



Voyage

Tom Stoppard

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Voyage is the first part of *The Coast of Utopia*, Tom Stoppard's long-awaited and monumental trilogy that explores a group of friends who came of age under the Tsarist autocracy of Nicholas I, and for whom the term intelligentsia was coined. Among them are the anarchist Michael Bakunin, who was to challenge Marx for the soul of the masses; Ivan Turgenev, author of some of the most enduring works in Russian literature; the brilliant, erratic young critic Vissarion Belinsky; and Alexander Herzen, a nobleman's son and the first self-proclaimed socialist in Russia, who becomes the main focus of this drama of politics, love, loss, and betrayal. In *The Coast of Utopia*, Stoppard presents an inspired examination of the struggle between romantic anarchy, utopian idealism, and practical reformation.

Voyage Details

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From Reader Review Voyage for online ebook

Jesse says

Saw the transcendent serial production of the trilogy during consecutive weeks at Lincoln Center (thx G'ma!), while reading the scripts in between shows. Amazing on every level. Not only vintage Stoppard, but an epic career centerpiece.

Lynn says

This is so good.

Edward says

First rate intellectual pageantry. Some nice floats--mostly monologues, and a few theatrical moments with a ginger cat--in the parade.

Not much happens of note; in fact, most everything that happens does so offstage, and we are left to piece events together from oblique references stuck in and among impassioned philosophical tirades. These are individually beautiful but feel a little detached because they're representative, rather than elaborative, of character: they're often all we have to go on in figuring out who a person is. Whereas I'm used to Stoppard giving me enough of any given character to play what s/he says against how s/he acts. Only select figures rise to this kind of relief here.

Wonder how I'd feel if I didn't know this was a prelude. The structure is lyric, not dramatic; chronicle, not plot. Panoramic portrait of an age.

Cheri says

I was watching a panel of actors speak and, (I think it was) Eileen Atkins began talking about taking over the role of Sister Aloysius in Doubt. I was amazed when she said that this was the kind of play you would never see performed in London. It was too American.

It got me thinking about how far British theater writing and American theater writing seem to be from each other.

Case in point, Tom Stoppard. British audiences love everything he does. Mostly, with the exception of Jumpers and The Real Thing, I find his plays brilliant, but cold and self-consciously intellectual. Don't get me wrong, I LOVE intellectuals and plays tackling intellectual ideas, but I need a play to sing with strong characterizations, not just wit. Or to put it more crassly, he seems like he'd be great conversation, but a terrible lay.

Anyway, surprise, surprise... I loved this play. I don't know what it was, but I actually felt these characterizations in my gut. Maybe, it's that I'm very interested in the people the plays are based on. Maybe, it's because it's only part one and now I'm hungering for part two. Maybe, because he writes so well about frustrated and sublimated passions that I didn't mind the feeling ending at my stomach and never going further down. Or maybe because for these people their intellect was their passion, so that made it feel so

much more alive. Which ever way... it's lovely.

Selena says

I have to be honest, I knew absolutely nothing about this trilogy before seeing last year's Tony awards. While watching that show, I saw that Tom Stoppard had written a new series of plays and I knew that I wanted them, because he is fabulous.

I became dubious almost immediately because the begining of the first play introduces the fact that the action of this story surrounds some figures tied into the philisophical movement behind the Russian Revolution. Now, I am almost completely ignorant as to the details of events leading up to the revolution in Russia, I know about the Romanovs, the stories about Anastasia and Rasputin (the cartoon, of course ;o), but my high school history classes covered the French revolution and its philosophers, when it came to Russia, they pretty much told us that the revolution happened and left it at that. However, much in the same way that one doesn't need to be a Houseman scholar to understand The Invention of Love, you don't need to be a Russian historian to get this. The action begins in the Bakunin house, where we meet a traditional upperclass family on the brink of upheaval. Michael Bakunin, the oldest child (and only son) has become a philosopher, not yet a revolutionist, but has rejected the place in society his family demands he take and slowly, throughout the course of the play, his passion begins to unravel the entire traditional base on which his family's beliefs are based.

As its title suggests, Voyage is the figurative ship, just beginning to set sail and the story begins, as these stories always seem to, with young students, studying the works of the greats only to find that the class system is faulty. The works of the European Romantics and Transcendental philosophers have opened this generation up to the idea of the "self" for the first time and that independence of thought and freedom of expression struggles to become the basis for their revolutionary ideas. But of course, there is also the conflict that arises between all the new movements invading Europe and the confusion that the contradictions cause. This idea is hinted at in the first play here but will play a much bigger role in the second.

Philip says

Though I have recently given up on the 19th century (see my review of Faust), I have not yet given up on depictions of the 19th century. And I like Tom Stoppard and am glad that he's writing Grand, 9 hour, Drama.

Jonfaith says

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 a 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.

I bought the trilogy for my wife just before we went to NYC to see it performed life at Lincoln Center. Stoppard provided an astonishing intellectual history. I thoroughly enjoyed the performances as well. The evening reached its zenith when John Lithgow and I had our moment.

Lana says

though the premise (about 19th century Russia) sounds boring and complicated, the play is fast moving and HILARIOUS. Saw Pt. 1 in January in NYC - loved it.

Matt Allen says

This doesn't really stand alone, but it's part of a trilogy, so it doesn't have to. This has the same big speeches about philosophy and art that you'd find in Travesties or The Invention of Love. But they just don't click. Hegel is much more boring than Leninism or Roman poetry, respectively, so I blame the subject matter. But if anybody could make it come to life, you would think it would be Stoppard. The play was well-plotted and well written, with a subtle sad ending. I'm sure I'll read it again, and I'll definitely read parts II and III.

Carl says

Not nearly on par with his great works -- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Arcadia chief among the latter category. Some interesting moments, and I'm curious to see the way the trilogy develops. Not emotionally satisfying, as early units of multi-part flows tend not to be. I'll withhold judgment pending more Utopia....

James says

Why does one go on a voyage? Sometimes you voyage to return to a place where you had previously visited, but you may choose to voyage to a completely new place, adventure in the unknown and perhaps into the future. This play is about the latter type of voyage. It is about young idealists centered around the polarizing and exciting figure of Michael Bakunin. It is about his family, their domestic relationships, and his friends. Stoppard presents these characters and develops situations that demonstrate Russia in the wake of the Decembrists.

The opening scene is a dinner scene with the Bakunin family, four daughters, mother, and at the head of the table father Alexander. He boasts of his daughters' learning and nostalgically remembers his own youthful Rousseau-based liberalism with the ghosts of the Bastille. The return from Moscow of son Michael is the first clash demonstrating the impact of change and new ideas on tradition presented in scenes of the young idealists, including Bakunin, Belinsky, Stankevich, and Herzen, with their elders, teachers, acting in the shadow of the minions of Tsar Nicholas I.

The young idealists discuss new ideas like "transcendental idealism" and question the nature of "objective reality". The world of ideas, represented by German philosophers like Kant, Hegel and Schelling, is changing rapidly leaving Russia "Stuck between dried up old French reasoning and the new German idealism which explains everything." The philosophical response of Michael Bakunin is that "Hegel shows that objective reality cannot be ignored," while Belinsky's approach is artistic invoking Pushkin. For Belinsky "The divine spark in man is not reason after all, but something else, some kind of intuition or

vision, perhaps like the moment of inspiration experienced by the artist . . ."

Belinsky's approach seems closer to that of Stoppard himself. His play, for all of its intense intellectual dialogue, is multifaceted with domestic relations among the Bakunin women mirroring the changes being discussed by the young idealistic philosophers. We gradually see the budding of the intelligentsia whose ideas would be the tinder for the coming fires of revolution, first in the rest of Europe and only later in Russia. The drama of *Voyage* leads the reader on a journey that raises questions on almost every page. One answer to the central questions of the play is presented by Belinsky as the play nears its end:

"Don't you bother with reading, Katya, words just lead you on. They arrange themselves every which way with no can to carry for the promises they can't keep, and off you go! "The objective world is the still unconscious poetry of the soul." What do these words mean? "The spiritual communion of beautiful souls attaining harmony with the Absolute." What do they mean? . . . Nothing, and I understood them perfectly!"

The final scene is set again at the family estate, a final farewell for old Alexander Bakunin. The stage directions even point out the old man's age again ("aged seventy six"), one more reminder to emphasize the end is nigh. Immediately his wife warns "You'll catch your death !". Oh yes, and he's watching the sunset. An age is over, and new times are coming, the voyage begun. "The words just lead you on" and in the end you remain in a state of wonder, still seeking The Coast of Utopia.

Chad says

The Coast of Utopia, Tom Stoppard's trilogy of plays about philosophical debates in pre-revolutionary Russia, expands the possibilities of drama. Stoppard paints on a large canvas, and he breathes life into characters that later played vital roles in Russian political, social, and cultural history.

Each part of the trilogy stands on its own, but Stoppard views The Coast of Utopia as one play...not three separate dramas. Part I: *Voyage* focuses on the early life of future anarchist Michael Bakunin. There are myriad topics to praise about The Coast of Utopia, but what most impresses me in *Voyage* is Stoppard's pinpoint, often intimate, focus. He somehow manages to explore grandiose subjects: the lack of Russian national literature, despotic suppression, and gender roles through the interactions of the Bakunin family and its inner circle. For example, *Voyage* doesn't show Michael Bakunin as an influential man. Instead, Stoppard's Bakunin is a parasitic intellectual, someone whose ideas are informed exclusively by the philosophers he studies and the idealists and revolutionaries with whom he surrounds himself. Yes, Bakunin is portrayed as energetic and seductively charismatic. He is the nucleus of the Bakunin family at Premukhino, the Bakunin family's extravagant country estate. Bakunin's four sisters hang on his every word, to the point where one of the sisters breaks off her engagement because of Michael's stern disapproval.

Despite his optimism, Bakunin is also written as vain, bullying, selfish, and an escapist. Bakunin is not a character that readers respect. He is unconcerned about his mounting debts because he knows his family and friends will pay them. Monetary issues are not topics that concern an educated, genteel man. Furthermore, Bakunin often speaks in abstractions. Early in the play, Bakunin passionately discusses the Spirit and the desire to "become one with the Absolute." What Bakunin doesn't recognize---and what Vissarion Belinsky, the renowned nineteenth-century Russian literary critic, points out---is that Bakunin's social status allows him to pursue his philosophical idealism (and eventually his revolutionary beliefs). As Bakunin states toward the end of *Voyage*, "I could study Idealism in Berlin for three years for the price of a couple of house serfs." Belinsky dryly responds, "...the life of the philosopher is an aristocratic affair made possible by the sweat of Premukhino's five hundred souls (serfs) who somehow haven't managed to attain oneness with the Absolute." Indeed, it is Belinsky that gives Bakunin and his circle its conscience. Both Belinsky and Alexander Herzen, the main character in Parts II and III of The Coast of Utopia, outshine Bakunin in

intelligence.

With *Voyage*, Stoppard opens a series of political debates and personal conflicts that extend throughout the play's second and third parts. For instance, generational tension is a significant theme in all three sections. What happens to idealists in the twilight of their lives? Well, someone younger, more energetic, and more radical takes their places. In *Voyage* this is exemplified when a young Herzen tells Nicholas Polevoy, the editor of a revolutionary publication called the *Telegraph* that as an older man, Polevoy has become as "conservative as the people you've been fighting all your life." Polevoy warns Herzen that when Herzen reaches Polevoy's age, a younger man will approach Herzen and tell Herzen he is behind the times. Of course, this prophecy is realized in Part III: *Salvage* when young nihilists condemn an older Herzen. This struggle between ideas and generations is also shown in *Voyage* with the disputes between Bakunin and his father.

Voyage is a remarkable introduction to Stoppard's trilogy, a play where family life and philosophical idealism intersect at the cusp of political revolution.

Elizabeth says

This is the only part of *Coast of Utopia* that really holds up as a play on its own. Which is not to say it's bad - Mikhail Bakunin is adorable, in the same way a puppy who keeps chewing on your shoes is adorable, the classic Stoppard wordplay is delightful (if unusually artificial; the running summerhouse gag gets tired pretty quickly), and Liubov makes my heart crack into little pieces. Turgenev is my favoritest ever, for the record.

Belinsky's act I monologue works better on the page than on the stage, in my experience (sorry, Lincoln Center production), but it rewards re-rereading.

Meghan says

When I first heard about this trilogy and its elaborate repertory style staging, I honestly mocked it for the elitism of it. Three nearly three hour plays at Broadway ticket prices? Talk about making theater inaccessible! But, thanks to a class, I gave *Voyage* a chance and surprisingly really enjoyed it. I hear its the best in the trilogy, I may get around to the other two in the future. I was lucky enough to view the Broadway staging as well through the NYPL, so I think that also heightened my appreciation for the piece.

Katie says

I have yet to see a Tom Stoppard play to date, but am increasingly certain I would enjoy the experience. This play asks the reader to piece together the storyline from a series of fragmented and interrelated scenes among a traditional aristocratic Russian family and a group of revolutionary, utopianist intellectuals. The first in a trilogy, enough is still left unsaid by the end that I'm intrigued to read more. These language is perfect - somehow both period-appropriate and modern enough to be readable. The characters are well-drawn, believably emotional, neurotic, in love, outraged, world-weary. Long conversations on highly abstract philosophy convey both the characters' earnest belief in whatever doctrine is currently in fashion, and the joke: that each is simply a fashion, and that the young men can't see this. Would have enjoyed more development among the female characters, but this isn't their story.

