Introduction: Stoppardianism

> I admit it looks odd. The question is does it look odd enough?
>
> *The Dog It Was That Died* (18)

Mix vaudevillian slapstick with crisp, witty banter. Add a song or two in the style of Gilbert and Sullivan. Try doing a whole scene in limericks. How about a shell game using humans popping in and out of shower stalls? Maybe add some really funny Communist Bloc shenanigans. Set it on a verandah in India, or on a transatlantic passenger liner, or in nineteenth-century Vienna, or in the secret byways of Elsinore Castle. Why not open eyes with a striptease act on a flying trapeze? Maybe parody the work of Agatha Christie. Or play fast and loose with Oscar Wilde. How about tapping into chaos theory or quantum mechanics? How about trying three full-length plays dedicated to the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia? Or how about taking on Shakespeare himself? And *always* leave your audiences wondering whether they have just been educated or entertained, in the end allowing for the likelihood of both.

In a nutshell, that is the theatre of Tom Stoppard.[1]

Stoppard has been going strong since the 1960s, generating five decades of consistently good theatre throughout. Consider his breakthrough *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), an award-winning "first" play that has hardly seen a day since its premiere when it was not being performed somewhere in the world. It was followed by the 1970s masterpieces *Jumpers* (1972) and *Travesties* (1974), which, combined with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, would by themselves have been sufficient to rate Stoppard a major playwright. But Stoppard continued, generating two successful West End plays in *Night and Day* (1978) and *The Real Thing* (1982). *Hapgood* (1988) followed, a robust and intellectually challenging "science play," which preceded what many think may be Stoppard's masterpiece, the science-informed, time-warping love story with a twist, *Arcadia* (1995). Stoppard followed that success with *Indian Ink* (1995) and *The Invention of Love* (1997), two more award-winning stage triumphs. This was

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followed up with yet another wonder of the theatre, his epic trilogy *The Coast of Utopia* (2002), which was in turn followed up with *Rock'n'Roll* (2006).

This extensive list, impressive by itself, fails to include Stoppard's numerous radio plays (like *Albert's Bridge*, 1967), shorter works (like *The Real Inspector Hound*, 1968), television plays (like *Squaring the Circle*, 1984), adaptations (like *On the Razzle*, 1981), and collaborations (like *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor*, 1977). And it overlooks Stoppard's notable dalliance with cinema, writing or co-writing the Oscar-nominated *Brazil* (1985), Oscar-winning *Shakespeare in Love* (1997), and numerous other works, including *The Romantic Englishwoman* (1975), *Despair* (1979), *Empire of the Sun* (1987), *Billy Bathgate* (1991), and *The Russia House* (1991). And then there is his much underappreciated novel, *Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon* (1966).

Anyone who has come in contact with any of the above works will surely agree that Stoppard is a consummate entertainer. But the entertainment is always enriched with an element of intellectual probing that challenges audiences in ways unique to his theatre. When at his best, Stoppard manages to draw from the minimalist likes of Samuel Beckett while making sure our eyes and ears are treated to sights and sounds that at times rival even Disney Productions, Inc. In a 1977 interview, Stoppard laid out his goals: "I want to demonstrate that I can make serious points by flinging a custard pie around the stage for a couple of hours."[2] Though he has yet to work with custard pies, he has tried just about everything else. If the audience is bored, Stoppard has failed. If the audience is not thinking, Stoppard has failed. Stoppard persistently repeats the point whenever interviewed: "Theatre is first and foremost a recreation. But it is not just a children's playground; it can be recreation for people who like to stretch their minds."[3]

Tom Stoppard likes to tell a story about a neighbor who owned a peacock.[4] One morning while drinking coffee and getting ready for work, the neighbor notices that the bird has gotten out of his yard. He puts on his slippers, grabs his coffee, and goes after the peacock, tracking it down on the other side of a major highway full of rush-hour traffic. He grabs the peacock, calms his squirming, awkward burden as best he can, and returns to the highway ready to cross when he feels his loose-fitting pajama pants slipping to his knees. Here is a question: what are the motorists thinking as they speed by a man in pajamas holding a coffee mug and a peacock? What would *you* be thinking?

Glimpses, vignettes, incomplete pictures. Something far less than the whole story. For Stoppard this tale does much to capture the human condition. We all want to know the whole story, to see the big picture, but all we get is a limited view of what is going on. Stoppard's theatre reminds us of the myopia that is so frustratingly central to being human. But his theatre does not sink to pensive

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self-pity in the standard way that so much modern theatre (and so much art in general) does. Other artists often take this limited drive-by vision and claim that this is all there is to life, concluding that the human condition is basically incomprehensibly absurd. What Stoppard suggests, however, is that our general bewilderment is not the result of a meaningless universe but the result of our current perceptual and intellectual shortcomings as human beings. For Stoppard, it is the great pleasure of life to work at getting a better view and arriving at a better understanding of those great perplexing mysteries of life. C. W. E. Bigsby observes that while the big picture may in fact forever lie just beyond our grasp, maintaining an "irrepressible vitality and eccentric persistence" constitutes "what Stoppard feels to be an authentic response to existence."[5]

One man's bag is nearly empty, and another's is nearly full. They are tossing coins, and for some time now each toss has come up "heads." It is a highly improbable event, but it is not impossible. This is the subject of the opening scene of Stoppard's first big success, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. That scene introduces us to what Stoppard will be doing for the next forty-plus years. He will take cold cool logic and just about every sensible way of looking at the world, and he will turn it all on its head over and over again. But Stoppard does not do this merely to entertain us with eccentric portrayals of comically absurd consequences. He focuses on the extreme horizons of probability in order to reveal to us that the world is far stranger and far more interesting than many of us ever imagined.

Stoppard's unique brand of theatre has led to the coining of the word "Stoppardian," putting him among the ranks of modernist and contemporary theatre innovators like Shaw (Shavian), Beckett (Beckettian), and Pinter (Pinteresque). Stoppardianism combines perplexing but undoubted rationalism with baroque linguistic precision to create comic plots filled with paradoxical uncertainties that somehow generate complex but logically satisfying results. Furthermore Stoppard's theatre integrates challenging intellectual concepts with high theatricality, so that, for example, an acrobatics routine becomes an illustration of agile minds at work; creating a deceptively realistic play-within-a-play rocks our notion of what is "the real thing" in theatre or anywhere else; and having one character morph into two characters gives us the chance to think about the multiple roles we all play in real life. Using the entertaining illusion of theatre to reflect upon the serious matters of life – that is Stoppardianism.

Not surprisingly, then, Stoppard takes a stand curiously atypical of many word-bound playwrights. Stoppard, a man who creates play*scripts*, insists that dramatic works are poor shadows of themselves when viewed as stand-alone

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art. They are best experienced when they take to the stage. Using a production of *Hapgood* as his example, Stoppard observes: "On to a shadowy empty stage, while short-wave radio voices are occupied in keeping tabs on a car somewhere in the streets of London, a swimming-pool's diving tower descends soundlessly from the flies ... the tower comes to earth as lightly as a leaf, and thus with perfect elegance and economy makes the first clear statement of the evening: 'We are at the pool, and now we begin.'" He concludes: "you can't *write* anything that good; and when you think about it, some, perhaps, most, of the best moments you can remember from plays are moments which nobody wrote."[6]

Tom Stoppard energetically recognizes the collaborative nature of the theatre and gives credit where it is due. While his plays are very good reads, they make for even better theatre when placed in the hands of talented theatre practitioners.

The Cambridge Introduction to Tom Stoppard is designed to help the theatregoer, reader, and student to better appreciate the world of Tom Stoppard on the page as well as stage. What immediately follows are a professional chronology, biographical sketch, and chapter on the keys to Stoppard's theatre in general. The subsequent chapters touch upon notable minor works while concentrating on Stoppard's major accomplishments. Interconnections among his works abound, and so it is unfortunate that space limitations prevent discussions of most of Stoppard's cinematic accomplishments (*Shakespeare in Love* is one exception).[7] Generally speaking, though, this book's ultimate goal is to encourage you to see, read, and listen to all of Stoppard's works, even those not covered in these pages.

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