud to be a Russian." But Herzen mocks him, saying, "But people think that you are a Persian."

Marx also makes an appearance, but fares no better. Stoppard has Herzen dismiss Marx as "bourgeois from the anus up." And later, when Bakunin tells Marx that he's been living with the French Republican Guard since the Revolution of 1848, Marx exclaims, "Really, the working class, what are they like?"

For Herzen, Marxism's great conceit is the notion that history has a plan and that it can be understood through reason. The greater affront is that the actions of individuals are essentially for naught because the laws of history rooted in class struggle are immutable. But for Herzen history has no endpoint. It is the spontaneity of free men and artists that make the struggle to create liberty worth the effort. And the future is not set in stone: "Nobody's got the map. In the West, socialism may win next time, but it's not history's destination. Socialism, too, will reach its own extremes and absurdities and once more Europe will burst at the seams . . . and then a new war will begin between the barefoot and shod." Stoppard has Herzen sum up: "History has no libretto."

These insights are quite moving in themselves, but the alternative is given such short shrift that you feel a bit cheated even when you agree. The case for an open-ended history that rejects determinism is well made, but surely it can stand up to stiffer tests than Stoppard subjects them to here.

The third play, *Salvage*, moves to London, where the Herzen household becomes home base for a motley crew of political exiles from the Continent. *Salvage* sees the death of the autocratic Czar Nicholas I and the succession of the more liberal Czar Alexander II who, to the great joy of Russian liberals, frees the serfs in 1861. But this success is fleeting for Herzen, who sees his liberal views derided by a new generation of Russian revolutionaries. These firebrands are bent on the violent overthrow of the Czar and rapid social change, but they display an utter lack of respect for humanity. The embodiment of these "new men" is Nikolai Chernyshevsky, author of the eminently unreadable *What Is to Be Done* (1863), who makes a pilgrimage to London to meet Herzen.

Chernyshevsky is another utopian straw man, hardly worthy of Herzen's attention. Cold and colorless, he fits the mold of Russian radicals inspired by Turgenev's searing depiction in *Fathers and Sons* (1862). For Stoppard the main fault of the "new men" is their disrespect for spontaneity and inspiration. Moreover, the "new men" are great foes of individual liberty because they are willing to sacrifice individual rights today for the promise of a glorious future. For Herzen, this is the greatest sin of all utopian thought. Again, the argument is compelling, wise and hard to contest. But these are the men

who eventually brought cataclysmic change to Russia, Europe and the globe. Were they really so boring? Herzen's case for individual liberty can stand on its own merits without making the alternatives into such unpalatable caricatures.

Herzen's criticisms of the easy solutions posed by the utopians are on the mark, nonetheless. You could easily rename the play *The Cost of Utopia*. Herzen aims to reclaim a liberal tradition based on individual liberty, disrespect for authority and the pre-eminence of local self-governance. His support for individual liberty as an end in itself is a remarkable position given the dominant social theories of the time. Yet Herzen fails to make much of a brief for how to bring about such liberty in the face of Russia's massive inequality and crushing poverty. He makes vague reference to evolutionary social change and professes great faith in the uncorrupted peasantry of Russia as the building block of self-government: "We have more to learn than to teach. The people will make their own Russia. But we have to be patient."

True enough, but what to do in the meantime? That Herzen dies lonely and in exile gives one pause. If violent social change is not the answer for Russia, neither is integration with the West. Herzen relishes the freedoms he experienced in Britain. Paraphrasing Mae West, he notes, "How can I go back? I've tried suffocation, darkness, fear and censorship, and I've tried air, light, security, and the freedom to publish—and I know which is better." He is confident that Russia will find its own way, but we get little more than an idealized version of peasant self-governance as to how this might happen. Explaining how individual liberty comes about is a tall task, and Herzen is right to point out that the search for easy solutions to complex social problems brings great cost. But is it too much to ask for a little more detail?

Philosophical debate is not likely the reason for the play's great success. The staging, music and acting are all wonderful. Moreover, Stoppard deserves great credit for the writing and wordplay, which are as entertaining as ever. Herzen at one point notes, "Being half Russian and half German, at heart I'm Polish. I often feel quite partitioned, sometimes I wake up screaming in the night that the Emperor of Austria is claiming the rest of me."

More important than clever wordplay, Stoppard brings Herzen, Bakunin and Belinsky to life as wise and witty characters who earn our sympathy. Stoppard's success was helped along by the great material he had to work with. Bakunin was a larger than life figure. Belinsky's asceticism and commitment to literature in the face of the censor can only be commended. And Herzen's life was as tragic as it was romantic. The plays become increasingly personal and dark as each of the main characters suffers for his beliefs. Belinsky was ultimately confined to Russia. Bakunin spent ten years in prison and exile before escaping from Siberia. Herzen saw six years of internal exile within Russia, and after moving abroad, was prevented from returning to his beloved country. Even if the play lacks the full philosophical punch Stoppard sought, the writing and the characters make the play well worth the effort. And effort is required. For sitting through the trilogy in one day you receive a badge declaring, "I ran the *Coast of Utopia* marathon." But this is far from the play's only reward.

Stoppard wrote the play before Russia's sharp autocratic turn under Vladimir Putin, and it is tempting to read current events into it. We'll see how well a play that attacks Russian nationalism, Orthodoxy, censorship and bureaucratic rule while also promoting Herzen's brand of liberalism plays in the Moscow production of *The Coast of Utopia*, planned for next year.

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