



**SWAN SONG** Josh Hamilton, Kat Peters, Brian O'Byrne, Martha Plimpton & Ethan Hawke (from l.) look toward the future in "Salvage."

# FANTASTIC VOYAGE

'The Coast of Utopia' sails to an epic stage finale

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

**A**s "Salvage," the last part of Tom Stoppard's massive theater trilogy, opens at Lincoln Center today, director Jack O'Brien is finally starting to believe he'll reach the end of one of the most ambitious events in Broadway history. "I feel like I've raised my head out of the water and somewhere ahead of me is the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, and I just keep stroking toward the finish line," says O'Brien, who has been nominated for numerous Tony Awards and won Best Director twice: In 2003, for helping the musical "Hairspray," and in 2004, for the Kevin Kline-led "Henry IV."

"It has been a long time. We went into rehearsals on Sept. 6 and I haven't done anything but this since."

With dozens of characters, Stoppard's "The Coast of Utopia" trilogy ("Voyage" and "Shipwreck" are the titles of Parts 1 and 2) depicts the rise of the Russian intelligentsia in the mid-1800s, a group of privileged aristocrats who grapple with philosophy and love and family squabbles — all under the watchful, condemning eyes of the serfs who make their lavish lives possible.

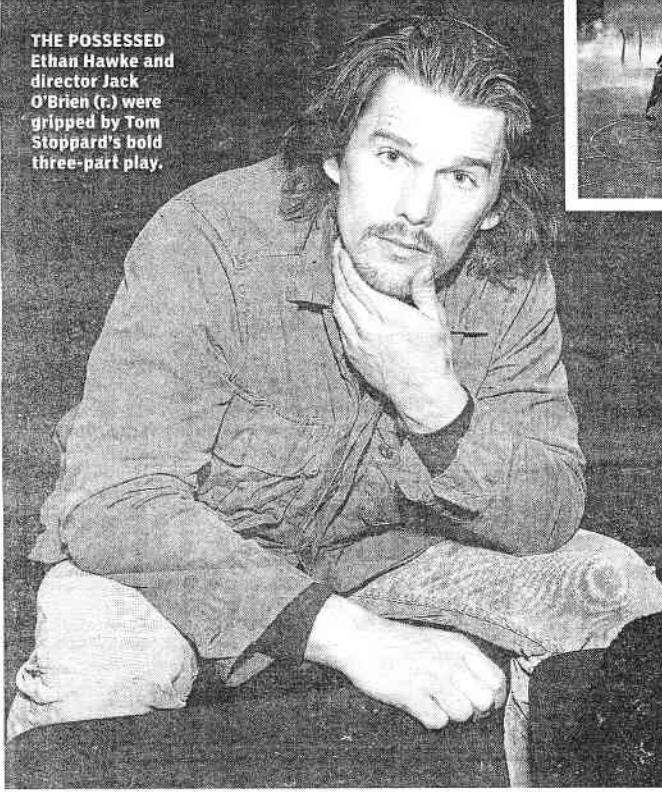
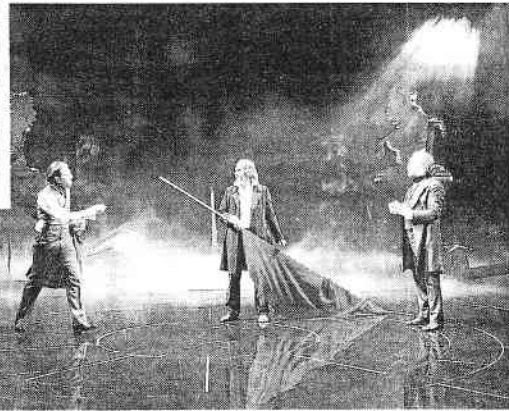
First staged in London in 2002, it took a massive commitment from Lincoln Center to make such a gamble possible in New York. Now, the work has been showered with praise; there's a crush of ticket buyers yearning to see the cycle all in one day, and "Salvage" has been extended to May.

The starry cast includes Ethan Hawke,



**NOTES FROM ON THE GROUND** Ethan Hawke, Martha Plimpton, Jennifer Ehle and Kellie Overbey (from l.) observe a country on the brink of revolutionary change in "Voyage," Part 1 of "The Coast of Utopia."

**TORRENTS OF SPRING** Butler Hamilton, Ethan Hawke and Adam Dannheisser (below, from l.) witness a wave of violent upheaval throughout Europe in the mid-1800s in "Shipwreck," Part 2 of "Utopia."



**THE POSSESSED** Ethan Hawke and director Jack O'Brien (r.) were gripped by Tom Stoppard's bold three-part play.



COREY SIKIN/DAILY NEWS

Brian F. O'Byrne, Billy Crudup, Josh Hamilton, Amy Irving, Richard Easton (who collapsed on stage in October performing a preview of "Voyage" but returned to the show several weeks later), Jennifer Ehle and Martha Plimpton. (Hawke also worked with O'Brien on "Henry IV.")

"When people say it's a sacrifice — well, what does a person who is interested in acting want to do with their time?" says Hawke, the 36-year-old who has been nominated for Oscars for acting (2001's "Training Day") and writing (2004's "Before Sunset"). "A three-part epic on Russian radicals written by Tom Stoppard and directed by Jack O'Brien at Lincoln Center — what else is there that you're hoping for?"

O'Brien agrees. "Let's not just look at it in terms of how difficult it has been or how challenging it is," says the director, who is working intensely with Stoppard, who has continued to trim and shape and refine the plays.

"It has been glorious. ... And I'm incredibly grateful and sort of amazed that I'm still standing at the end of this."

For Hawke, who plays the blustery, yearning-for-action revolutionary Bakunin, this is the culmination of an exceptional run of

theater work, which includes "Henry IV" and a 2005 revival of David Rabe's "Hurlyburly."

"I can't even be objective about Ethan," says O'Brien, who had high praise for the entire ensemble. "Ethan was the first to commit; he was the first tumbler to fall, and it all fell into place. Billy came almost immediately thereafter, and suddenly, much to my astonishment, I got this extraordinary company."

"I've seen Ethan grow since 'Henry IV,'" continues O'Brien. "He's formidable. I think he has been through a lot of unhappiness, but it has tempered him. It hasn't made him bitter and it hasn't defeated him; it has enlarged him. He's got a section in the last play that is as beautiful as anything I've ever seen in my life. It's the entire range of what he is as Bakunin and what he is as Ethan."

Now, rehearsals are over, all three plays are being performed in repertory, the casual backstage book club has moved on from Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" to Turgenev's "Fathers and Sons," and already, it seems, the May closing of this epic is coming fast.

"Theater is present tense, in the moment, as opposed to film which [seems] so much more nostalgic," says Hawke. "People have this idea that film is immortal, that it lives forever. It just doesn't. If your butt is in the seat [at a play] and you're watching something that's really special, it's special to you right now, this instant — you're not going to be able to rent it next year."

"When we do the last performance and the guys come in with the sledgehammers and crowbars and the garbage bins and start throwing our set away, it's such a strange meditation on death or something, it's so sad. ... But the fact that it's passing makes each performance special."

O'Brien is looking forward to a cruise to Costa Rica before, almost unbelievably, moving on to another trilogy at the Metropolitan Opera: Puccini's "Il Trittico," a collection of three one-act works.

"This has taken every bit of refinement, wit, blocking, cheerleading and editing that I can possibly muster," says O'Brien. "I don't know what it's going to be like when I finally finish this." ♦

**'Theater is in the moment,' says Ethan Hawke.**