Review of The Coast Of Utopia by Tom Stoppard

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The Coast of Utopia2 by Tom Stoppard
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artistic training. The cast of The Silver River satisfied this condition. The production featured diverse artists such as actress Karen Kandel, flautist David Fedele, baritone Joseph Kaiser, and dancer Wen-Shuan Yang, the latter born in Taiwan and educated in the United States. Additionally, artists of traditional Chinese forms included pipa player Hui Li and Peking Opera performer Yu-Cheng Ren. The roles of the Cowherd and Goddess-Weaver were each portrayed by a pair of performers in different media. The flautist and the baritone shared the role of the Cowherd, while the pipa player and dancer jointly portrayed the Goddess-Weaver. As a potential triumph of intercultural music theatre, The Silver River had both the right personnel and an innovative concept. However, the production achieved only mixed success.

In the writing and staging of the piece, the distinctive communicative powers of each of the various art forms—acting, dance, vocal music, and instrumental music—were not effectively melded. Early on in The Silver River, it became clear that performance in English—whether the speaking of Kandel’s Golden Buffalo or the singing of one of the Cowherds—would be special. The musicians held their own in acting their roles while playing their instruments. In fact, both instrumental musicians showed more expression on their faces than did their singing or dancing counterparts. However, far too often they either interacted only with one another, or did not interact with anyone at all. If each pair of performers is truly sharing a role, then each should interact significantly with both members of the other half of the couple. The second of the opera’s two scenes displayed the greater success in this regard. In the first scene, the musicians did not get involved in the physical action. At times, they seemed more like costumed members of the pit orchestra. Perhaps a too-close adherence to the stage geography of traditional Chinese opera minimized their movement and physical activity. In terms of the music, composer Sheng skillfully fused the freer rhythms of the pipa with Western musical signatures. It was, however, the fusion with other art forms that proved more problematic.

Linguistic unevenness took on a more pronounced cultural dimension in the Peking Opera portions sung by Ren as the Jade Emperor. His portions were sometimes translated into English, and sometimes not. Aside from the difficulty of understanding his English lyrics, particularly after spending over an hour trying to understand untitled Chinese lyrics (rarely expected nowadays even among Peking Opera-goers in Chinese-speaking countries), the meaning of such a transformation is troubling. In a world of intercultural exchange, must English be the language of the new order? The Silver River implied that it must, which does seem to mesh with the present-day political dominance of the English language. This implication is troubling in a piece that expands the language of opera and music theatre in the West through influences from Beijing Opera and pipa. If musical languages can attain a more equal footing, on stage and in the world, one can only hope for the same from spoken languages.

While intercultural issues were certainly key elements of The Silver River, what is striking is that Hwang’s most interesting statements in the piece had nothing to do with matters of culture or race. Through the voice of the Golden Buffalo, he noted the difference between mortals and immortals: things matter for mortals. He commented that waiting for death is more bearable when you share it with someone else. In The Silver River, Hwang demonstrated again and again his brilliance as a writer of spoken theatre on themes beyond the racial ones that have brought him greatest renown. With this realization comes a further realization that in the case of The Silver River, the obsession with interculturalism may in fact place limitations on the artists. Sheng, Hwang, and Ong in their collaboration demonstrated a creative energy related to, but not defined by, their Chinese heritage.

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THE COAST OF UTOPIA. By Tom Stoppard.

In an interview with Mel Gussow several years ago, Tom Stoppard remarked that, “I am a playwright who is interested in ideas and is forced to invent characters to express those ideas.” This is certainly the case in his latest work, The Coast of Utopia, staged by the Royal National Theatre and regarded as one of the most ambitious and eagerly anticipated events of London’s 2002 summer theatre season. Consisting of three sequential plays (Voyage, Shipwreck, and Salvage), The Coast of Utopia is a dramatic biography of a group of nineteenth-century Russian radicals and focuses on their efforts to create political change in a country ravaged by poverty, injustice, and centuries of reactionary Tsarist rule. It is an extravaganza: thirty actors playing seventy parts, 416 costumes, and (according
Stephen Dillane (Alexander Herzen) and Douglas Henshall (Michael Bakunin) in Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia: Shipwreck*. Photo: Ivan Kyncl.
Herzen fully assumes the central role of Stoppard’s trilogy in Shipwreck. Probably the best of the three plays, Shipwreck focuses on the events before, during, and immediately after the 1848 European uprisings. Herzen is in exile, but unlike most of his colleagues, has been able to get his money out of Russia, allowing him to live comfortably and give generously to his less fortunate revolutionary colleagues. Shipwreck shifts locales from Russia to Germany to France—and, like Voyage, uses flashback techniques to give a clearer picture of the major characters and their relationships.

What makes Shipwreck particularly wrenching is the perverse love triangle that develops between Herzen, his wife (Natalie), and George Herwegh, an ineffectual radical poet. Natalie’s professed love for George is based on a pure (i.e. platonic) love and nearly destroys the lives of all three, as well as George’s wife, Emma. Natalie explains to her husband that, “all my actions spring from the divine spirit of love” (II). The relationship is clearly dys-functional, and becomes dependent upon Herzen’s support for the openness of his marriage. Caught between his professed liberal tolerance and personal jealousy, Herzen is unable to tolerate the illicit affair any longer and demands that his wife make a choice. Accused of being an egoist, Herzen responds, “Egoism is not the enemy of love. It’s what love feeds on” (Shipwreck, II). Natalie remains with her husband, but their relationship is forever changed.

The climax of Shipwreck comes as Herzen and Natalie (now pregnant) are in their villa in the south of France awaiting the return of his mother and their deaf son, Kolya. News is delivered that there has been an accident; the ship was rammed and there were no survivors. The play’s chronology concludes nine months later (in 1852) with Herzen gazing at the sea from the deck of a steamer and summoning the spirit of Bakunin. Herzen tells his old friend about the death of his wife (in childbirth, three months earlier) and the drowning of his mother and Kolya. In one of Stoppard’s most beautifully written speeches, Herzen speaks poignantly about the death of children:

A child’s purpose is to be a child. Nature doesn’t distain what lives only for a day. It pours the whole of itself into each moment. . . Life’s bounty is in its flow, later is too late. Where is the song when it’s been sung? The dance when it’s danced? 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. [Shipwreck, II]

Herzen imagines his dead wife calling for Kolya off stage and quietly reminds her that he is unable to hear. The scene is followed by a brief flashback to the first scene in Shipwreck (in 1846) and we glimpse the Herzens in happier times.

The trilogy’s final play, Salvage is set in England and Switzerland and moves forward from 1853 to 1865. Herzen, now in London and still in mourning for his wife and young son, confronts the realities of being a middle-aged radical. His political ideas have become even more pragmatic and he eventually comes to terms with the disappointments, betrayals, and ideals of his youth. Herzen has no patience with the new generation of revolutionaries ("These new men are the syphils of our revolutionary lust" [Salvage, II]), and the play ends with Herzen in a rented chateau near Geneva, now fifty-six years old and less than two years from death, dreaming of a chance encounter with Marx and Turgenev. Herzen tells Marx that his ideas are flawed: “History has no culmination! There is always as much in front as behind. There is no libretto. History knocks at a thousand gates at every moment and the gatekeeper is chance. . . . We need wit and courage to make our way while our way is making us” (Salvage, II). He awakes to find his children at his side and together they watch a summer thunderstorm approach.

Director Trevor Nunn certainly has experience in staging grand historical pageants set in the nineteenth century. But, unlike Nicholas Nickleby and Les Miserables, he seems a bit overawed by Stoppard’s challenging language and sheer intellectual firepower. It’s an odd match at times and Nunn has some difficulty without the strong characters created by Dickens or the music and romantic fervor of Les Miserables. He and Stoppard do, however, give us a sort of mini Les Mis Paris barricade, complete with flag-waving radicals in tricolor hats. Nunn’s direction is fluid enough, but the pace seems slow at times and some scenes are unwieldy.

The acting in the production is magnificent. In the role of Herzen, Stephen Dillane strikes a clear balance between cynicism and idealism. His performance is subtle and compelling, portraying Herzen as the often-unwilling radical who brings reason and sanity to the chaos that often surrounds him. Douglas Henshall is equally convincing as Bakunin, portrayed as a puckish, selfish playboy with an ego the size of Siberia. His scenes with Dillane are dry and crisp:

Bakunin: I am not free unless you, too, are free!
Herzen: That’s nonsense. You were free when I was locked up.
Bakunin: Freedom is a state of mind.
Herzen: No, it’s a state of not being locked up . . . [Shipwreck, I]

Eve Best turns in a wonderful performance in all three of her parts: as one of Bakunin’s sisters in Voyage, as Herzen’s wife (innocently advocating free love and open marriages), and finally as Malwida, the tough and manipulative German governess who takes care of Herzen’s family in Salvage. Other performances worthy of note are Will Keen’s (as the moody and mercurial Belinsky) Guy Henry (Turgenov), and Lucy Whybrow (Natalie Tuchkov).

The scenery in The Coast of Utopia is developed through sophisticated video projections and computer images on a large curved screen that sweeps across the upstage of the Olivier’s huge rotating stage. Designer William Dudley establishes dozens of scenes—including: a pastoral Russian countryside, the Neva River in St. Petersburg, the streets of Paris, Dresden, London in the 1840s, and a country estate in Nice—all successfully evoking the Victorian era’s panorama. Dudley’s costumes (all 416 of them) are simply gorgeous.

The Coast of Utopia is powerful and inconsistent. Strangely passionless in sections, the play is better at expressing ideas than developing strong, three-dimensional characters. In some ways, at the end of nine hours of drama, the audience feels oddly disconnected from the aging revolutionaries and, although they are demonstrably passionate about ideas and politics, their enthusiasm is not contagious.

Stoppard is clearly in familiar territory, effectively setting up the dialectic between noble thought and basic instinct, sex and philosophy. The women in the trilogy use social activism as a means to achieve romantic love while the men immerse themselves in politics to avoid the terror of the opposite sex. Stoppard suggests (at times) that important and even history-changing ideas often emerge from arrested male development.

In an effort to be historically accurate, Stoppard is forced to paint his canvas with too wide a brush and, as a result, occasionally sacrifices character in order to give a political science lecture. Although advertised as self-contained, the three plays are
clearly not. It would be difficult to imagine seeing one or two in isolation; there’s just too much potential for missing important plot points, characters, and context.

Still, Stoppard’s is a monumental achievement on such a grand scale that it’s impossible not to shake your head in awe. Because he aims so high, he can be forgiven for falling short on occasion. The play calls for a great deal of audience effort to follow the segmented episodes and characters that appear and re-appear. Stoppard has always been interested in probability and chance encounters; in The Coast of Utopia he seems to say that even large scale social change and upheavals may be more attributable to random interactions than to deliberate attempts to change the world. Human nature will always win out over politics, social activism and utopian visions. The real world (money, love, sex, jealousy and ego) will usually triumph over the ideal.

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RICKY JAY: ON THE STEM. Written and performed by Ricky Jay. Second Stage Theater, New York City. 28 June 2002.

Ricky Jay’s On the Stem is a new departure for the perennially sold-out prestidigitator. Word in professional magic circles was that the show wasn’t as exciting as Ricky Jay and His 52 Assistants. Watching On the Stem, it is easy to see why magic buffs might be disappointed. Jay showcases far fewer of his signature feats of card manipulation, even the ever popular card throwing; instead, he spends much of his time doing what he does in his books—documenting the history of American popular entertainment.

Those who consider Jay a magician or card sharp are often surprised to find how little of his material is original. Most of his tricks, complete with patter, can be found in classic texts such as the 1902 cheater’s manual, The Expert at the Card Table. Jay is not as interested in creating new tricks as he is in reminding us of the old ones. On the Stem surfaces this documentary drive: the piece is a compendium of the tricks, buffooneries, cons, and sideshows that make up the marvelous margins of American theatre history.

On the Stem zeros in on Broadway, the “Stem” of the title. Soliloquizing in front of an unrolling panorama of the Great White Way, Jay functions as time-traveling tour guide, leading the audience beyond legitimate theatre to explore Broadway’s other legacy. With little fanfare, he transforms into a variety of carnival barkers, candy hawkers, card sharps, and shysters who have gone largely unnoticed in official accounts of the theatre. His skillful recreations serve a dual purpose: even as they entertain and amaze, they demonstrate the vibrancy and legitimacy of this branch of theatrical history. Cheap tricks? No, this is performance at its best. It has excitement, suspense, skill, and emotional engagement. You’ll never look at a three-card monte guy in quite the same way again.

Addressing popular entertainment, Jay has cast a wider net than in previous performances. He plays rounds of poker and demonstrates sleight-of-hand skill, but he also juggles eggs, forges signatures, operates a flea circus, and tells stories. Hard core fans might see some of these tricks as beneath his talents. As a competent professional magician, why should Jay lower himself to telling a moving story about a blind man who thinks he owns a collection of Audubon prints, when the story’s only trick is a simple palming of the notebook to make the prints disappear?

The answer is because it’s good theatre. Skillful as he is, Jay has never really been simply a magician or con man. Even his more impressive feats are often, upon consideration, less than astounding. In one segment of On the Stem, for instance, he moves a knight through every square of a supersized chess board without landing on the same square twice, beginning at a spot chosen by an audience member. Simultaneously, he calls out Appalachian field hollers, quotes Shakespeare from plays chosen by audience members, and calculates cube roots of large numbers called out randomly from a list. Each component of this mental mastermind demonstration is rather straightforward: the knight’s tour, for instance, simply requires memorizing a sixty-four-move sequence that—like the London Underground’s Circle Line—follows the same sequence of stops regardless of where one begins. Cube roots are easily calculated for large numbers since the final digit of the number reveals the root’s final digit; once you have memorized the correspondences, it is simply a matter of estimating to within ten. And most drama critics, let alone actors, can rattle off long passages of Shakespeare. What is impressive here is not the skill behind the tricks; it’s the showmanship that brings them to life. Magic is the art of making the difficult look easy, but it is also the art of making the easy look difficult. Just as his poker patter takes your eye off the hand that palms the ace, the pileup of offerings