Paul Delaney

‘They both add up to me’:
The Logic of Tom Stoppard’s Dialogic Comedy

Tom Stoppard burst onto the theatrical scene in 1966 when an amateur student production on the Edinburgh Festival Fringe caught the eye of a London reviewer. Ronald Bryden’s prescient review for the Observer hailed Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead as ‘the most brilliant debut by a young playwright since John Arden’s’ (Bryden 1966: 15). Bryden praised the play’s witty ‘stream of ironic invention, metaphysical jokes and linguistic acrobatics’, but he also described the play a bit more ponderously as ‘an existentialist fable’ with ‘allegoric purposes’. Bryden’s review caught the eye of Kenneth Tynan, then literary adviser to the National Theatre, who immediately cabled Stoppard to request a script. And in April 1967 the 29-year-old Stoppard, a Czech immigrant who had been a refugee in Singapore and India, became the youngest playwright to have a play performed by the prestigious NT. Writing for The Sunday Times, Harold Hobson called the London production ‘the most important event in the British professional theatre of the last nine years’ (Hobson 1967: 49) – that is since Harold Pinter’s debut with The Birthday Party. By November Rosencrantz had embarked for Broadway – the first National Theatre production to cross the Atlantic – and the hitherto obscure author found himself the toast of two continents, winning the
Evening Standard drama award in London and the Tony award for best play on Broadway.

The sudden attention lavished on the play left the young playwright confounded by repeated questioning as to what Rosencrantz was ‘about’. At one level the play is about two Elizabethan courtiers who have been summoned to center stage where they make increasingly desperate attempts to delve and glean what afflicts Hamlet, to find out ‘what’s going on’ (1967: 58) in the mystifying world of Elsinore. Their fumbling efforts to understand their situation make them sympathetic, even endearing, characters. The courtiers flip coins, volley questions, and toy with getting caught up in the action when they encounter The Player and his tragedians. Their banter is never less than engaging and frequently laugh-out-loud funny. But amid the laughter, the very amorphousness of their identity and the irony of their situation make it easy for viewers to suppose that Stoppard’s hapless courtiers must be emblematic of something.

Bryden’s ‘existential’ label was much repeated as were terms like ‘Beckettian’, ‘Pirandellian’ and ‘absurdist’, all of which would prove equally inaccurate and irrelevant. Although Stoppard was not going to refute anyone who wanted to see his play as ‘an existentialist fable’ and get it produced on the South Bank or Broadway, a few years later he confessed ‘I didn’t know what the word “existential” meant until it was applied to Rosencrantz’. For good measure he added that ‘even now existentialism is not a philosophy I find either attractive or plausible’ (Hudson 1974: 58). What Stoppard had stumbled onto in Rosencrantz was not a philosophy but a comic stratagem. What came through more strongly than in previous writing was the playwright’s gift for badinage, repartee, verbal byplay:
GUIL: What’s the first thing you remember?

ROS: Oh, let’s see . . . The first thing that comes into my head, you mean?

GUIL: No – the first thing you remember.

ROS: Ah. (Pause.) No, it’s no good, it’s gone. It was a long time ago.

GUIL (patient but edged): You don’t get my meaning. What is the first thing after all the things you’ve forgotten?

ROS: Oh I see. (Pause.) I’ve forgotten the question. (1967: 6-7)

Playing at ‘words, words’ in a kind of verbal tennis, young Stoppard was ready for Centre Court at Wimbledon. Even the earliest of interviewers found him, as Clive James would say, ‘a dream interviewee talking in eerily quotable sentences’ (James 1975: 70). While his conscious purpose in Rosencrantz may have been to amuse a roomful of theatregoers, in the banter between Ros and Guil he found the kind of ironic juxtaposition that would be characteristic of his comedies – both high and low, both trivial and serious – throughout his career. Only in retrospect did he recognize the extent to which he was being self-revelatory not just in the substance but in the manner of the continuing, ongoing crosstalk. ‘They both add up to me in many ways in the sense that they’re carrying out a dialogue which I carry out with myself,’ Stoppard said. ‘One of them is fairly intellectual, fairly incisive; the other one is thicker, nicer in a curious way, more sympathetic. There’s a leader and the led. Retrospectively, with all benefit of other people’s comments and enthusiasm and so on, it just seems a classic case of self-revelation’ (Gordon 1968: 19).

In the endless banter of the two courtiers, which he describes as ‘a sort of infinite leap-frog’ (Hudson 1974: 58), Stoppard had found a way of putting on stage something
of the inner debate that he already carried on with himself: ‘I write plays because
dialogue is the most respectable way of contradicting myself’. The play, Stoppard
affirmed, ‘had nothing to do with the condition of modern man or the decline of
metaphysics’ (Bradshaw 1977: 99, 95). In Stoppard’s hands such a comic stratagem
proved so effective that he would use it again in his next play, which, as it turned out,
dealt with the decline of metaphysics.

Kenneth Tynan famously described *Jumpers* (1972), Stoppard’s next full-length
play, as ‘something unique in theatre: a farce whose main purpose is to affirm the
existence of God’ (Tynan 1977: 93). Although Stoppard denies that conveying a
philosophical message was any part of his conscious purpose in *Rosencrantz*, he
acknowledges that ‘quite early on . . . I found that philosophical questions occupied me
more than any other kind. I hadn’t really thought of them as being philosophical
questions, but one rapidly comes to an understanding that philosophy’s only really about
two questions: what is true, and what is good?’ (Bedell 2005: 5). After mulling – during
the five years after *Rosencrantz* – what is true and what is good, Stoppard decided that
his next play needed to move on from Wimbledon:

    I wanted a device enabling me to set out arguments about whether social morality
    is simply a conditioned response to history and environment or whether moral
    sanctions obey an absolute intuitive God-given law. I’ve always felt that whether
    or not ‘God-given’ means anything, there has to be an ultimate external reference
    for our actions. Our view of good behaviour *must* not be relativist. The
    difference between moral rules and the rules of tennis is that the rules of tennis
    can be changed. I think it’s a dangerous idea that what constitutes ‘good
behaviour’ depends on social conventions – dangerous and unacceptable. That led me to the conclusion, not reached all that willingly, that if our behaviour is open to absolute judgement, there must be an absolute judge. (Kerensky 1977: 86)

Belief in the existence of an absolute judge provided, Stoppard explains, the motivation to write ‘a theist play’:

I felt that nobody was saying this and it tended to be assumed that nobody held such a view. So I wanted to write a theist play, to combat the arrogant view that anyone who believes in God is some kind of cripple, using God as a crutch. I wanted to suggest that atheists may be the cripples, lacking the strength to live with the idea of God. (Kerensky 1977: 86-7)

Although Stoppard did have a philosophical message to convey in *Jumpers*, he used the same kind of ironic juxtaposition as in *Rosencrantz*. *Jumpers* pits a laughably dowdy professor of moral philosophy against a dapper shaman of a showman. Preparing for a symposium on the topic ‘Man – Good, Bad or Indifferent,’ the moral philosopher George Moore is such a fumbler that he can’t even get the pages of his lecture in order (striking a pose to begin he intones: ‘Secondly! . . . ’). Absorbed in trying to prove the existence of moral absolutes, George remains oblivious to his beautiful and occasionally naked wife in the next room who is trying to hide the corpse of a murder victim.

George’s antagonist in the play, Sir Archibald Jumper, is a jack-of-all-disciplines. Besides being ‘a doctor of medicine, philosophy, literature and law, with diplomas in psychological medicine and PT including gym’, the Vice-Chancellor heads an acrobatic troupe comprised of ‘the more philosophical members of the university gymnastics team
and the more gymnastic members of the Philosophy School’ (1986: 52, 41). Archie’s versatility in leaping from one discipline to another is paralleled by his versatility as to what constitutes truth, his epistemological relativism. Archie is slick and suave, a stylist who is never at a loss for words and a showman who has his jumpers neatly choreograph – to the tune ‘Sentimental Journey’ – the removal of the corpse in Dotty’s bedroom, giving graphic illustration to the Rad-Lib philosophy: ‘No problem is insoluble given a big enough plastic bag’ (1986: 31). In the verbal panache and dazzling virtuosity of Archie’s showmanship, it is certainly possible to see something of Stoppard’s own sparkling theatricality. But in *Jumpers* Stoppard was seeking to write about ‘what is true and what is good’, and *Jumpers* leads us to recognize the truths in what George is affirming even if we also see the culpability in George’s obliviousness, insensitivity, and moral cowardice. In juxtaposing George and Archie, Stoppard may be deftly dividing his own verbal adroitness from his moral perception of what is right. But even if we see two sides of Stoppard in the moral affirmations of George and the stylistic panache of Archie, Stoppard gave such flair and savoir faire to Archie, the amoral villain, that a few observers mistakenly regarded him as a spokesman for Stoppard himself.

That phenomenon repeated itself in *Travesties*. Well, no one has ever regarded Vladimir Lenin as a spokesman for Stoppard. But Tristan Tzara – the Dadaist, sonnet-scissoring, artist manqué – has been regarded by some as a sympathetic character. Like *Jumpers*, *Travesties* (1974) begins with a mélange of disparate images that at first seems incoherent. With something of the flamboyance of Archie, Tzara begins the play by pulling words out of a hat as an exercise in randomness, an attack on artistic order and design. Meanwhile, the novelist James Joyce is dictating the fragments that will form the
earliest recollections of the protagonist in *Ulysses*, and Lenin and his wife are having an animated exchange in Russian. The words of Lenin, Joyce and Tzara may be equally incomprehensible on first hearing. But Lenin’s words make coherent sense in Russian. Joyce’s words make sense in the context of *Ulysses*. And from the first, Stoppard slyly subverts Tzara’s presumed nonsense: the words Tzara pulls out of a hat as an exercise in randomness make coherent sense – unbeknownst to Tzara – as a transliterated limerick in French.

Stoppard sets *Travesties* in Zurich, Switzerland, where, historically in 1916, the political revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, the Dadaist performance artist Tristan Tzara, and the novelist James Joyce were all in residence. But Stoppard puts this historical convergence in the memory of one Henry Carr, a British expatriate and minor consular official who once sued Joyce for the cost of a pair of trousers worn in a production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The historic Carr made a cameo appearance in Joyce’s *Ulysses* as a foul-mouthed, bullying British Army private, but in Stoppard’s play he becomes the narrator, the central consciousness for a kaleidoscope of memories. In Carr’s mind such Wildean characters as Cecily and Gwendolen sweep on-stage and *Travesties* becomes as much a fantasia on Wilde’s *Earnest* as *Rosencrantz* is a refraction of *Hamlet*. In the conflict between Tzara – who seeks to destroy art, reason, order, causality – and Joyce, Stoppard declares that he not only finds Joyce ‘infinitely the most important but that he “loaded the play” for Joyce: ‘When they have that argument about art at the end of the first act, notice that Joyce has the last word. I wanted him to murder Tzara, and he does’ (Wetzsteon 1975: 82-3; Eichelbaum 1977: 105). If Stoppard is torn, and he is, it is between the extraordinary artist James Joyce and the claims of the ordinary
mundane individual Henry Carr who here serves as the unreliable, memory-slipping narrator. In the conflict between Joyce’s claim that he need not justify himself in political terms at all, and Carr’s affirmation of patriotism, duty, love, and freedom, Stoppard says he finds himself on both sides of the debate: ‘my answer to that question is liable to depend on the moment at which you run out of tape’ (Hudson 1974: 69).

At the same time that Stoppard was seeking, in works of dazzling virtuosity like *Jumpers* and *Travesties*, to contrive ‘the perfect marriage between the play of ideas and farce’ (Hudson 1974: 59), he was also turning his hand to more lightweight fare. *After Magritte* and *Travesties* may both begin with a bizarre ‘pig’s breakfast’ of images that will subsequently be explained as making coherent sense. But while *Travesties* engages questions regarding the role of the artist and the potentially competing claims of aesthetic and political freedom, Stoppard happily lumps *After Magritte* with his ‘plays which are farcical and without an idea in their funny heads’ (Hudson 1974: 59). Stoppard distinguishes such rompy farces, which he calls entertainments, from his serious plays (however funny they may be). Confections like *The Real Inspector Hound* and *After Magritte* are intricately plotted pieces of stage machinery that ‘attempt to bring off a sort of comic coup in pure mechanistic terms’ (Hudson 1974: 59). By contrast, ‘*Jumpers* is a serious play dealt with in the farcical terms which in *Hound* actually constitute the play’ (Hudson 1974: 63, emphasis in original). ‘The confusion arises,’ Stoppard acknowledges, ‘because I treat plays of ideas in just about the same knockabout way as I treat the entertainments’ (Gussow 1979: 130). But toward the end of the 1970s even Stoppard’s shorter plays began to evince more substantial concerns. The origin of *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977) was André Previn’s query as to whether Stoppard
might want to write a play that included a symphony orchestra. Confessing that ‘before being carried out feet first, I would like to have done a bit of absolutely everything,’ Stoppard says ‘I find it very hard to turn down offers to write an underwater ballet for dolphins or a play for a motorcyclist on the wall of death’ (Bradshaw 1977: 98). The chance to play with a full symphony orchestra – even if he couldn’t play a note – was too playful an opportunity to pass up. Stoppard first conceived of EGBDF as a play about a Florida grapefruit millionare, which sounds like an entertainment, a play without an idea in its funny head. But in the meanwhile Stoppard had been speaking out on behalf of Soviet dissidents and Czech survivors of Eastern bloc repression. About the time Stoppard realized that the symphony orchestra in EGBDF could be in the mind of his protagonist, Stoppard was meeting with political prisoners who had been confined to Soviet psychiatric hospitals for their political beliefs. EGBDF may have begun as an entertainment, but by its first performance in 1977 the piece had greater resonance than even its tympani could provide. Stoppard’s play sounds the dangers that an overly orchestrated society poses to individual human rights, political freedom and moral good.

Stoppard’s subsequent plays are frequently playful, but they’re never just playful. In Professional Foul (1977), Stoppard has a bit of fun with the way academics (and footballers) can talk past each other. But Stoppard’s 1997 television play essentially picks up where Jumpers left off, with a moral philosopher confronting injustice and attempting to come to terms with ‘the way human beings are supposed to behave towards each other’ (Hebert 1979: 127). Prof. Anderson arrives at a Prague philosophy colloquium intending to give a paper on ‘Ethical Fictions as Ethical Foundations’ but has his own ethical foundations shaken when he encounters his former graduate student Pavel
Hollar, who has written a doctoral thesis arguing that ‘the ethics of the State must be judged against the fundamental ethic of the individual’ (1978: 55). Anderson at first refuses Hollar’s appeal to take his thesis – which Czech authorities would regard as contraband – to the West. In the confrontation between a young Czech dissident who cannot escape repression and a complacent Englishman who has not had to consider what life is like for his East European counterparts, Stoppard finds himself on both sides of the Iron Curtain. After brushing up against the reality of Soviet-era repression as experienced by Hollar’s son, a ten-year-old boy, Anderson gives a ringing public affirmation of ‘a sense of right and wrong which precedes utterance’ and argues that ethics are based on what is right in ‘one person’s dealings with another person’ (1978: 90). In rejecting any ‘collective or State ethic which finds itself in conflict with individual rights’ (1978: 91), Anderson clings to a truth that Herzen would salvage from the shipwreck of utopian philosophy at the end of The Coast of Utopia (2002), Stoppard’s magisterial trilogy on nineteenth-century Russian thinkers and artists.

Just as the protagonist of The Real Thing (1982) will affirm ‘I don’t think writers are sacred, but words are’ (1988b: 54), Night and Day (1979) celebrates freedom of the press while acknowledging the misuse of that freedom by some practitioners. ‘People do awful things to each other,’ says the photojournalist Guthrie, implicitly acknowledging that there is a way human beings are supposed to behave towards each other, ‘but it’s worse in places where everybody is kept in the dark. It really is. Information is light. Information, in itself, about anything, is light’ (1979: 92). Stoppard has repeatedly insisted that the affirmation of a free press and and Guthrie’s blazing affirmation that information is light ‘utterly speak for me’ (Berkvist 1979: 137).
The Real Thing attempts to distinguish the genuine from the ersatz in romantic relationships and in writing – and the real link between writing that works and relationships that work. With a playwright as a protagonist, The Real Thing is the most autobiographical of Stoppard’s plays. In writing, Henry reveres ‘well chosen words nicely put together’; in relationships Henry values ‘a sort of knowledge’: ‘what lovers trust each other with. Knowledge of each other, not of the flesh but through the flesh’ (1988b: 51, 63). But just as Anderson in Professional Foul is ‘educated by experience beyond the education he’s received from thinking’ (Gollob 1981: 155), Henry in the course of The Real Thing receives an education by experience that leaves him in ‘tears, pain, self-abasement’ (1988b: 72) prior to the final reconciliation. The extent to which art imitates life here is exceeded only by the degree to which life imitates art. Whether Henry’s play-within-the-play is ‘about self-knowledge through pain’ as he describes it or ‘about did she have it off or didn’t she’ (1988b: 62) as his daughter describes it, the autobiographical implications ripple outward.

In Hapgood (1988) Stoppard uses the quantum mysteries of particle physics and the twists and turns of a multi-national spy caper as metaphoric equivalents for the mysterious complexity of personality, temperament and human identity. The spy caper hinges on the realization that Ridley, a suspected double agent, has an identical twin. Like light, Ridley can appear to be ‘here’ at the same time he is ‘there’, he can be particle pattern or wave pattern and investigators seeking to find one or the other invariably get what they interrogate for. But the buttoned-down professional Elizabeth Hapgood also appears to have a twin who is anything but buttoned-down. And as much as Hapgood exemplifies prudence, professionalism and propriety, she discovers a different side to
herself when her eleven-year-old son’s life is on the line. Stoppard’s play demonstrates that ‘we’re all doubles’, that it is an oversimplification to think ‘you’re this or you’re that’ (1988a: 72, 73). The one who puts on the clothes in the morning may be ‘the working majority’ but at night ‘we meet our sleeper – the priest is visited by the doubter, the Marxist sees the civilizing force of the bourgeoisie, the captain of industry admits the justice of common ownership’ (1988a: 72). And, as Stoppard says of Ros and Guil, it takes both to ‘add up to me’ (Gordon 1968: 19).

The radio play In the Native State (1991) and its much revised stage avatar, Indian Ink (1995), explores cultural imperialism and the ways in which a post-colonial mindset can be even more confining than constraints imposed by fiat.

Arcadia (1993) weaves an intricate skein of past and present in a play that contrasts romantic and classical temperaments, Newtonian physics and chaos theory, the arts and sciences, the desire to know intellectually and the desire to know and be known in the biblical sense. Although Hannah may demonstrate classical reserve in stark contrast to Bernard’s impetuous privileging of passion, Stoppard demonstrates again that temperament is a matter of ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’. Hannah largely refrains from asserting truth claims that go beyond demonstrable proof, but there does come a point where she trusts her gut instinct and asserts that she knows more than she can prove. Set in a Derbyshire stately home, Stoppard’s play celebrates what endures as the genius of the place in the infallible mute witness of Gus – as well as celebrating Thomasina, a nineteenth-century prodigy who does not endure to see the dawn of her seventeenth birthday.
*The Invention of Love* (1997) dramatizes the conflict between restraint and release in the poet and classics scholar A.E. Housman, whose profoundly felt impulse toward restraint strains against his passionately felt but almost wholly unexpressed ardor for Moses Jackson.

Using the vast canvas of a trilogy of full-length plays, Stoppard in *The Coast of Utopia* (2002) offers a panoramic view of Russian thinkers in the nineteenth century, wheeling from Chekhovian estates to Tsarist Moscow, from philosophic to political to poetic precepts. In the sweep of the trilogy, Stoppard pits ideological appeals to a utopian culmination of history against a more measured sense of the worth of particular persons. Stoppard ultimately appeals to the ineluctably moral value of the individual human life given ‘our dignity as human beings’ (2002c: 118) as opposed to any utilitarian view of the masses. If Stoppard is continuing to reflect on ‘what is true, and what is good’, he concludes in *The Coast of Utopia* that good is not to be found in some distant future. Stoppard rejects as a bloodthirsty Moloch the promise ‘that everything will be beautiful after we’re dead’ (2002c: 118). If life is to be valued, it is to be valued in the here and now before Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead, not in some utopian future whether conceived of as a Marxist march of history, or a Muslim paradise of martyrs or ‘the great celestial get-together for an exchange of views’ (1993: 75). *The Coast of Utopia* offers Stoppard’s full-length response not only to Marxism but to all ideology that calls for self-sacrifice, from revolutsia to jihad, from proletariat apparatchiks to suicide bombers. What Stoppard leaves us with instead is Herzen’s much more modest affirmation that ‘the end we work for must be closer, the labourer’s wage, the pleasure in the work done, the summer lightning of personal happiness’ (2002c: 118).
And what waves washing upon the Coast of Utopia can be traced back to ripples in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead? In the long voyage of Stoppard’s plays the pulse that continues is a sense of the value of the individual human life, the worth of particular persons, yes, even such non-entities as the laughably forgetful Henry Carr, the dowdy George Moore, or the inauspicious Ros and Guil. For all of the majestic sweep of Hamlet’s tragic demise, it is also true that by the end of Shakespeare’s play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern too are dead. In Stoppard’s canon, even their little lives matter. While Ros and Guil are dying to know ‘what was it all about?’ (1967: 116), Hannah assures Valentine that ‘it’s wanting to know that makes us matter’ (1993: 76). Foreseeing the heat death of the universe, Thomasina says ‘Yes, we must hurry if we are going to dance’ (1993: 94). She waltzesfluently with Septimus through the time left for ‘it is God-given’ (1993:91). Carr dances with Cecily (1975: 97). Anderson retrieves Hollar’s manuscript (1978:93). Gus picks up what has been let fall by others (1993: 96-7).

Primary Reading


**Further Reading**


Wetzsteon, Ross (1975). ‘Tom Stoppard Eats Steak Tartare with Chocolate Sauce’.