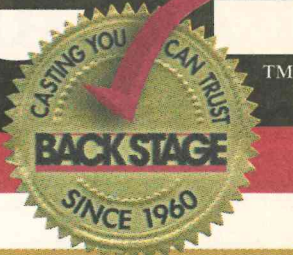


BACKSTAGE

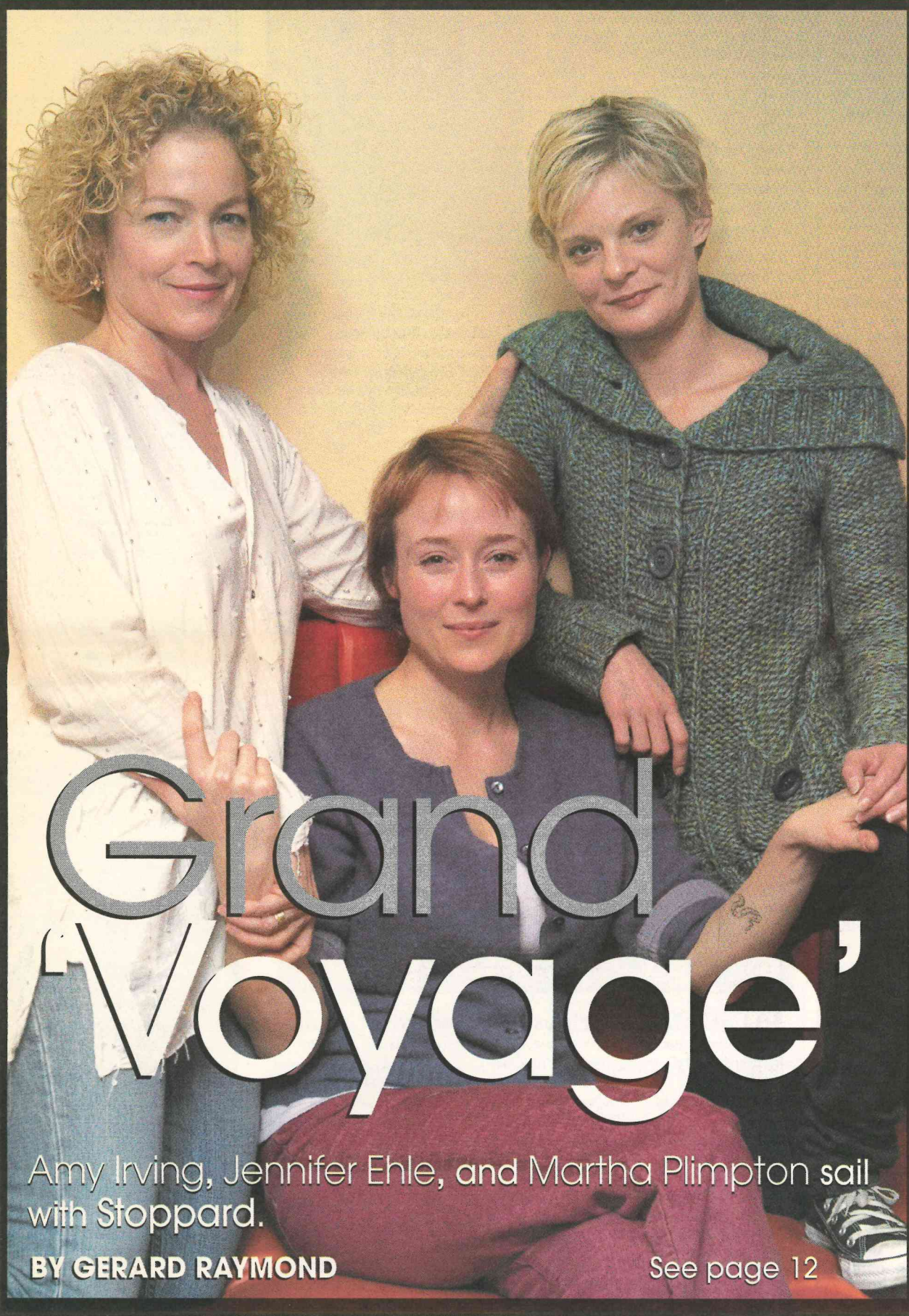
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ROBIN HOLLAND



Grand Voyage

Amy Irving, Jennifer Ehle, and Martha Plimpton sail with Stoppard.

BY GERARD RAYMOND

See page 12

Who Will Be Nominated?

Our annual wrap-up of great performances in 2006 that should be remembered for SAG Awards season.

See insert section inside



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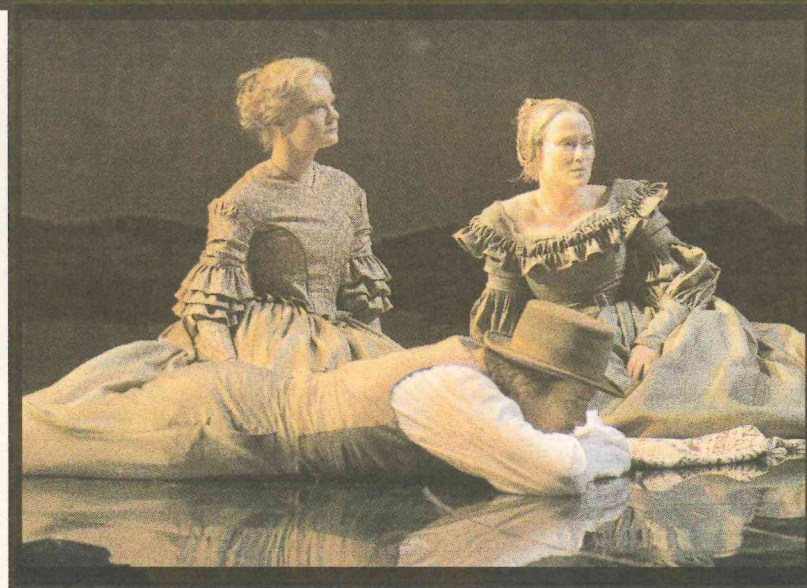
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COVER STORY



the WOMEN of 'UTOPIA'

BY GERARD RAYMOND

AMY IRVING, JENNIFER EHLE, AND MARTHA PLIMPTON PONDER ACTING IN TOM STOPPARD'S LATEST EPIC.

Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia* is an epic by any measure. A trilogy of plays—*Voyage*, *Shipwreck*, and *Salvage*—it spans three decades of Russian social, political, and literary history and is performed in rotating repertory. It has a cast of 44 playing 70 roles and is set in eight different locations throughout Russia and Europe. Originally staged by Trevor Nunn at London's National Theatre four years ago, it opened last month in its American premiere at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater in a brand-new production directed by Jack O'Brien. The story focuses on a group of mid-19th-century Russian intellectuals who, in widely different ways, help shape the destiny of their country. *Voyage* opened Nov. 27; *Shipwreck* began previews on Dec. 6 and opens Dec. 21, while *Salvage* will begin previews Jan. 30 for a Feb. 15 opening. All three plays will continue performance through May 13.

Back Stage recently chatted with Amy Irving, Jennifer Ehle, and Martha Plimpton, the three female leads in *The Coast of Utopia*. In *Voyage*, Irving plays Varvara, the matriarch of the Bakunin family, and Ehle and Plimpton play her daughters, Liubov and Varenka. In *Shipwreck*, Ehle plays Natalie, the wife of radical theorist and editor Alexander Herzen, while Plimpton plays Natasha, her intimate friend who later marries Herzen's best friend, poet Nicholas Ogarev, and Irving plays Ogarev's estranged first wife, Maria. In *Salvage*, Ehle plays Malwida von Meysenbug, governess to Herzen's children, and Plimpton repeats her role from the second play.

BACK STAGE: How did you become a part of this mammoth production?

AMY IRVING: I saw *Shipwreck* in London in 2002. I was passing through, so I wasn't able to see all of them. I remember being a little puddle on the floor at the end of it. It's a very moving piece. Then I heard it was coming here. I ran into Jack [O'Brien] and he said, "I'm just putting it all together. Do you want to be a part of it?" So we had dinner and we talked, and that's how it happened.

MARTHA PLIMPTON: I auditioned. Beginning, middle, and end of story. I was working on [Conor McPherson's play] *Shining City* at the Biltmore, and I had an audition. I think I knew that Brian [F. O'Byrne, her co-star in *Shining City*, who plays Herzen in *Utopia*] was doing it already, but I hadn't read the play. I hadn't even heard of it.

JENNIFER EHLE: I was asked if I was interested to do the London production with the same parts that I have now. But I didn't even read the play then because I was at a point where I wanted to take some time off. The next thing I knew, when I was rehearsing the Scottish play for the Public, I got this huge foundation block—a packet from my agent—and a letter saying I've been offered these parts. I thought surely there's no way I can be a good wife and mother and take this job. Then I talked to Jack and he emailed the schedule to me. My husband actually opened the attachment, and I remember him saying, "Well, it's not that bad a schedule, the bastards!"



(This page, above left) Kellie Overbey, Amy Irving, Felicity LaFortune, Richard Easton, David Manis, Ethan Hawke; (above right) Hawke, Martha Plimpton, Jennifer Ehle. Both pictures taken from *Voyage*, Part 1 of *The Coast of Utopia*. (Left) Amy Irving, Jennifer Ehle, Martha Plimpton.



ALL PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE BY ROBIN HOLLAND

BACK STAGE: How do you feel about the six-and-a-half-month commitment and rotating repertory?

PLIMPTON: It's definitely unlike anything I've ever done before, not just in terms of the length of the commitment but the repertory aspect. There are some people who are playing different roles and some who have the same roles right through. Although I've been a member of Steppenwolf—I joined the company in Chicago in 1998—and that was something that I really loved and I miss, it's hard to find that kind of creative home as an actor.

IRVING: The actual commitment—people do that with Broadway plays all the time. I did *Amadeus* for nine months, so it's not unusual. What is different, I think, is once you get one play on the stage, you go back into rehearsals, and then you get the second one up, and you do the first two plays, and then you're in rehearsal for the third. There is no norm, but you're just constantly being stimulated. I'm a single parent, so the wear and tear is hard, but you're so high after every show. It gives us all energy to do our lives as well. I think it's probably all downhill from here because I don't think anybody will ever find such a thrilling piece to do, and only Lincoln Center in this country could possibly do this play.

EHLE: And only American Equity is strong enough to make the schedule as doable as it is. If this were in England, we would be rehearsing all day and performing every night. Here we either rehearse or perform on any given day except on Fridays, when we sometimes rehearse four hours and then do an evening show. I did a year at the RSC in Stratford, God help me! There you rehearse every day and you perform a different show every evening. This is really joyous.

BACK STAGE: While this is the first time the three of you have been in the same production together, I understand you have associations that go way back—and for two of you, ties to Lincoln Center as well.

IRVING: I was on this stage when I was 11, but I was too young to know anything. My father [Jules Irving] was artistic director here. I was in the second play, *The Country Wife*. I didn't have a big part: I sold a guinea pig to Stacy Keach—that was my big moment.

EHLE: And I walked across the back of the stage during a matinee when my mother [Rosemary Harris] was doing *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I was about 3, I guess. Blanche was supposed to be in the bathtub, and of course there is no bathtub. My mother was in the quick-change room changing clothes. I must have said something or waved, because I remember her going, "Shhhh!"

IRVING: And my mother [Priscilla Pointer] played Eunice, the woman who lived upstairs, in that production. We have quite a connection. Jennifer and I have known each other since when I worked with Rosemary in *Heartbreak House* [in 1983]. And I also used to baby-sit for Martha. So my mother just put together this collage of the three of us.

BACK STAGE: In *The Coast of Utopia*, the tides of revolution are set in motion by the men. What is the role of the women in the trilogy?

PLIMPTON: The men occupy the outer world and the women occupy the inner world, and there is a sort of contract between them. It's set up in the first play in the relationship between Michael Bakunin [played by Ethan Hawke] and his sisters, and his influence over their lives. While they're very sheltered and protected and prevented from experiencing life in the outer world, they're educated and encouraged to think for themselves on a certain level. It's unusual for the time, but this was true for that family. But the relationship between Michael and his sisters sets up the conflicts that these women have to deal with in terms of being smart, being adventurers, and yet being stymied by their position and situations. There's not a lot of political posturing in this play about that, which is actually kind of nice. It means you're free to play the characters instead of some polemic. But it is in there, and it's a matter of us finding the balance between being able to tell their stories and allowing the audience to see or read into those things that they want to see. My character in the last play and somewhat in the second play—I'm wary about making any grand pronouncements before we actually start rehearsals, but just from reading it and familiarizing myself with it—she is very representative of that kind of breaking point that many women must have come to in their lives: wanting to be a part of something bigger—that men's world—and to dream men's dreams. Very often the girls are sitting back there going, "Damn, I want to play Bakunin, I want to play Herzen."

IRVING: As far as the worlds of women, it's really a contrast for me. [In *Voyage*] I have the really traditional woman: the head of the household, running the serfs, making sure the daughters get married, and not a whole lot about herself. But going from that traditional woman to the second play, where I play a very bohemian woman—actually, I'm living in France in sin with a painter and posing naked. And then you get to meet the two of us [Ehle playing Herzen's wife]—she's going to be having her own [extramarital] relationship later, but she has this idealized view of love. [My character] has kind of knocked it all off. She's just getting down and dirty now.

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—AMY IRVING



BACK STAGE: Did you do much research on your characters before you started rehearsals?

PLIMPTON: I went to Moscow and St. Petersburg the week before we started rehearsals with Jason Butler Harner, Josh Hamilton, and Brian. I was the only chick in the whole trip. Andy McGinn, who is also in the company, went by himself to Russia for two weeks and he went to the house, Premukhino [the Bakunin family estate, which is the primary setting of *Voyage*]. We weren't able to get there because it was a bit too far north and we were only there for a week. I don't know how much it specifically informs our performances, but it was incredible, a really terrific way to get our feet wet.

IRVING: We all read about Bakunin and Herzen and *The Romantic Exiles* by [E.H.] Carr, which is all the backstories of the people involved in this story.

EHLE: It's a real page-turner, but there's this wonderful quote of Tom [Stoppard]'s talking about what a great book it is, where he says you can read it in an evening. Well, he can! I found it hard to put it down, but it was at least three evenings. [She laughs].

BACK STAGE: Tell us about working with Stoppard and about performing his text. Jennifer, you did *The Real Thing* in London and New York, and Amy, you must have known him during the making of the movie *Empire of the Sun*.

IRVING: Yes, I was married to Steven [Spielberg] at that time, and Tom would come out to our home and work on the weekends on the beach at Malibu. Steven was talking about the latest script and I was getting lunch together—not cooking but preparing stuff. I remember the thing that impressed me most at that time was Tom would say, "But hasn't Amy read the latest script?" and he would not let me wait on them. I had to contribute to the conversation, which I loved, and he wouldn't get back to work until he helped me with the dishes. I thought, There's a gentleman for you.

EHLE: In most plays, probably, and certainly in Tom's, I think there's a key. You figure out which words, what rhythm he had in mind, and then it all makes such sense. If you try to make sense of it [without that], nobody will know what the hell you're talking about. And it's really hard to unlock it. But you know it when you find the stress, the lean of the line. Suddenly it's effortless—the meaning is just there. I think that if you take care of the words, you'll get to the heart of it. I don't ever find it wordy, but I think that there's nothing possible that could happen onstage that is more important than what's being said. I just figured out the other day how to say a line from *The Real Thing*. I went to him and said, "I'm so sorry. I want to apologize. I was stressing the wrong word." And he said, "Yes, you were, but that was your prerogative."

BACK STAGE: Director Peter Hall once said that the greatest guide to playing a dramatist is to listen to his tone of voice in ordinary life.

EHLE: I do that sometimes. On the second play, for example, that I'm working on, I think, "Now, how would Tom say that line?" Because he writes in his rhythm of speech.

BACK STAGE: *The Coast of Utopia* has great emotional depth, as well as intellectual heft, but do you think it might seem too cerebral for some?

PLIMPTON: It's an odd thing when people are alienated by the language or the articulateness of a playwright. Because we aren't as people, in life and relationships. When you're flirting or falling in love with someone, the last thing you ever want to do is stare deep into their eyes. You want to look away. It's part of the seduction, part of the game. There's a funny thing about what we expect from the theatre—to see everything writ large and obvious, with all these emotions laid out in front of us. The lovely thing about Tom's writing is that it does all that work for us without being in your face. It allows you to be taken along on a sort of train track of a given story, and by the end of it you're sitting there saying, "I don't know what the hell happened, but that was awesome."

EHLE: When we did the second read-through of *Shipwreck*, we had clearly taken on board a lot about how the audience responds to Tom's work. One of the reasons why it worked so well is because we all know now [having performed *Voyage*] how to listen as an audience member to Tom's work, and we know more about delivering it to the audience as well.

PLIMPTON: There's a phrase that Billy [Crudup]'s character, Belinsky, says to Bakunin: "Words just lead you on. They arrange themselves every which way with no can to carry for the promises they can't keep." Tom asked, "Do you all know what 'can to carry' is?" No one had heard that expression—it's a Britishism that we Americans weren't familiar with. He said, "It means responsibility, but I really don't want to use that word because it's too many syllables based on Latin." And I died. [They all laugh.]

IRVING: We all agreed, of course!

PLIMPTON: Very true, Tom, very true.

EHLE: I can see your point!

IRVING: So we're stuck with "can to carry."

BACK STAGE: It sounds like a wonderful opportunity to work closely with a writer of Stoppard's caliber.

IRVING: It just doesn't get any better. For all of us to speak his words and be a part of his vision is a dream. And to have him here every day giving us a piece of what he knows—to do his master class, to have Tom leaning over and starting to give you little notes and hints and stuff—it's just, you know, nirvana. Also, we happen to have a director [Jack O'Brien] who I call an alien, because he's not only the most energetic, brilliant, and funny man, he's never in a bad mood. I have just never seen a director like this. Even during tech he doesn't get cranky, and I have never seen a director not lose it once during tech. He's just so secure. He's generous, gives us direction, and helps us find our characters in a way that I've never experienced before. He also understands Stoppard really well. It has been so entertaining just working with him and having him be our leader. We trust him so much.

EHLE: It would be impossible to do this without having a leader. And it is pretty rare to do a play, I find, with somebody at the helm.

BACK STAGE: The opening of *Voyage* was postponed by three weeks because Richard Easton took ill during previews. How did that affect you?

PLIMPTON: It's really fantastic when you get to realize the love and appreciation for Richard, and the way that the company gets to show our gratitude for him by all of us opening together. It's unusual and it's warming. It reminded us all of how close we were.

IRVING: It happened right on the stage. Martha and Ethan were on the stage, and his last words were "That is my last word," and he goes down. He didn't have a pulse for a long time. The doctors said that it was a miracle, given the state that he was in, that he was joking in the hospital. And the fact that he'll be back and he'll be better than ever. Jack came back to us the next day and said, "You know, all you actors, you create something, and the energy that went into this is almost stronger than any religion." I was brought up in the religion of theatre because I was brought up on the stage—we all were, actually. The theatre can be one of the most healthy environments and can feed your soul in a way that I don't think any other jobs can do.