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Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia* in Russia: Cultural Adaptation

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Tom Stoppard's theatrical trilogy *The Coast of Utopia* (in Russian Берег Утопии) premiered in London in 2002. Since that time, it has been performed in New York, and, just recently, in Moscow at the RAMT, the National Youth Theatre. The last performance was in the beginning of April 2008. In March, I was privileged enough to be able to go see the performance. I had wanted to see the plays on stage ever since I read the trilogy the year before and it particularly interested to me to see the performance in Russian. I was curious to discover what Russians would think of these Tony-award-winning plays which, while written by an Englishman, have a profoundly Russian subject matter.

The Coast of Utopia recounts the lives of several early Russian revolutionaries, among them Alexander Herzen (in Russian Герцен) and Michael Bakunin, as well as those of their friends and peers, such as the author Ivan Turgenev and the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky. Each play runs for about three hours, and though they are meant to be able to stand alone they work best as a whole. In Moscow they were always shown together, one after the next from noon until almost eleven at night.

The first play, *Voyage*, takes place between 1833 and 1844, in a variety of places including “Premukhino, the Bakunin estate,”¹ and “Moscow.”² *Voyage* deals mostly with Michael Bakunin’s youth and his search to find himself through the study of philosophy, which he does not really understand but cites with abandon. Finally, Bakunin decides that “revolution is his new philosophy of self-fulfillment,”³ thus setting his path to the future. Belinsky is also important in this play in his attempt to establish himself as a literary critic. Herzen is also present as a young writer and activist. In addition, Bakunin’s parents and four sisters play significant roles.

The second play, *Shipwreck*, takes place “between 1846 and 1852 at Sokolovo, a gentleman’s estate fifteen miles outside Moscow; Salzbrunn, Germany, Paris; Dresden; and Nice.”⁴ The most prominent character in this play is Alexander Herzen. The story recounts the experiences that he and his wife, Natalie, encounter while living in Western Europe (mainly in Paris), where they are allowed to go to seek medical aid for their younger son, Kolya, who is deaf. Herzen spends much time discussing revolutionary theory and even witnesses firsthand the forming of the 2nd Republic in France, as well as its fall. Bakunin is also present in this play; he takes part in the revolutions that Herzen discusses and eventually is sent to prison in Siberia for this. Turgenev and Belinsky are present, though Belinsky dies during the time covered by the play. There are also some characters which appear only in this play, such as George and Emma Herwegh, a German revolutionary poet and his devoted wife. The play ends with Kolya’s tragic death in a shipwreck and the subsequent death of Natalie. As the play ends, Herzen leaves for England with his surviving children.

Salvage, the third installment of the trilogy, takes place between 1853⁵ and 1868.⁶ In this play Herzen continues to be the

¹ Tom Stoppard, *Voyage*, in *The Coast of Utopia* (New York: Grove Press, 2002), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 52.

³ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴ Tom Stoppard, *Shipwreck*, in *The Coast of Utopia* (New York: Grove Press, 2002), xiii.

⁵ Tom Stoppard, *Salvage*, in *The Coast of Utopia* (New York: Grove Press, 2002), 1.

main character and focus. The action follows his efforts to publish insurrectionary newspapers from abroad, as well as his complicated family situation, in which for a while he is sharing the wife of his friend Nicolas Ogarev, (whose name is also Natalie.) The play ends shortly before his death; the last scene is a dream of Herzen's in which Turgenev and Karl Marx are discussing the future of Russia and that of the world in general.

Due to their complexity, any interpretation of these plays relies heavily on the reader's or spectator's preunderstanding. That is to say, the way in which the trilogy is appreciated is highly dependant on the spectator's level of background knowledge about the subject. In Richard E. Palmer's essay "Hermeneuein and Hermeneia: The Modern Significance of their Ancient Usage," he explains hermeneutic preunderstanding as thus:

Explanatory interpretation makes us aware that explanation is contextual, is "horizontal." It must be made within a horizon of already granted meanings and intentions. In hermeneutics, this area of assumed understanding is called preunderstanding. One may fruitfully ask what preunderstanding is necessary in order to understand the (given) text. ... It might be asked what horizon of interpretation a great literary text inhabits, and how the horizon of an individual's own world of intentions, hopes, and preinterpretations is related to it.⁷

Clearly, not every viewer of Stoppard's trilogy will interpret or understand it in the same way. The plays, concerned as they are with a particular aspect of Russian and European history, require some familiarity with Russian history, as well as philosophy and the history of socialism, to be understood. A viewer whose preunderstanding emphasizes one of these aspects over another will thus interpret the play differently than someone whose preunderstanding emphasizes a different aspect. A viewer who is completely unfamiliar with this era of history may not get anything from these plays at all.

⁶ Ibid., 111.

⁷ Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 25.

One example of this is the difference in comprehension of one theme in *Voyage* that my mother and I experienced. She read the play before I did and found it hard to get through. One thing that puzzled her was the attestation of certain characters that Russia has no literature (except for that written by Pushkin.)

In *Voyage*, the following discussion occurs:

ALEXANDER: ... They write better Russian than I do – what a shame there’s nothing worth reading (*over his daughters’ protests*), apart from...

DAUGHTERS: Pushkin!

ALEXANDER: ... Pushkin.⁸

This theme is reprised several times over the course of the play, as Belinsky makes it his thesis that, “we have no literature.”⁹ He argues that, for the most part, what is published in Russia (in his era) is an imitation of Western literature and, furthermore, that should Russia develop its own literary tradition, “literature can *replace*, can actually *become* Russia! It can be greater and more real than the external reality.”¹⁰ Even in this monologue, though, he acknowledges that there is, “Pushkin, or Gogol’s new stories, definitely Gogol, and there’s more to come.”¹¹ Being, as I am, a student of Russian literature, this statement makes sense to me. My mother, though, due to her lack of knowledge of the subject, remains confused. I understood that the fact that the scene took place in the 1830’s means that many of the most well-known Russian authors had not yet begun to write, but she did not.

Likewise, understanding something about the link between romanticism and the rise of nationalism is key to understanding Belinsky’s argument that a national literary tradition would create a new Russia and bring her grandeur, and a short article about this subject was apparently included in the play’s program when it was performed in New York to aid the spectators in their appreciation.

But what sort of preunderstanding would a Muscovite viewer of Stoppard’s trilogy bring to the work? Presumably, the

⁸ Stoppard, *Voyage*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

Russian spectators would better know the historical era. They would have heard of Herzen and Bakunin and would probably not need to ask why none of the characters, in their discussions of Russian literature of the 1830s, were mentioning Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. But what more would they know? And what would they think of the whole concept in the first place? Would they be pleased that an Englishman had taken interest in their history, or would they feel that it was not his place to write about a foreign culture in such detail? If Stoppard's research was flawed, would they notice? Would mistakes bother them?

Of course, the answers to these questions depend on the individual spectator. Nonetheless, it seems that Russian audiences generally like *The Coast of Utopia*. My host sister in Moscow affirms that at least *Voyage* has a Chekhovian feel to it, an opinion echoed by some critics. "Время в спектакле постоянно возвращается к каким-то исходным точкам и сюжетам (излюбленный стоппардовский 'флэш-бэк'). Для театра такие сюжеты — 'чеховский'..."¹² (Time in this show is continually returning to some initial starting point and subject, Stoppard's beloved "flash back." In theatre, such a "Chekhovian" subject...). This article from *The Banner (Znamya)* goes on to point out that Chekhov's plays have also been performed on the stage at the National Youth Theatre and suggests that Stoppard's trilogy is not out of place there.

In fact, it seems that many consider *The Coast of Utopia* very apt and appropriate to contemporary Russia. An article in "More Intelligent Life" discusses this:

"What kind of literature and what kind of life is the same question," as Belinsky says in the play. It is still the same in Russia today. Borodin's production has everything to do with modern Russian life, its ideas and ideals, its comprehension of the past and contemplation of the future... Russian state ideologists are hard at work trying to persuade themselves and the country that democracy and respect for individual rights and liberty are of no use to its people, that Russia always prospered when it was ruled by

¹² Svetlana Vasilieva, "Tom Stoppard. Bereg Utopii," *The Banner* 3 (2008)
<<http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/2008/3/vas25.html>>

despotic tsars and that there is nothing in Russian history to be embarrassed about. The characters have returned to a country where their dreams about justice and freedom evoke mostly sneers, whereas Nicholas I, one of Russia's most senseless autocrats, evokes sympathy and respect. "I'd love to read an article by Herzen, with his lacerating wit, about contemporary Russia," Stoppard says.¹³

According to this same article, the spectators after the first Russian performance argued "not about the merits of the production, but about what has been said on stage. This surprises Stoppard: "It is as if people are responding to statements. They seem to imply that my plays fill some sort of gap-I don't quite believe it."¹⁴

It's true that names such as Herzen's are familiar in Russia, but the significance of these historical figures was changed during the Soviet era. The article goes on to say that Isaiah Berlin, who inspired Stoppard's interest in Herzen, wrote that "the singular irony of history was that Herzen—who wanted individual liberty more than happiness, or efficiency or justice, and denounced organized planning, economic centralization and governmental authority—was canonized by the Soviet government," and that "the Soviet and post-Soviet eras also deformed the language that expressed those sentiments. Words such as "honor" and "duty" were first extolled and abused by the Communists then turned into a joke by their successors. Stoppard's trilogy has not only taken off layers of bronze paint from Herzen or Belinsky and brought them back to life, it has rehabilitated their language."¹⁵

During the rehearsal period for *Coast of Utopia*, in order to help the actors understand the characters that they were to play, Stoppard organized trips to Premukhino, the Bakunin family estate, and also to Herzen's hometown, where they cleaned up an old statue of Herzen and his friend Ogarev, also a prominent character in *Coast of Utopia*. Thus, although the actors' preunderstanding of

¹³ "Stoppard In Moscow: 'The Coast of Utopia' Returns Home," *Intelligent Life Magazine* (Dec. 2008), <<http://www.moreintelligentlife.com/story/stoppard-moscow>>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

the subject may have labeled the trilogy's heroes as proto-Marxists, through their historical exploration and the trilogy itself they came to see the characters as individuals with their own ideas, and, most importantly, their own lives. The Znamya article agrees with this. "По сцене ходят не "портреты", а живые, милые люди."¹⁶ ("Portraits don't walk out on the stage, but rather living, likeable people").

When I went to see the show the theatre was almost full and the spectators seemed to be enjoying themselves. It seems that the critics like the plays well enough, too. I would have liked to be able to interview more individual Russians about their impressions and opinions, though. As thus, my attempts at understanding *The Coast of Utopia*'s place in Russian society is far from complete. I am eager to learn more and hope to do so soon.

¹⁶ Vasilieva, "Tom Stoppard. Bereg Utopii."