“The Real Thing”
“The Real Thing”:
Essays on Tom Stoppard
in Celebration of his 75th Birthday

Edited by

William Baker and Amanda Smothers
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—William Baker
February 2013
INTRODUCTION

Tom Stoppard turned 75 on 3 July 2012. World acclaimed as a dramatist and screenwriter, as well as being a fierce defender of individual freedom, to date he has authored thirty plays, at least thirty-one screenplays or adaptations of others’ work that became screenplays and plays for other media that he adapted for the cinema or television. This celebratory volume honouring his 75th birthday includes a discussion of his television drama based on Ford Madox Ford’s Parade’s End, broadcast in the autumn of 2012. This is the main subject of Steve Price’s assessment of Stoppard’s “return to the small screen after an interval of twenty-eight years.”

Combined with film and TV scripts, Stoppard has so far created twelve adaptations and translations for the stage, two prose fictions, a collection of short stories, a novel, and many published letters to newspapers and magazines, mainly on political issues relating to censorship and issues of individual freedom. Not to be ignored are public talks such as his April 1980 lecture “Is It True What They Say about Shakespeare?” given to the International Shakespeare Association at their annual meeting in Hamburg.

Stoppard is also the author of over three-hundred-and-twenty articles, many of which he produced as a young journalist living in the West Country and as a fledgling reporter for the Western Daily Press and the Bristol Evening World. When he went to London to find fame and fortune, he wrote for the short-lived arts magazine Scene in 1962-1963. In addition to all this, Stoppard has given over three hundred newspaper and magazine interviews, as well as innumerable radio and television interviews and broadcasts. There are also unpublished materials and, of course, the radio plays. Four of his major radio plays, Albert’s Bridge, Artist Descending a Staircase, The Dog It Was That Died and In the Native State, were issued during the summer of 2012 as a British library BBC CD in honour of the author’s 75th birthday.

The present collection had its genesis in a graduate English seminar on Tom Stoppard, directed by this collection’s editor, at the Department of English at Northern Illinois University in the spring of 2011. The focus of the graduate seminar was not on Stoppard’s most well-known work, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but rather on his relatively neglected
work, such as his prose fiction, film adaptations, and two magnificent, relatively late plays: *Arcadia* and *The Invention of Love*. The essays that emerged from the seminar formed the basis for presentations in a special session devoted to Tom Stoppard at the Midwest Modern Language Association (M/MLA) conference in St. Louis, Missouri in the autumn of 2011. Carol Koulikourdi, the enterprising commissioning editor of Cambridge Scholars Publishing, expressed an interest in these papers, and this volume was born.

The revised graduate student papers have been supplemented in this 75th birthday tribute to a great creative genius by essays produced by eminent literary critics and journalists who have written notably on various aspects of Stoppard’s work. Without giving the game away—hopefully this volume will be something of a surprise to its recipient Tom Stoppard—his longest-serving assistant Jacky Matthews proved to be extremely helpful in obtaining Tom’s Stoppard permission to reprint his 1983 observations in an interview with Brian Firth on his play *The Real Thing*. The stage production opened shortly before Stoppard’s comments, which are not confined to the play but range widely over his dramatic work up to the interview date with an emphasis on *Jumpers*, were documented. They appeared in the student magazine *Strawberry Faire*, emanating from what was then a teachers’ training college in South London, and, until their re-incarnation in this volume, had been largely forgotten.

The majority of Stoppard’s manuscripts and other materials are held at his archive at the University of Texas’s Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. An account of the material from Stoppard’s early career housed at the Ransom Center appeared in John Fleming’s “Tom Stoppard: His Life and Career Before ‘Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’” published in *The Library Chronicle of the University of Texas at Austin*, 26:3 (1996). Stoppard has added to this archive on a regular, annual basis. John Fleming’s essay in this collection updates and expands on his account of the Ransom Center Stoppard holdings. The author of *Stoppard’s Theatre: Finding Order amid Chaos* (2001), Fleming pays special attention to materials relating to his subject’s early career and journalism.

Ira Nadel, Stoppard’s biographer, author of the over-six-hundred-page tome *Tom Stoppard: A Life* (2002), in his intriguingly titled “Chekhov’s Stoppard” places *The Coast of Utopia* in its context. Demonstrating the importance of Stoppard’s long association, interest, and attachment to Chekhov, Nadel justifiably writes that “Stoppard has shaped Chekhov. His wit, lightness, comic sense and belief that underneath the misery of disappointment there could be some hope re-defines his Chekhov for our
time.” Nadel adds that “in three major plays—Ivanov, The Seagull and The Cherry Orchard—Stoppard has re-made Chekhov into a contemporary, interpreting rather than directly translating the works into his own style.”

A different tradition to which Stoppard is indebted is the subject of Alastair Macaulay’s exploration of The Invention of Love. Macaulay brilliantly examines the main items of classical literature that occur in the play, some of them well-known, others more obscure. Macaulay also discusses selected aspects of textual criticism on those classical works and mentions some textual critics including A. E Housman himself, an actual character in a prominent role in The Invention of Love, as well as other aspects of classical scholarship. He also has very interesting things to say about Oscar Wilde, another real-life figure whom Stoppard’s genius transforms into a dramatic character in what Macaulay and other discerning critics regard as perhaps Stoppard’s finest dramatic achievement to date.

A very different approach is found in another contribution to this volume celebrating genius. In their “Reading (and Writing) the Ethics of Authorship: Shakespeare in Love as Postmodern Metanarrative,” Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack are only too cognizant of the fact that Shakespeare in Love is a film screenplay jointly authored by Mark Norman and Tom Stoppard. Their concern is its “explicitly postmodern narrative design [that] undergirds” the screenplay. Womack and Davis pay particular attention to recent critical approaches to Stoppard and to the “numerous textual, cultural and historical aspects of Shakespeareana” that “continually remind” the film’s audience that they “are witnessing the construction of narrative.” Further, Womack and Davis argue that the “screenplay provide[s] subtle but profuse cultural and literary referents” ranging from films such as Laurence Olivier’s 1944 Henry V to Trevor Nunn’s 1996 Twelfth Night, amongst other cinematic productions. There are also “several verbal allusions to Shakespeare’s plays, including The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Love’s Labour’s Lost, Anthony and Cleopatra, and Titus Andronicus, among a host of others.”

Still another direction is offered by Steven Price’s “The Illusion of Proprietorship: Tom Stoppard’s Parade’s End.” Price examines the craft of screenwriting and Stoppard’s working methods with singular reference to his return to television in his five-part adaptation of Ford Madox Ford’s tetralogy. Price considers the business of authorship and writing the screenplay, especially the multi-authored television script “albeit with Stoppard retaining a sense of ownership,” drawing upon the Ford text as published by Faber towards the end of 2012. He also consults previous textual incarnations generously made available by Tom Stoppard to the
editor of this volume prior to the actual television broadcast. Consequently, Price reveals much about “the nature of Stoppard’s screenwriting.” Price significantly draws attention to Stoppard’s remarks in an interview with John Preston recently published in the *Daily Telegraph* that he doesn’t “write in pure cinematic language the way a screenwriter probably aspires to. [He writes] scenes—often quite long scenes—mainly because [he] still get[s] seduced into writing six lines where one and a half will do … *Parade’s End* is closer to writing a play than anything [he]’s ever written for the screen” (“Tom Stoppard Interview for *Parade’s End* and *Anna Karenina*,” 24 October 2012).

A signal of Stoppard’s greatness lies in the diversity of approaches that may be applied to his work. In “Stoppard’s Arcadia: ‘This is not Science; this is story-telling,’” John V. Knapp, having witnessed one of its very first performances, returns to the text of *Arcadia* and re-examines his own reactions to and memories of the play first performed in London in April 1993. Knapp employs the ideas of the cognitive psychologist/economist/logician and all-around polymath, Daniel Kahneman in his *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), as well as others. Knapp notes the substantial changes in the “science” alluded to in the play, whether scientific concepts such as “chaos theory,” or Newton’s second law of thermodynamics, or even Mandelbrot’s fractals. Knapp also wonders how a play of witty exchanges and verbal jousting had such a powerful emotional hold on him during its last few minutes. Kahneman’s explanation seemed most satisfying: from his perspective, human beings live at the mercy of the “remembered self” contrasted to the “experiencing self.” Kahneman notes: “Memories are all we get to keep from our experience of living, and the only perspective that we can adopt as we think about our lives is therefore that of the remembered self” (381). Consequently, whether speaking of Verdi’s *La Traviata* or Stoppard’s *Arcadia*, Kahneman thinks that the theatrical experience is about “significant events and memorable moments, not about time passing” (387). Requiring us to watch Thomasina and Septimus’s poignantly circular but terminal waltz, Stoppard pulls off a sleight-of-hand with our remembered and final emotions. The waltz is indeed the musical cue triggering the tyranny of the remembering self.

*Arcadia* also engages papers emerging from the NIU graduate seminar. In an interview with Sarah Lyall that appeared in the *New York Times*, 13 December 1998, Stoppard comments: “I have a special take on historical accuracy, which is that all supposed post historical truths are temporary, meaning they’re always there to be modified in the light of subsequent discoveries.” Such an observation provides the foundations for the search
for historical “truth” in *Arcadia*. For Amanda Smothers, this search provides a central theme that permeates Stoppard’s play. Both the early-nineteenth-century characters and their late-twentieth-century counterparts attempt to discover and recover historical “truths” in addition to “truths” and proofs in both science and love. Yet, as Smothers perceptively observes, the “truths” that they uncover are incomplete, particularly the information that the twentieth-century characters discover about the earlier occupants of the house. For Smothers, the search for historical information in the play reveals that it is not possible to obtain complete veracity because different planes/perspectives are dependent on the limited vision of each character and the always shifting constitution of “truth.”

*Arcadia* is also the subject of another graduate contribution. John Sieker’s “Confrontations with Mortality: Keats’s Nightingales, and Prelapsarian Symbols in Stoppard’s *Arcadia*” points to Stoppard’s poetry, revealed even in his discussions of the mathematical and scientific aspects of nature. The character of Septimus Hodge in his hermitage in Arcadia needs to repair the destruction of his world resulting from the loss of his love. Septimus tries to do so through his desperate attempts to use his elegant mathematical ability to find the iterated equation that will undo past events, time and tragedy. Such an effort is represented by his attempt to reorder his world and to re-create what was becoming his idyllic garden at Sidley Park. Through his love of Thomasina, Septimus attempts to reject the plight of human mortality. It provides a striking parallel to John Keats’s speaker in his *Ode to a Nightingale*. Keats’s speaker is able to wrench himself from the beautiful world that he, being human, cannot ever truly occupy. Septimus is doomed, however, to continually search through mathematical equations to re-create his garden in a way that he deems to be ideal. In such an exploration and in his comparison between Keats and Stoppard’s *Arcadia*, Sieker elucidates the tragic pathos underlying the play.

The work emerging from the graduate seminar yet again illustrates the eclectic nature of approaches to Stoppard afforded by his rich texts. The essays also draw attention to relatively critically neglected areas of his diverse, prolific output. Scott Stalcup’s “Who Rules the Empire?” is an examination of J.G. Ballard’s semi-autobiographical novel *Empire of the Sun* (1984). Subjects engaging Stalcup include contrasts between the novel and the film, contrasts and similarities between the lives of Stoppard and Ballard, and an explanation of Stoppard’s attraction to *Empire of the Sun*. The film has a complicated production history. Changes in the production team led to a curtailment of Stoppard’s involvement and there was additional interference from outside writers that complicate the nature
of the screen adaptation’s authorship. Additionally, critical reactions to both the film and novel are addressed, as is the problem of to whom authorial credit should be given. Should it be conferred on Stoppard or equally to the film’s director, Steven Spielberg? As Stalcup points out, it may not even be possible to decide definitively who rules the Empire.

Timothy Hendrickson’s “Insecurity and Frustration and Disgust in Tom Stoppard’s Fiction” indicates correctly that very little critical attention if any has been paid to Stoppard’s fiction. Further, most of the work on his fiction is largely concerned with establishing patterns of understanding from which his subsequent drama may be understood. There is a vacuum: critics seldom discuss the fiction without referring to the drama. The reason for this may well be that critics find Stoppard’s fiction of lesser quality than his drama. Hendrickson argues that Stoppard’s fictional characters are a more honest and less academic reflection of their author’s personal insecurities and concerns. During the mid-1960’s, the period of his fiction to date, he felt less averse to sharing them than he became subsequently. For Hendrickson, given Stoppard’s international reputation, his framed and assumed persona subsequently afforded him a degree of secrecy and privacy. This was not always so, however, and his fiction presents Stoppard at what may be perceived as his most accessible, particularly in its representations of insecurity, frustration, and disgust. Consequently, there is considerable value in approaching the fiction for its own sake and not merely as a basis for discussing the drama.

In “The Inauthentic Translations in The Invention of Love,” Melina Probst argues that the drama’s intricate scenes contain characters that have the appearance of authenticity and that this prompts audiences to investigate Stoppard’s art more closely as well. Characters who are actual people become figments of another actual person’s imagination, to which audiences can never have complete access. Several characters in Stoppard’s drama are based on historical figures. Five of these, found only in the initial act, interact with one another. These five—Mark Pattison, Walter Pater, John Ruskin, Benjamin Jowett, and classical scholar Robinson Ellis—are personalities of relatively different importance in Victorian art and scholarship. In other words, they interact in his character AE Housman’s, or “AEH’s,” imagination. Housman’s crucial decision to devote his energies to his scholarly career, rather than to produce poetry, transforms him into “AEH,” the elder, far less virile incarnation of himself reflecting on his seemingly conflicting impulses. The actual people who become figments of “AEH’s” imagination are also characters in the mind of the dramatist. Stoppard’s act of writing the play mirrors his character
“AEH’s” exploration of his own past. Central to The Invention of Love is the idea of the artist or scholar who, dependent on the past, reconstructs it for his own purposes, for his craft: the peripheral characters of the first act become central to this Stoppardian theme.

Much has been written on Stoppard’s early and important creation Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and his subsequent engagement with Shakespeare represented by the collaborative screenplay for Shakespeare in Love. Michael Dean’s “Stoppard’s Shakespeare: Collaboration and Revision” examines Stoppard’s fascination with his great dramatic predecessor through the lens of Stoppard’s neglected lecture “Is it true what they say about Shakespeare?” In this 1980 lecture, Stoppard describes his philosophy of interpretation and offers valuable insight into what he perceives makes Shakespeare powerful. Stoppard illustrates the interpretive range of Shakespeare’s drama and pays tribute to the importance of creative wordplay. Dean explores the manner in which the great twentieth-century dramatist has borrowed and then transformed his great predecessor’s work into fresh territory by grasping the key elements of the old and integrating them into what may be perceived as a Stoppardian vision of life and expression of faith.

—William Baker
Introduction

The Real Thing was first performed at the Strand Theatre London on 16 November 1982. It was directed by Peter Wood. Roger Rees played Henry, and Felicity Kendall was Annie. Some of its many concerns are the nature of love, fidelity, infidelity, and commitment. In Ira Nadel's words, "music is an important register of change and morality in the play." The play "is [also] about counterfeit politics as much as real emotions." However, The Real Thing is also remembered for Henry's speech celebrating the wonders of the cricket bat, "confirming for many not only Stoppard's obsession with cricket but his obsession with words."1

Shortly after the initial performance of the play, Stoppard was interviewed by Brian Firth, a lecturer in English at St Mary's Teacher Training College, and spoke about the drama, its inception and meaning, and of course other matters! The interview was published in the literary magazine Strawberry Fare produced by the English Department at St. Mary's College Strawberry Hill, Twickenham Middlesex. Strawberry Fare, during its short run, published fascinating interviews with leading literary figures, including Peter Porter, David Lodge, Seamus Heaney, Beryl Bainbridge, D.J. Enright, Michael Holroyd, and others. Today, copies of the journal are extremely scarce. It ran from autumn 1984 to autumn 1989, and the only complete runs appear to be in the British Library under the call mark ZK.9.a.41, or in the archives of the College. Its duplicate copies were generously sent to the present writer by the College.2

Tom Stoppard and Brian Firth have generously allowed this interview to be re-published in this volume of essays celebrating Tom Stoppard's 75th birthday.
Interview

BF [Brian Firth]: The general emphasis of interviews with you and articles about you has, it seems to me, tended to be on lines like theatricality, irony, detachment … and I wanted to take a different line because *The Real Thing* shows a thematic seriousness that is quite risky—as the play says, “loving and being loved is unliterary.” Did you have a sense of doing something difficult in this way?

TS [Tom Stoppard]: In fact the origins of the play weren’t particularly close to that aspect of the play. To begin with, I was interested in this remark, which appears in the play in a slightly different form, a remark that public attitudes are the displacement of private derangement, the displacement of something private into a public arena. And at the same time, I quite separately wanted to write something about a situation which would play with the audience’s expectations, so that the opening situation would later be found to be a play written by one of the characters. So really, I began with something that wasn’t to do with any particular subject like love or marriage; it was much more to do with something more mechanical; it was to do with having a play with a first scene which was written by a character in the second scene, and then whatever that scene happens to be about, in some way it would be echoed by a subsequent event of that character’s life and so on. Because of this, I was stuck with the person being a playwright, because he has to be responsible for Scene 1, and that rather put me off writing the play for quite a while because I didn’t really want to write about a playwright; I thought it might indicate that one had run out of everything, if one started to write plays about people who write plays. However, after thinking about trying to deal with a novelist or a filmmaker, I decided that that was not practical, so I ended up with a first scene which is part of a play, and thus with a character who wrote plays; and then it came to what the thing was actually about, another quite separate earlier feeling that I would like to write something about love, which was a subject that I started trying to write about in *Night and Day* which only went half-way along the road. So all these things came together like that. That’s how I find things happening. If you start writing plays, when notions about two or three plays turn out to be notions about the same play, it’s always a good starting point.

BF: I suppose what impressed me about the theme of *The Real Thing*, as in other plays, was its faith in certain simple good things, its belief in simple pleasures and in certain fundamental decencies.
TS: Well, it’s not a policy or principle or philosophy which I in a deliberate way propagate through plays. I have a very conservative temperament. What sophistication I pretend to usually takes the form of resolving various complex versions of the world and arriving at a really simple view of the world, which I take to be a fairly sophisticated end… something like that.

BF: You provide almost a parody of that in what you have said about Henry—an ironist on the surface...

TS: …and a prig in private, yes. There’s a lot of stuff in the play which inevitably bounces off the wall and back at me, in a way which is more central to me than a lot of lines in Night and Day. I mean, Night and Day is full of statements about the subject of journalism which are absolutely myself speaking, as much as anything in The Real Thing. But The Real Thing comes over as much more personal, perhaps because of the subject.

BF: If you write about love, you are bound to be personally exposed.

TS: Yes, that’s right. I’m told that all middle-aged married playwrights end up with their marriage play.

BF: What struck me as important in your concept of love was—I don’t know if the word would be responsibility. “What else could I do, he was my recruit,” Annie says; and she asks Henry at the end, “look after me”; and earlier, there is ironic use of the term “caring society.”

TS: Yes; you’ve reminded me of something—this is a bit of a tangent—but the line about Henry drawing his knees up into his chest when he hears a phrase like “the caring society,” you’ve reminded me that that line is no longer in the play, which opens up a whole new subject matter of how one compromises a text when one gets into a theatre, and I am heartless about doing that sort of thing. I had forgotten all about that line until you mentioned it just now. One of the slightly alarming things about writing plays is that you spend a long time thinking about what ought to be said, months and months go into that, and then in four weeks with actors in rehearsal and for empirical reasons, like the dragginess of a scene, you just chop these things out and never think about them again. It’s really rather sad, and that thing about the caring society, which is a sort of joke but it meant something to the character, that was in the play when we had our first audience, but it was in a scene which was evidently five minutes too long. You have these ruthless conclusions about whether the length of a scene is being justified by its dynamics, and when it’s not, you have to change the equation. You either have to make it more dynamic or make it shorter—and I usually end up by making it shorter.
BF: And the scene with Debbie …
TS: For the first few performances, we performed the daughter scene and the ex-wife scene as separate scenes, as they are in the printed text. The second edition brings the text into line with what we are now performing. And what I did was I made those separate scenes into one scene and for similar reasons. In some peculiar way, there was one scene too many in the second half, one scene-change too many, a kind of stop and start thing about the second half; it had over-extended itself. And finally, that’s what I did about it without the slightest regret. I think it’s very much better the way it is now. That’s the difference between the theatre and the novel.

BF: Could I draw a comparison between George in *Jumpers* and Henry here? In the sense that George is in a similar position—he has a similar call of responsibility for Dottie, which he can’t fulfil, but Henry does for Annie?

TS: I hadn’t thought of it. Quite honestly, I could turn what you said around, and say that it would be quite impossible for someone to write two plays with a protagonist in each, in which the two protagonists didn’t in some way remind you of each other.

BF: I raised that example because I wanted to come back to this question of responsibility, which seems a concern of your work in different ways. It’s obviously something, the responsibility of the writer, which concerns you.

TS: Yes it does. It comes up in most of the plays, doesn’t it? In fact, it comes up in most of the things I have written in one form or another: it’s an interesting and powerful thing to write about.

BF: I suppose that for a dramatist, who has a recognised capacity for manipulating words—and an audience come to that—it’s natural to be concerned. And you give alternative responses of course—in *Travesties*: “And what did you do in the Great War?” “I wrote *Ulysses*”

TS: Yes it’s one of those preoccupations which revel themselves to the author in the moment that he’s writing. It’s much more to do with finding out what you’re preoccupied with in the process of writing plays than with knowing what your important concerns are and determining to write plays about those. There’s very little of that in me. Occasionally one does, I mean a play like *Professional Foul* was written to order practically—I said I would write a play for Prisoner of Conscience Year before I had the slightest idea or notion of a play to write and had to find something appropriate. That was an exception. Everything you write comes out of yourself; it’s going to be in some ways an expression of yourself, however many sieves it may have
gone through. So it’s going to have that kind of internal consistency. If you have been in some way misidentified by other people, you’ve heard that you are a certain kind of writer, or ought to be, and if you decide to be that person and write as that person would write, I think it would be difficult to do anything half-way decent because that’s not how good writing happens. There is a kind of craftsmanship, facility, in writing which might help you to get away with quite a lot, but I think writers know which things they can stand behind and which things they can’t.

BF: Of course some writers appear deliberately to cut themselves off from discussing their work—respond to enquiries very gnomically and so on.

TS: I envy them, actually. Although I enjoy talking to people because it’s a very pleasant occupation, I have absolutely no urge of any kind to discuss my work; whenever I do it, it’s entirely out of courtesy to somebody—it just seems finally priggish to say no I am not actually interested by my plays in any academic way. I am extremely interested in my plays, but I am not remotely interested in assessing them, finding relationships between them; in short, I am not interested in any sense in studying them, and I don’t think that’s much of an admission to make; I don’t see why writers should be because, of course, I am interested in that way in the work of other people.

BF: If I could then ask a question on a more technical level. You are obviously taken with what Yeats called “the fascination of what’s difficult.” The Real Thing takes technical risks in the way it introduces and drops a generous sequence of characters—Max, Billy, Brodie, the daughter—it stops and starts again if you like. Was this because you were so concerned with the central pair?

TS: I think that you could write that play without the daughter, if it were to be a play just about Henry and Annie. But what the daughter says I wanted to be in the play; there was no one else to say what she says, and it was one of the things in the end that I wanted the play to say. But the question is on a false premise. There is something wrong with your question—it assumes that one’s interest is in this relationship. But actually that is only part of it. One’s interest is also in pulling the rug out from under audiences and having fun with the form of theatre. I am liable to get more excited by the idea of four people having a drink and two people leaving the room, and the other two revealing themselves to be in love with each other, for which you have got to have four people. As a theatrical moment, that actually gives me more juice to write than something more abstract, like love and marriage, friendship.
BF: The need for the sequence is for one to take the place of the other—Billie is Brodie and so on, Max is Henry.

TS: That’s right. I couldn’t write the play I wanted to write with any fewer characters. And at the same time, I should point out to you that it says a lot for the day and age and the economics we live in that you think seven actors a lot of people. It’s really just a modestly average play.

BF: Yes, I was thinking from the position of the actor who comes in in Act I, let’s say, Max.

TS: And you never see him again. That’s the one thing that I would have liked to do, to bring back Max in Act II. I had a sense of the architecture of the play, and even while we were rehearsing, I kept saying to the actor, I’m going to get you back in here. And I said to Peter Wood at one point, we’ll have Max in when Annie is rehearsing the play on the train, in the T.V. studio, put Max there—he can be dressed up as Henry V or something. Because it seems to me a defect of the play that Max never shows up again. But I never solved it. I mean, I had no reason for putting Max in the second act, so in the end I didn’t do it. It would have been architecturally neat, and I like symmetry. You do have a scene with the husband and his ex-wife and a complementary scene between the wife and her ex-husband would have been perfectly acceptable and desirable, but I couldn’t think what they had to say.

BF: Could I ask you again about the Debbie scene—it’s one you obviously took trouble over and thought important, changing it around to get it right.

TS: Yes. Funnily enough, I originally thought the daughter would come and visit him and we would have the scene there. Peter Wood thought that the daughter ought to be in the squat she’s talking about, and I rather agreed with that. I mean, I was just trying to simplify life for whoever had to put the play on, so I was rather pleased when he disagreed, and I put the daughter into that scene as you read it. Then the second Act became unwieldy, and we kept wanting to get back to the couple and that digression was just one digression too many. But as to why I wanted the daughter there at all, which was really what you were asking, it was mostly to do with what she said about sex, that there are a couple of speeches in that scene; the daughter says things which are supposed to be pertinent, instructive vis-à-vis Henry’s situation. And there is no other person who can say those things in the play. More than one person said before the play went on, “Well, you know, the daughter could go,” and I was fighting for the daughter.
BF: Could one make a comparison again, between the Jumpers situation and Henry’s as in the scene with his daughter? In each case, you have got a man confronted with the relativity of values; with George the terms are theological, here they are sexual, but you have a man in each case unable to live without standards, needing to find a ground for responsibility that he can’t rationally justify but knows.

TS: Well, I’m a great one for intuitive morality.

BF: She represents the gulf into which he can’t go.

TS: That’s absolutely right, yes. It’s funny that you talk quite a lot about Jumpers and I can see why because there are tensions in each play between a painful, intuitive ethic, and a cheerful nihilism, really, or determination not to get things out of proportion, just to look at things rationally, and in Jumpers it’s carried to a farcical extreme. But it’s the same tension that’s perpetrated between the father and the daughter, and indeed between Henry and his ex-wife. I do tend to have people in my plays who are irrationally hanging on to some un-demonstrable truth. I would not disclaim that.

BF: The Last Romantic.

TS: The Last Romantic indeed, yes.

BF: You described yourself earlier as conservative. Do you think that comic writing tends to be conservative? That it reconciles us with what’s there?

TS: I am tempted to say that’s too deep for me. Comic writing is supposed to be subversive. Mine isn’t, I don’t feel that. I mean, Lenny Bruce—subversive—Morecambe and Wise—conservative—I would have thought you couldn’t make general statements about comic writing; I think what’s truer is that there are conservative comedians, radical comedians. It reminds me obscurely of a remark made by an American painter whose name escapes me; he was with a lot of other painters who were arguing as to whether it was conceited or the opposite to leave canvases unsigned, and this chap said, “If you’re conceited, it’s conceited to sign them, if you’re not conceited, it’s not conceited to sign them…” I think that if you are conservative, your humour is conservative, and if your politics are radical, your humour is radical as well.

BF: You clearly take a line in your work which is aware of the arrogance of “them” of totalitarian dangers, and also of the arrogance of the individual, defining the world for himself; this seems to relate to the importance of respect for language on which you have clearly strong personal feelings.
TS: Yes, I have. I don’t know how important it really is, but it seems important to me. It upsets me if I find the language skidding away and people using it like plasticine.

BF: Perhaps the thing about language is it’s social, but I don’t own it and they don’t own it either, we show respect to each other through it.

TS: I think it’s a question [of] whether language describes the world or whether language is the toy of the world, whether it’s simply there to be used by the world. I prefer to think that there is a defined world which exists independently of human beings and that language is structured in order to describe that world, and therefore, you have to use that language accurately. There’s no problem as long as there’s a consensus that black means that and beige means that—it wouldn’t make any difference to me if the labels changed, it’s only when they start crossing that it becomes important.

BF: If I could ask one last question. You seem very fond of what I might call the quiet ending, the anti-climactic ending. You vary your endings in so many different ways—the facing of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Free Man ends with weak gestures towards “I’ll go round tomorrow,” “tide me over.” In Night and Day, you’ve got a kind of aftermath last scene with Wagner and the wife … are you conscious of this? I mean you are operating on an audience here.

TS: I’m not that conscious of it, but obviously, for one reason or another, I have a predilection for that sort of conclusion. I’ve no idea why, but you’re quite right: that’s quite consistent of me; and furthermore, if I see something by somebody else that ends with a bang, I think, “Surely there’s something else.” When I went to see Don Giovanni, or Samson and Delilah where the pillars fell over and the thing finished, I felt, where’s the rest of it, what happens next, here’s the coda?

BF: This is a common element in modern writing—perhaps a sense of the impossibility of imposing a final meaning on a work—one conclusive experience that will sum it all up.

TS: I think it’s back to the theatre again. You’ve got this room full of people and you hope you’ve trapped them and carried them along, and perhaps one doesn’t feel like just like that—flinging the doors open and throwing them into the street. You want them to sort of wind down and get used to the idea that they have to look for their other selves.

BF: And go on arguing as it were? Even in Jumpers you have a set of parallel speeches to end, George, Archie …

TS: Yes, but that all closes down slowly onto one image, doesn’t it, and it’s the same feeling.

BF: All those endings are so different; no two are the same…
TS: And yet they have the same feeling about them, don’t they? I did find for myself the effect was to leave me with the play to resolve, so that I went out to argue about it… Perhaps it is appropriate to end on that note of suspension.

Notes


Works Cited

Lopakhin’s question at the end of Tom Stoppard’s version of *The Cherry Orchard* is one that has long fascinated the playwright, introduced to Russian society and culture through Chekhov’s enigmatic work. Absorbed by the way nothing seemed to be occurring in his plays, “and yet it’s all intensely interesting and dramatic,” Stoppard found Chekhov intriguing from his early days as a journalist in Bristol where he attended productions at the Bristol Old Vic. In the Russian’s drama, he later explained, there are large “subterranean movements going on in relationships between characters, but they are conveyed as though they were clues which you have to pick up. That really attracted me.” How Chekhov achieved this has always interested Stoppard, who echoed a similar sense of disarming intensity when he declared in a lecture for the London Library that “I have a practice but I have no theory, let alone a thesis—my only expertise is in theatre, which is a much more pragmatic business than is often thought.”

The attitude is Chekhovian and suggests ways Chekhov shaped Stoppard’s work.

In turn, Stoppard has shaped Chekhov. His wit, lightness, comic sense, and belief that underneath the misery of disappointment there could be some hope re-defines his Chekhov for our time. In three major plays—*Ivanov*, *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard*—Stoppard has re-made Chekhov into a contemporary, interpreting rather than directly translating the works into his own style. Just prior to the opening of his mammoth Russian trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*, Stoppard admitted that everyone wants to write a Chekhov play. Failing that, a playwright turns to adaptation. Stoppard has done both.

In each treatment of Chekhov, Stoppard makes the text his own, while at the same time maintaining its Chekhovian core. He does not translate
these works in any sense but begins with someone else’s literal translation of the text which he then alters, modernizes, or revises. Actress and Russian expert Helen Rappaport, for example, provided a word-for-word translation of *The Cherry Orchard*, while also suggesting alternate language, as well as topical and historical references, and allusions. This was Stoppard’s initial text.³

In a 2007 essay, Rappaport herself addresses this practice, noting first the wide range and preponderance of contemporary productions of Chekhov. The source for this rebirth, she explains, is the shift from actor-vehicle to playwright-vehicle productions which suddenly became the fashion. Replacing the old-guard of reverential literary translators such as Constance Garnett was a new generation of “non-Russian speaking playwrights working from literal translations whose major preoccupation would be the accessibility of new ‘acting versions’ of Chekhov’s texts.” The rationale for this is that the academic practitioners were “deemed unable to translate for stage performance” (Rappaport 68). They lacked the stagecraft and experience of working with actors. Stoppard’s practice is the opposite: he clearly understands that the purpose of the playwright’s craft is to serve the actors, working for the event at the possible sacrifice of linguistic authenticity.⁴

Stoppard quickly realized that Chekhov was also an entry to understanding Russian life explored most intensely in *The Coast of Utopia*. Exposure to the manners, ideas, and visions of Russia experienced in Chekhov encouraged Stoppard to attempt a big Russian work, hastened by his viewing a production of Gorky’s *Summerfolk* in 1999 at the National Theatre, two years after his version of *The Seagull*.

Chekhov, one might say, guided Stoppard from the beginning of his career as a dramatist. The premiere of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* at the National Theatre in 1967 found him, in fact, sandwiched between Strindberg and Chekhov. The season began with *The Dance of Death*, followed by *Rosencrantz*, and then *The Three Sisters* directed by Olivier (Nadel 575 nt 36). With Beckett, Chekhov became the most influential dramatist for Stoppard, the appeal being one of character as much as language and structure. In “Chekhov—An Impartial Witness,” Stoppard elaborates Chekhov’s “idea of moral neutrality” arguing that this is his great contribution to theatre. After narrating his rocky start with *Ivanov* and Chekhov’s efforts to rewrite it, Stoppard contradicts Chekhov’s belief that he should have waited further before revising, that waiting would not have helped—“because it was Chekhov that the Russian theatre was waiting for.”
Chekhov’s ability not to offer judgments on his characters brought something new to the Russian drama, Stoppard believes. There was not a “single villain or angel” in Ivanov, he told his brother. The artist must be, in a now famous phrase, “an impartial witness.” The artist must have the confidence to admit that he understands nothing of what he sees. Like the early Stoppard who claimed he constantly contradicted himself and stood for nothing with no clear cut political or social views, Chekhov explained to an early admirer, writer Dmitri Grigorovich, that he lacked “a political, religious and philosophical world view—it keeps changing every month, so I’ll have to limit myself to the description of how my characters love, marry, give birth, die and how they speak” (Stoppard, “Chekhov”).

The sense of simultaneity—of domestic action hiding or obscuring another less obvious story often of displaced values—provides both a technique and a theme for Stoppard’s work. The dual story and time shifts of Arcadia, for example, more hidden in the alternate story of Indian Ink, expose the duality Stoppard perceives at the centre of Chekhov offering structural possibilities for his own work.

My bones are stiff with boredom. I have to stretch them.  
—Babakina, Ivanov

The immediate Stoppard/Chekhov relationship began with Stoppard working on Chekhov’s second play, The Seagull, in 1997, looped back to his first, Ivanov, prepared for the stage in 2008, and ended with his last, The Cherry Orchard, which premiered in 2009. Only Uncle Vanya and The Three Sisters remain untreated. But the three Stoppard does “translate” stand at three major stages in Chekhov’s development and share a similar theme of return and departure elaborated on by Stoppard. In The Seagull, Arkadina and Trigorin come back to Sorin’s estate, in Ivanov it is Ivanov constantly returning to the Lebedevs, and in The Cherry Orchard, Ranevskaya returns at the opening after five years in France—Trofimov had come back to the estate two days earlier. Arrival is also the motif of Stoppard’s major plays, from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and Arcadia to Indian Ink and The Coast of Utopia, both writers generating a sense of expectation and an unstable atmosphere with the re-entry of characters, most evident, perhaps, when Charlotte slams the door, destroying Max’s house of cards at the opening of The Real Thing.
Departure is another persistent theme for both playwrights: at the end of *The Seagull*, Nina leaves for a new, sober life as an actress, and Arkadina heads back with Trigorin to the enticing city. In *Ivanov*, Ivanov tries to call off his forthcoming marriage to Sasha—ending this “provincial performance of a hand-me-down Hamlet and his awestruck disciple” (75) and his life by shooting himself. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Ranevskay is off again to Paris, Lopakhin will travel to Kharkov, and Varya leaves to be with the Raulins, while Anya and Trofimov depart for somewhere. Only the aged servant Firs remains. In Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern depart for England, while *The Invention of Love* is entirely about departure, that of Houseman’s lover and Houseman (“I really do have to go” is his and the play’s penultimate sentence [InvL. 106]). The end of *Rock ‘n’ Roll* focuses on the departing Nigel and Candida, Jan and Esme.

The accelerated perplexity and confusion found in Stoppard’s early plays further confirms Chekhov’s shaping of Stoppard’s work, extending the situation of many of Chekhov’s characters—Konstantin in *The Seagull*, for example, admitting at the end that “I’m still adrift in a chaos of dreams and images . . . and no idea where I’m going or what I’m for” (Seagull 69), or Lebedev in *Ivanov* telling Ivanov, when he announces near the play’s end that he wants to call off the wedding to Sasha, that the suitor has turned his “life into a sort of modern art gallery—I look at things and don’t know what to make of them” (Iv 78). The Chekhovian situation finds parallels in the constant confusion of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or in the former aristocrat Ogarev, the cuckolded poet and co-editor of *The Bell*, now dependent on a crass mistress in a West End London slum in *Salvage* from *The Coast of Utopia*. “It’s just like life,” he mutters, “waking up in your own bed and not knowing how you got there” (Salvage 55). George in *Jumpers* offers an intellectual summary of the situation when he remarks that “there are many things I know which are not verifiable but nobody can tell me I don’t know them” (J 78).

Appealing most strongly to Stoppard was Chekhov’s designation of *The Seagull* and *The Cherry Orchard* as “comedies.” Indeed, it is the comic Chekhov that captivated Stoppard the most. And although Chekhov labelled *Ivanov* a “drama,” Stoppard liberally added comedy. The repeated puzzle, however, is what is Chekhovian comedy? Richard Gilman offers a workable definition: “it has everything to do with an opening toward time to come,” which the dramas do not (Gilman 200). For Stoppard, it is Henry and Annie at the end of *The Real Thing* or the dance that blends time at the end of *Arcadia* or even Housman standing at the shore at the end of *The Invention of Love* anticipating a life to come once he crosses
the Styx, remarking “how lucky to find myself standing on this empty shore . . .” (InL 106). The comedies of high seriousness that Chekhov and Stoppard create satisfy their characters as well as audiences.

iii

In Chekhov, everything blends into its opposite, just fractionally, and this is sort of unsettling.
—Tom Stoppard, 6 February 2009

Stoppard’s experience with Chekhov originated in Bristol with early productions of The Cherry Orchard and Uncle Vanya at the Bristol Old Vic during his years as journalist in the city. What likely appealed to him was the way real life seemed to be out of reach for the characters, something he might have experienced himself as he sought a move to London, his quest loosely parallel to that of the three sisters seeking to go to Moscow (Stoppard relocated in 1962). Life and death with laughter may have been his early understanding of the Bristol Old Vic productions, learning gradually that meaning in a Chekhov play originated not in what was said but in what happened in between words.

As his own playwriting started, Stoppard began to incorporate the Russian’s strategies in his work, something of a departure from the fireworks of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or Jumpers. Indeed, it is possible to think of Chekhov’s influence as toning down Stoppard’s verbal exuberance as he realized what could be gained from Chekhovian atmosphere, language, and action. And as early as Travesties (1974), Stoppard began to acknowledge Chekhov in his work. Lenin’s wife Nadya remarks that Lenin favoured Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya over The Lower Depths, although he recognized Gorky’s politics as acceptable and Chekhov’s as not (Tr 88-9).

The less said, the more meaning. The Real Thing (1982) might be the first of Stoppard’s major plays to exhibit this shift. In the Native State, the 1991 radio play which became Indian Ink, expands this Chekhovian dimension in that secrets suggested widen the importance of the characters’ relationships. Just as Chekhov’s plays create space and time around the action, providing a rich Russian social background for his leisured gentry with sudden jabs of sadness, Stoppard fashions a sense of the decline of the British Raj and the post-war independence of the sub-continent for Flora Crewe. An amused view of human weaknesses, characteristically Chekhovian, began to appear often in Stoppard’s writing from Jumpers to Hapgood and beyond.
Stoppard’s 1997 adaptation of Chekhov’s *The Seagull* extended his interest in things Russian—mixed with Shakespeare. He had long admired Chekhov’s use of micro-narratives to engage the audience, which allowed the macro-narrative to operate. In 2000, advising a production of *The Seagull* at San Diego’s Old Globe, he agreed with the director’s vision of the play as “a Russian version of *Hay Fever*, the characters drunk on theatre.” He worked with the cast to remove any “Englishisms” from the script and expressed admiration for Chekhov’s compression. How was it possible, he wondered, for the playwright to move from this moment to that in four lines; “it would have taken me four pages,” he declared. Theatre is threatening, he added, because every text is capable of producing a dull evening (Welsh).

The 1997 production of *The Seagull*, starring Felicity Kendal and directed by Peter Hall, was a success, with Stoppard declaring that working on Chekhov was “magical.” He wrote at the instigation of Peter Hall at the Old Vic, seizing the opportunity to engage with Chekhov. “There’s more on the stage than you think there’s going to be when you read the page. I keep reading Chekhov and wondering how he does it” (qtd. in Welsh). As Stoppard explained in a program note, “You can’t have too many English *Seagulls*” (”English” 6). But the practical side always dominates: “In the theatre, the question ‘What is translation?’ is replaced by ‘What is translation for?’ and the answer is that it is for the event”—and for the actor (“English” 6). His additions to the text include a series of running jokes based on Shakespearean quotations, premised on Chekhov’s own allusions to *Hamlet*. “Having no backbone, he was able to bend both ways,” a comment about Trigorin’s tendency for sexual sharing, is typical as Stoppard adhered to Chekhov’s own comment about the play: “a comedy with much talk about literature and five tons of love” (Seagull 58; Seagull Program 13).

While *The Seagull* and Chekhov were initial inspirations for *The Coast of Utopia*, another dramatic source for staging the play was Maxim Gorky’s *Summerfolk* (1904), which Stoppard saw in Trevor Nunn’s energetic production at the National Theatre in September 1999 in a new version by Nick Dear based on a literal translation by Vera Liber. The naturalist play presents a scathing portrait of the Russian professional class at leisure. Returning yearly to a set of neighbouring country dachas, they question their lives against a backdrop of amateur theatricals, self-conscious relationships, and dismal futures, despite their being writers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and government officials. Some are frightened of change, while others despondently yearn for a new life. The doctor, Dudakov, complains that his life “seems composed of trivialities,” while