

**SERIOUSNESS IN THE PLAYS
OF
TOM STOPPARD**

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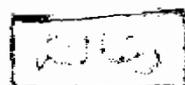
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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Seriousness, regarding theatrical works is assessed by the good effective value a play provides. This value can be intellectual that it has its effect on our vision of life and the way our experience of the world is reflected back by it. It also can be spiritual as entertaining the audience is, in itself, a respectable and important objective a play, as a work of art, is essentially created for. The more a playwright integrates the two features together, the more his work is serious and complete.

In an assessment of the plays of Tom Stoppard (1937), his detractors have accused him of cold intellectualism or frivolous showmanship and of having nothing of substance to say: "As a dramatist, Stoppard is a dandy. His plays toy with difficult subjects, but they are essentially not very serious."⁽¹⁾

My task is to test the validity of these claims. Therefore, I have chosen three of Stoppard's plays that belong to the early and recent stages of his literary career. In attempting to study these plays, I am trying to find answers to several questions:

- a. What is the difference between Stoppard's conception of seriousness and that of the critics?
 - b. Are frivolity and seriousness incompatible opposites in his plays?
 - c. Do his plays deal with present and tangible issues?
 - d. Is Stoppard a talent to amuse only by verbal acrobatics?
 - e. How does he make use of his medium to serve his purpose?
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- f. How far is Stoppard responsible for the difficulty the critics experience in coming to terms with his plays?
- g. Does his falling-out with critics in the early stage of his literary career stem from his feeling of the critics' academic snobbery or his disinterestedness is only a self-defensive attempt below its surface for not having a degree?
- h. Throughout his entire canon, is there a sudden politicization or sudden conversion: a shift to more serious issues in his recent works or his entire canon demonstrates consistency which has been ignored by observers?
- i. Is seriousness defined only in political terms or has it got a more universal perception?

In fact, to know the meaning of seriousness which critics negate from Stoppard's drama and which Stoppard does not care if abstracted from his theatre, we have to shed light on the juncture at which he started writing. C.W.E Bigsby tells us that "It was a time when British theatre- from- Look Back In Anger (1958) onwards - had gone 'naturalist' and was showing a slightly heavy breathing concern for social 'message'"(2) Tom Stoppard did not want to be a "message writer."(3) He endeavored to prove himself as a "self -confessed aesthetic reactionary... [who] believes in the primacy of words."(4) Talking about his start, Stoppard told the interviewer of New York Times that sixteen years ~~before~~, when he began writing plays, he was surrounded by writers who used to write plays with positive statements about social and political questions. Those writers, he explained, "did not seem to be aware of the difficulties involved in solving those questions. I had a reaction against making

heroes for plays who had positive points of view and no qualifications about them..."(5)

The early Stoppard emphasized his different position among writers of the 1960s by some bold proclamations which enlarged the gap between him and academic viewers. He expressed in many occasions that he was not concerned with social causes. He even rejected the other playwrights' idea that a play is an occasion for an extensive discussion of a social issue. He boldly pointed out that "some writers write because they burn with a cause which they further by writing about it. I burn with no causes."(6)

At that juncture, Stoppard opposed committed theatre and pure art. Such labels, he viewed, imposed certain constraints and restrictions on the kind of art created. Art is a reflection of our life with its good and evil sides. It can be a commentary on "... adultery in the suburbs or the Vietnamese war."(7)

The playwright who can boldly assert these viewpoints is unlikely ever to be the darling of the critics that they find his work preferred by those who consider theatre "an end and not a means, a ramification and not a modifier of the status quo..."(8)

Stoppard inflames the discussion when he declares the limits of the importance of art in general, and the job of the playwright in particular. He objects the exaggerated notions of the importance attached to art "I think that art ought to involve itself in contemporary social and political

history as much as anything else... I've never felt... that art is important."⁽⁹⁾

Michael Billington objects Stoppard's view and argues that art has many different motives. It is true that we can not judge that art has become automatically important only because of tackling social issues, but we should consider, at the same time, that if art is a response to life then that response will be expressed in the form of public life events. "And if you took out of world drama all those writers whose plays are fired by a response to public events or the contemporary zeitgeist you would actually abstract the Greeks, Shakespeare, Schiller, Chekhov, Ibsen, Shaw, Brecht and many more."⁽¹⁰⁾

Dr. Philip Roberts joins Billington's assertion and maintains that Stoppard's notions, in fact, distort and degenerate the works of other social writers who apparently work differently. His notions are so provocative that they make a love of writing the only reason for legitimate art. Thus, Roberts concludes, Stoppard supposes that "those whose medium is the theatre who are judged to have something to say are lesser writers who merely employ the theatre. Any other medium would do as well..."⁽¹¹⁾

Stoppard extends the argument in his play Travesties⁽¹²⁾ (1974) chosen to be the subject matter of chapter I when Carr says "Art is absurdly overrated by artists which is understandable but what is strange is that it is absurdly overrated by everyone else."⁽¹³⁾ Billington argues that in confining the appreciation of art only to the artists, Stoppard is compromising himself with the conception that an ordinary man does not

respond to it. Art may not feed the hungry, create wealth or even banish evil systems but it is a fact that anyone can respond to any aesthetic work regardless to his status. Stoppard's notions led Billington to ask: "By what criterion is he judging [art]? Pure utilitarianism?"⁽¹⁴⁾ In chapter I, nevertheless, the play will delineate that those words are directed to Tzara who exaggerates the importance of the artist rather than art itself. Carr, or rather Stoppard, underlines the modest position of the artist in regard to the position of art.

The writer's over theatricality, verbal pyrotechnics and wit, particularly in his early stage, have caused those who see immediate social change as the sole reason or purpose for art and those who find reality in fundamentally political terms to conclude that Stoppard's art is frivolous. Tynan would deny that Stoppard is a serious artist for he rejects "any pretension that art might have to change, challenge, or criticize the world, or to modify, however marginally, our view of it."⁽¹⁵⁾ Michael Billington similarly concludes that the playwright thus "doesn't acknowledge... the power of art to unsettle and unnerve."⁽¹⁶⁾

Stoppard absolves himself from such charges when he asserts that the importance of art is incarnated in modifying our view of the world. Art is much better at providing us with the moral matrix, the moral sensibility with which we make "our value-judgments on society, than in making an immediate value-judgment on an immediate situation.... Art is intensely important for reasons other than writing angrily about this mornings headlines."⁽¹⁷⁾

Critics have accused Stoppard of triviality as a result of the statements expressed in his interviews or articles as well as the authorial views in his plays. My task, throughout, is to stress, in spite of the writer's airy notions, how serious is the thought content in his plays. I have also considered that the study of the thought content, only, will be an incomplete study of a writer works for the "marriage of a play of ideas and high comedy."⁽¹⁸⁾ Stoppard's vision of life is both comic and serious. He states that "In my mind, my plays perfectly express my own being in that they are serious plays, seriously compromised by their own frivolity, or frivolous plays redeemed by their seriousness, according to the audience's own attitude toward them."⁽¹⁹⁾

Some viewers believe that the playwright seeks to achieve integrity between seriousness and frivolity. Frivolity means Stoppard's contrivance which helps him make "serious points by flinging a custard pie around the stage for a couple of hours."⁽²⁰⁾ This delineates that he "has always been completely serious about frivolity and stylishness as ways to make ideas fly."⁽²¹⁾

The work's main concern is to find out whether frivolity and seriousness are incompatible opposites or two concomitant elements. Each of them is reinforcing the existence of the other that the critics' endeavors to polarize them is a misinterpretation of the nature of Stoppard's theatre. Dr. Roberts, for example, dismisses the playwright's experimentation and argues that the more disturbing matters in Stoppard's plays "are severely diffused by the shifting insistence upon farce which featherbeds and suffocates them."⁽²²⁾

In their stark attack, viewers have concluded that Stoppard's penchant for stylishness and farce has even spoiled the moral dimension of Stoppard's playwrighting. C.W.E. Bigsby observes that

The moral dimension of Stoppard's work seems at times to suffer from his own commitment to farce. He seems afraid to take himself seriously, to allow his humour to become a consistent critique-hence his penchant for parody rather than satire, his technique of building scenes through contradiction. As he once remarked, "I write play because dialogue is the most respectable way of contradicting myself."⁽²³⁾

Those viewers' mistaking attitude stems from considering only one aspect of the writer's art, namely, the high spirited stylishness. Therefore, my study will be essentially concerned with stressing the serious meaning underlying the feasts of language.

In fact Stoppard writes comedies that are mutually replete with *joie de vivre*, sparkle, vivacity and exhilaration. Stoppard insists that

I think like a lot of writers I've got a cheap side and an expensive side. I mean rather like a musician might stop composing for a few days to do a jingle for "Kattomeat" because he thinks it's fun. And I honestly can't believe that because of something that happened to the world or to England I'll never write a 50-minute rompy farce for Ed Berman.⁽²⁴⁾

Stoppard furthers his falling-out with his detractors when he mocks academism in his Times Literary Supplement article of 1972. Stoppard objects academic criticism of drama which is practiced almost by men

who have no practical knowledge of theatre and seldom go to it. In his point of view there must be a distinction between the practice of drama which is directed to the audience and the theory of drama with which the fellow - theoreticians are concerned. More tellingly, he explains that "There is a public event holding limitless private possibilities. Criticism is a private and not an event at all. And its possibilities are circumscribed by limitation of writing about writing."⁽²⁵⁾

Academic viewers, on their part, believe that Stoppard's acid feeling of inferiority for having no degree and being only a Czech British ex-provincial journalist is behind the acerbity of his attitude:

Tom Stoppard/Tom Straussler, the Czecho-British ex-provincial journalist who mocks academism without having a degree may formerly have experienced moments of feeling his flank was exposed, the acerbity of some of the early interviews - particularly "Doers and thinkers, Playwrights and Professors of 1972" is heavily self-defensive below its surface.⁽²⁶⁾

Stoppard makes himself clear when he maintains that a play is an event rather than a text and he writes plays to be seen in performance not to be discussed or even to be read. His purpose in playwriting is purely theatrical, giving priority to the technical consideration. He believes that the difference between theatre and a classroom is the entertainment that the audience can get. He emphasizes that "I don't write plays for discussion -plays with secrets in them which are only to be discovered after patient research... to look for a kind of cryptogram in a play is to approach it in a way not to do with theatre."⁽²⁷⁾ According to

Stoppard, literary criticisms' mistake lies in the critics' ignorance of all kinds of purely technical consideration. He finds, for example, the precise content of a scene could be influenced by the stage: physical limits such as changing of a ~~set~~ from a room to a street and back again. he also considers the length of time; how much time the audience can sit and listen attentively without getting bored. This matter should be essentially reconsidered, for "while a reader can put down a book and return to it another day... an audience leaves for good, and it will not be kept in its seats by ideas."⁽²⁸⁾

Hence, the critical study of Stoppard's plays should not be based on the idea that they are isolated literary works, but in relation to their performance. This fact underscores the importance of knowing the manner of his playwriting in both early and recent stage and whether there is any change.

Critics ponder whether the early Stoppard should be called an absurdist and whether "the lack of order, symmetry and purpose, which is properly expressed through a dramatic structure"⁽²⁹⁾ of the absurdist plays can be applied to his world drama. They also ponder whether his world is indebted to the theatre of the absurd in its lack of "moral awareness."⁽³⁰⁾

What the researcher intends to do is to stress precisely that Stoppard shares the absurdist writers in some features and he does not in some others. Some critics have endeavored to prove the writer's full debt to the absurdist theatre which has implied the plotlessness of Travesties. Jill Levenson, for instance, affirms that Stoppard does not welcome the

conventional plot in his plays in its predictability and resolution. In his plays "plot and theme are correlative. His dramas are all experimental in form. None is strictly linear. To differing degrees they appear arbitrary, unpredictable and confusing."⁽³¹⁾ Gabrielle Scott Robinson joins the same thought and explains that the writer's plays consist of "sequence of farcical situations and abstract ideas put together in a parodistic and seemingly aimless fashion. There is little development, no evolution of characters and relationships."⁽³²⁾ Although Robinson may be right in arguing that Stoppard's characters, as delineated in Travesties "are vehicles for the ideas"⁽³³⁾ that we notice the debates are more important than the debaters, yet it will be important to find out, in the same play if she happens to be mistaking about the plot.

Few critics, use the notions about the playwright's debt to the absurd theatre to belittle his ingenuity. Arnold Hinchliffe, for instance, argues that Stoppard is a clever writer who "is only manipulating rather than exploring."⁽³⁴⁾ This suggestion was dismissed by some discerning critics who were careful enough when they "retreat[ed] from the full implications of such an awkward conclusion."⁽³⁵⁾ They sought to assure only the writer's general debt to the Absurd Theatre. Victor Cahn suggests that in his early plays "Stoppard confronts absurdity head-on and at the same time takes the initial steps towards moving beyond absurdity."⁽³⁶⁾ Victor Cahn's opinion seems to be, according to Tim Brassell, inaccurate for the writer virtually starts beyond absurdity after "having digested the movement's bold, dramatic adventurousness and turned it to his own, unique and advantage."⁽³⁷⁾ Brassell maintains powerfully that there is a limited analogy between Stoppard's theatre and that of the absurdists'. This analogy does not extend beyond that "vague