Stoppard contra Stoppardianism

by Jonathan Gaisman

In what he frequently referred to as a charmed life, Tom Stoppard (1937–2025) suffered one enduring if ultimately minor professional misfortune. Three early stage plays—*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), the inverted, existentialist *Hamlet* that remains his most celebrated work; *Jumpers* (1972), which combines moral philosophy, murder, and gymnastics; and perhaps his most audacious creation, *Travesties* (1974)—were the principal reasons for the coinage of that most doubtful of literary gifts, the personalized adjective. The dictionaries trace the first use of the tag "Stoppardian" to a column in *The Listener* in 1978. It was intended to convey a demanding subject matter, an intricate playfulness of words and action, and—that characteristic of which the English have ever been most suspicious—incurable cleverness. While it could be deployed as a compliment, the term more usually carried the implication that his work, although undeniably witty, was emotionally deficient and lacking in dramatic substance, sacrificing depth of engagement upon the altar of theatrical brilliance, and preferring the bloodless circulation of ideas to the development of plot and character.

The difficulty with nominative epithets in this sphere is not merely that they are inherently simplistic. (How little is communicated, and how much omitted, of Beckett or Pinter by their own adjectives—the former of which is scarcely pronounceable to boot.) With Stoppard there is an additional problem: the conclusion that his plays were Stoppardian was reached too soon in his writing career for his own good, and thereafter it was assumed that the designation should axiomatically apply to his entire output.

Thus, one criticism of his final play, *Leopoldstadt* (2020), was precisely that it failed to conform to the paradigm. That his plays were Stoppardian was apparently bad enough, but it was worse if they were not. The reaction of many critics was like that of the bemused Henslowe in the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), who goes on expecting the appearance of a pirate king long after Stoppard's protagonist has abandoned his original concept in favor of a tragedy called *Romeo and Juliet*.

In truth, viewed other than through the self-validating perspective of the label, Stoppard's plays had always probed well beyond the ideas they featured and, far from lacking emotional content, they mostly brimmed with it. Yet as late as 1999, when his best work had been written, Lyn Gardner was still beating the Stoppardian drum in *The Guardian*: "Stoppard's heart—or rather its absence in his work—has made him something of the Tin Man of British theatre. . . . the plays have seldom had much connection with human emotions." She continued more acidulously:

> Clever Tom—or Tomas Straussler, as he was called when he was born in Czechoslovakia 61 years ago—has always been very good at doing joined-up thinking. Over the past 30 years, playgoers have often found that, along with their ticket for the afternoon matinee, they have also

> bought a crash course in subjects as diverse as quantum mechanics, Marxist theory, landscape gardening, journalistic ethics, espionage, chaos theory and moral philosophy. But, as they stagger exhausted from the theatre three hours later, they are unlikely to be much the wiser about the conditions of the human heart.

Contrariwise, Stoppard has been inconsistently belabored from the academics' corner for not truly being one of them, or else for underestimating the value of their work. The caustic correspondence between Stoppard and Daniel Mendelsohn in *The New York Review of Books* following the latter's essay on *The Invention of Love* (1997) centered around his belief that the playwright was mocking A. E. Housman's failed life for its emotional and intellectual aridity. Mendelsohn had managed to overlook the fact that the play was a love story, one written moreover in a spirit of reverence. It is not just that, to quote the theater critic Michael Billington, "the intellect and emotion are bedfellows rather than opposites" in Stoppard; this is a play in which the scholar's devotion to rescuing classical texts from the corruptions of time and error, the poet's unrequited longings for his undergraduate comrade Moses Jackson, and the sublimated expression of these emotions in *A Shropshire Lad* are all aspects of the same impulse.

Meanwhile, Professor Armand d'Angour of the Oxford classics department has since Stoppard's death taken him to task for—we are surprised to learn—his dismaying amateurishness and intellectual inadequacy:

> There is no doubt a place for work that makes audiences think about textual criticism or thermodynamics or Sapphic fragments, even if these remain only evocative names for things one might investigate in greater depth. But by making scholarship into a clever backdrop or emotional metaphor, Stoppard's plays risked enlarging the gulf between specialist knowledge and general culture. The audience may leave the theatre flattered that they've been faced with difficult ideas, when all they have encountered are simulacra of such ideas; a knowing cleverness substituted for true understanding. For those who work in the scholarly fields Stoppard appropriated, watching his plays can—in some cases, at least—be a strangely disappointing experience. We admire the craftsmanship while recognising that what we know and love has been hollowed out for aesthetic purposes, its substance turned into a kind of brilliant, ornamental glitter.

This unappealingly supercilious critique wholly misses the point. Stoppard was writing plays, not aspiring to the ranks of the academy ("Theatre is recreation; it must entertain"). That a coterie of toilers "in the scholarly fields" might deprecate his simplification of their subjects without the benefit of "true understanding," never mind his presumptuousness in "appropriat[ing]" them in the first place, could scarcely matter less to the intelligent theatergoing laity. The notion, moreover, that his plays *widen* the gap between specialist knowledge and general culture is incomprehensible.

One other difficulty with the identification of underlying themes in Stoppard's work was his own frequent denials that his plays were about anything much at all. His comment in relation to *Indian Ink* (1995) is typical:

> What the play is about is a kind of critic's question or academic's question. But the play is about different things to different people, and it's actually only about what happens in the play. One doesn't write so that there is a secret "aboutness" which the audience is supposed to guess or arrive at.

Now that Stoppard is no more, we do not have to contend with the denials and evasions of an essentially private personality, who confessed a reluctance to mourn the dead and a preference for "moving on," and whose incuriosity about his family history is perhaps inadequately explained by respect for a mother's feelings. Nor need we any longer accommodate his concern that to let too much light in on the creative process may have interfered with what was for him the always effortful business of choosing a subject for the next play.

It may as well be said once and for all that the assertion that Stoppard's plays lack the-

atrical heft was always nonsense; each of the major works is (among other virtues) devoted to topics about which he cared ardently. Some critics may have been deflected by the centrality of paradox and the apparent inconsistencies within his output; he notoriously remarked that writing dialogue represented the most respectable way of contradicting himself. Far from being the product of mere flippancy, this dialectic reflects a deep wisdom. A book Stoppard admired, *The Matter With Things* (2021) by Iain McGilchrist (reviewed in *The New Criterion* of November 2022), assigns entire chapters to paradox and the *coincidentia oppositorum* as paths to truth, and quotes Niels Bohr's remark that the opposite of a profound truth is also a profound truth. Likewise, Oscar Wilde, a central figure in Stoppard's work, said that "a Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true." The problem of giving a unitary answer to a difficult question does not imply that the inquiry itself is made other than in good faith.

Equally, accusations of gratuitous flashiness miss the mark. It is true that the plays' enviable brilliance was not merely a vehicle for the ventilation of more fundamental issues: Stoppard loved ingeniousness for its own sake, as he reveled in forging connections between apparently unrelated subjects and, perhaps above all, jokes (bad as well as good). Why should he not have? The role of humor is not just to amuse; what Mark Twain said about a German joke applies generally: it is no laughing matter. Behind or more accurately within the showiness (he did confess to being a "repressed exhibitionist"), there were substantial preoccupations, and it is as facile to disparage the exuberance of the writing as to complain of the number of brushstrokes in an Impressionist painting that yield the image, or of the quantity of notes in a piece of music by Chopin from which the melody emerges.

Perhaps the most baffling of all the accusations levelled by the Stoppardians is the claim that his plays lack emotional depth. Since this obviously cannot be said of *Leopoldstadt*, that play has been set apart from the rest of the oeuvre as sui generis—the apologia of an old man finally confronting his personal story. A more natural process of literary analysis might be to construe the earlier work in the light of the later. While it is easy to detect a progression over time towards a greater emotional candor, one readily acknowledged by the playwright ("The older I get, the less I care about self-concealment"), one does not need hindsight to detect the sensibility of relatively early works such as *Jumpers*, discussed below.

Even in *Travesties*, where the fecundity of the conjuring tricks and the plurality of threads take the breath away, there are evidently passages of deep personal engagement, such as James Joyce's speech on the value of art:

> What now of the Trojan War if it had been passed over by the artist's touch? Dust. A forgotten expedition prompted by Greek merchants looking for new markets. A minor redistribution of broken pots.

A not-dissimilar message is conveyed by Donner in *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1972); here is a playwright who, even in his most pyrotechnical phase, rejected the dreary tenets of relativist postmodernism and argued passionately that some things matter more than others.

When one comes to *The Real Thing* (1982), a play about love and the importance of language, or his masterpiece, *Arcadia* (1993), a work rich in the heartbreak wrought by time—that thief and guardian of our treasures—the point is hiding in plain sight. With *The Invention of Love*, one need look no further than the title. Of course, this is deliberately ambiguous; it refers in part to the origins of the love lyric in classical poetry, about which the play gives a lot of detail that is apparently not to everyone's taste. But when the older Housman addresses the shade of Jackson ("I would have died for you, but I never had the luck!"), the Platonic allusion to the Sacred Band of Thebes is charged with the most authentic emotion.

Commentators who cannot see what is before their eyes tend also to dismiss commissions saturated in feeling such as *Shakespeare in Love* and the television series *Parade's End* (2012) as mere screenplays. (Stoppard worked on the

latter over three years, and in it he permitted himself a purely sentimental allusion to the former, thereby economically conveying the embryonic magnetism between Tietjens and Miss Wannop.) In the end, nothing can be done to persuade the wilfully blind. More profitable is to return to the themes that, on the evidence of the plays, mattered to Stoppard. In a body of work as wide-ranging as his, it is here possible only to sketch some principal elements.

As Alastair Macaulay has written, most Stoppard plays are about epistemology: they concern the various ways in which our brains apprehend the world, the range of possibilities whereby experience and thought become knowledge. What can we know, and how do we live by that knowledge? What do we know about metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic questions? Is it plausible to assert the existence of objective standards of goodness and artistic value, or are these no more than social conventions or statements of opinion? Might there be an ultimate source of such goodness and value? By the second half of the twentieth century, two particular intellectual movements attacked the beliefs implied by these inquiries as absurd and the questions themselves as meaningless. Both the analytical school of philosophy exemplified by logical positivism and a scientific discourse increasingly beset by reductionist tendencies restricted legitimate descriptive statements about the world to the most limited propositions and the smallest component parts, repudiating a holistic embrace of the *Gestalt*.

From the beginning of Stoppard's maturity, his position on these questions was clear and unchanging. *Rosencrantz*, for all its brilliance and melancholy, is too indebted to Beckett to constitute a full-fledged work save for its characteristic ingenuity and humor. The first major play that speaks with a completely personal voice is *Jumpers*. As Billington was quick to see, it is "a deeply moral play."

Stoppard said in a 2016 interview with his biographer Hermione Lee that the objective existence of goodness was "a brute fact in my consciousness"; aesthetic value no less so. His remark "The idea that there is a metaphysical Good is an affront to physics" was not said in deference to physics. Rather, "something in [his] character [made him] recoil" from the reductionist standpoint. As one would expect, the play that more than any other addresses this territory adumbrates both sides of the argument; but it is usually not difficult in Stoppard's work to see where his sympathies lie. Still less does he make a point of deliberately abstaining from taking sides. (Consider the dispute about writing in *The Real Thing* between the playwright Henry, of whom Stoppard later said that "all his prejudices are mine," and the appalling Brodie, whose contempt for literary craftsmanship is temporarily championed by Annie.)

Jumpers accepts that matters of value and goodness are not susceptible of proof but asserts them nonetheless, despite citing Professor Frank Ramsey's powerful observation that theology and ethics are two subjects without an object. George, a philosopher, is married to Dotty, who may be having an affair with a proponent of the standard arguments of inter-war Oxford analytical philosophy. Adopting them, she maintains that good and bad, in contrast with shape or color, are not real properties of things but express only our judgements about them. The play, however, invites us to see such thinkers as mere acrobats; George by contrast keeps his feet on the ground:

> The National Gallery is a monument to irrationality! Every concert hall is a monument to irrationality!—and so is a nicely kept garden, or a lover's favour, or a home for stray dogs! . . . if rationality were the criterion for things being allowed to exist, the world would be one gigantic field of soya beans! The irrational, the emotional, the whimsical . . . these are the stamp of humanity . . . . In a wholly rational society, the moralist will be a variety of crank, haranguing the bus queue with the demented certitude of one blessed with privileged information—"good and evil are metaphysical absolutes!"

The audience's sympathies are also recruited by the deployment of a recurrent Stoppard trope, that of sexual pathos. For unlike Robert

Browning's grammarian, George is not "dead from the waist down." (The critic A. D. Nuttall wrote a book of that title concluding with a perceptive chapter on *The Invention of Love*, whose hero, like George, exhibits both academic rigor and the tragicomedy of unfulfilled desire.) The listener may smile at George's reproof to his television-watching wife, "You are deliberately feigning an interest in brass-band music to distract me from my lecture!" but a few pages on will wince at his description of her as "an attractive married woman whose relationship with her husband stops short only of the issue of a ration book." Lee rightly says in her biography that this is a play of "grief and love." As for the semifarcical culmination in which George finds that he has shot his pet hare with an arrow and, stunned by the discovery, steps off a chair onto his tortoise, this is not the fate of a character on the wrong side of the argument.

Stoppard's absorption with moral philosophy continues through *Professional Foul*, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (both 1977), and *Rock 'n' Roll* (2006), albeit these are colored by a political dimension—his concern, at the time and retrospectively, with freedom of expression in Eastern Europe, especially his native Czechoslovakia. (This was a field in which, when contemplating the courage of acquaintances such as Roger Scruton, he came over time to feel that he should have done more.) His belief in the existence of ethical absolutes is no less clear from *Darkside* (2013) and *The Hard Problem* (2015). These works are also flatly inconsistent with the notion that, as he put it, there is no more to us than meets the microscope. "Do you know anyone who believes that, really and truly?" asks Hilary in the latter play about extreme reductionism. This was a question Stoppard had previously put publicly to Richard Dawkins, whose alter ego in the play suggests that Raphael's *Madonna and Child* (he does not specify which one) should properly be entitled "Woman Maximising Gene Survival." As to the "hard problem" of consciousness itself, Stoppard was so impressed by the argument on the issue in *The Matter with Things*—namely that, far from being the product of the brain, consciousness (like value) is an ontological primitive incapable of reduction to or explication by some more basic element—that he said he could have saved himself years of preparatory research if he had been able to read it before setting pen to paper.

After *Leopoldstadt*, Stoppard entertained hopes of revisiting the same territory as *Jumpers* in a new play. The idea was stimulated by two recently published books on the redoubtable quartet of female Oxford philosophers comprising Elizabeth Anscombe (Wittgenstein's disciple), Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch (later a novelist). Faced with the technical character of much (male) philosophizing around them, which had no discernible connection to the world outside the university, these women were driven by the horrors of the first newsreels from Belsen into a reassertion of the objective nature of right and wrong. That the Final Solution was an unmitigated evil was not, they argued, simply a matter of opinion. Most non-philosophers would agree with this point of view, but it did not require the annihilation of European Jewry that is the subject of his last play to recruit Stoppard to it. George's intuition had been his all along.

Stoppard read and reread Benjamin Lipscomb's *The Women Are Up to Something* (2021) and *Metaphysical Animals* (2022) by Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman. At the same time, in his inclusive way, he admired Nikhil Krishnan's nuanced defense of analytical philosophy in *A Terribly Serious Adventure* (2023). Unfortunately, nothing came of it all. He was unable to find sufficient dramatic aliment in the material, though he toyed with the idea of enhancing it by including as a character the classical scholar Eduard Fraenkel, whose seminars Murdoch attended and who was posthumously embroiled in allegations of sexual misconduct following Mary Warnock's account of his "individual evening tutorials." This device would probably have entailed some of the temporal prestidigitations that feature in many mature Stoppard plays, but what finally prevented the idea coming to fruition, apart from a decline in creative

vigor caused by illness, was his feeling that he had definitively covered the ground half a century earlier.

Questions as to the nature of value and the origin of consciousness may only be problematical if one persists in seeking to derive them from simpler constituents. But there is an alternative, which is to conceive of them in metaphysical terms. The hero of *Jumpers* is a theist who infers the existence of God in the same way that we may infer a perfect circle without ever having seen it, by positing successive polygons with an ever-increasing and finally infinite number of sides. Perfection is out of reach, but one lives in the faith of it. As George says with matchless concision:

> I don't claim to *know* that God exists, I only claim that he does without my knowing it, and while I claim as much I do not claim to know as much; indeed I cannot know and God knows that I do not.

Such thoughts resurface in Stoppard's final period: Hilary in *The Hard Problem* has written a paper entitled "Is God the Last Man Standing?" Forty years on, we have not come far from George's starting point: "Is God?"

The evidence suggests that this characteristically interrogative assertion reflected Stoppard's position too. Great men often suffer the fate—both before and after death—of having their spiritual beliefs either wrangled over by rival factions or else anxiously interrogated by adherents. (Scruton provides another example.) It is incontestable that the topic was important to Stoppard and is addressed in his work—a fact of itself hardly consistent with any accusation of superficiality. If it matters, he is probably best described as a "non-denominational theist" (the scholar Dr. V. Iswarya's verdict). He said that he tried to behave "as if" God existed, and that the idea of Him was "slightly more plausible than the alternative proposition that, given enough time, some green slime could write Shakespeare's sonnets." Asked once by the director Nicholas Hytner whether "for want of a better word" he believed in God, he responded, "Is there a better word?" One cannot read too much into a spontaneous remark, but, as he would have been the first to agree, the exchange would make little sense if applied to unicorns.

The hallmark of Stoppard's creative vision is that the recurrent epistemological themes within the plays are both defined and adorned by his conviction that there is a horizon beyond which we cannot see. It is the tension between the thirst for knowledge at the heart of the human condition ("It's wanting to know that makes us matter"—a quotation printed twice in the order of service at his funeral) and the boundaries of that knowledge that provides much of the dialectical energy within the dramas. Sometimes the limits of knowledge are self-inflicted, as with the blundering Bernard in *Arcadia*, but more often they are inherent, and it is their inevitability that imparts poignancy, sometimes even a tragic dimension. Leaving on one side the mysteries that attach to the types of metaphysical inquiry already identified, these limits are evinced in three main ways.

First, just as George challenges Zeno, a follower of Parmenides who taught that all change is illusory, Stoppard was a devout Heraclitean: everything is in flux and, as Herzen says in *The Coast of Utopia* (2002), "Life's bounty is in its flow." The hero of his (loose and abortive) adaptation of Brecht's *Galileo* (1971) says that what he finds admirable in the world is "all to do with change. Alteration, novelty, decay, regeneration—these are not the blemishes of an imperfect world." A dynamic system is less perfectly knowable than a static one; the shadows of advancing twilight may leave much hidden or implicit compared with the midday glare, but the more oblique light is the better for what it withholds.

Second, the physical laws of the universe themselves impose limits on what we can know. The characters' motives in *The Real Thing* do not conform to the mechanisms of a Newtonian universe but comport unavoidable ambiguities within them. *Hapgood* (1988) is marinated in Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Chaos theory manifests itself at more than one level in *Arcadia*, where Valentine ex-

plains of the grouse population at Sidley Park that "the unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is." And as the mathematician Marcus du Sautoy points out in *Blueprints* (2025, one of the last books Stoppard read), the catastrophic death by fire of Thomasina and the ensuing derangement of Septimus are the product of butterfly-wing details—a neglected candle, a proffered assignation declined. Yet who could have foretold these outcomes?

Third, time itself—perhaps the most consistent of all the presences in Stoppard's plays—corrodes and subtracts, and in doing so withdraws from us knowledge (as well as much else). Of *Indian Ink* Stoppard said that "one of the things it ought to be saying to an audience is, 'Hurry up, it's time. Time's going by, you only get one chance.'" The arrow of time, the second law of thermodynamics, "runs" in Lee's words "like a sombre drumbeat under the life and vitality" of *Arcadia*. In perhaps the most exquisitely poised of all the arguments in Stoppard's work, Thomasina laments the manuscripts burned in the destruction of the library at Alexandria ("All the lost plays of the Athenians! . . . How can we sleep for grief?"), while Septimus urges in answer that knowledge foregone will have its time again: "You do not suppose . . . that if all of Archimedes had been hiding in the great library we would be at a loss for a corkscrew?" The first of these points of view, echoed in other of his works, is probably nearer Stoppard's own; the loss of seventy plays of Euripides "seems to matter a lot," he said in a 1993 interview.

Yet his plays are full of fragile, poetic remnants that do survive. The Groby tree in *Parade's End*, which in Stoppard's adaptation becomes a central image, is cut down like the tree recalled from his Darjeeling childhood that he went back hoping to find. But in *Indian Ink*, the remembered tree remains, as does the secret portrait of the heroine painted by her probable lover. The most touching and autobiographically resonant of all Stoppard's symbols of time regained is the scar on a living person's hand in *Leopoldstadt* that links him to another person, dead long since. Much is lost, this playwright of supreme balance tells us, but something will be retained. Like the poet, we must "find strength in what remains behind."

In their dispute over *The Invention of Love* (they were afterwards reconciled), Stoppard told Mendelsohn that "Most of us . . . are compounded of contrary psychologies injudiciously mixed." One of the problems with the concept of Stoppardianism is that it reflects its adherents' difficulty in understanding that permanent self-contradiction is not some sort of un-English affectation, but rather an admissible, indeed necessary technique in the search for the truth of the world. As McGilchrist gnomically writes, "We need not *either* both/and *or* either/or, but *both* both/and *and* either/or."

If any remaining purpose is served by the epithet, it should be to convey not some reprehensible narrowness of ambition on Stoppard's part, but rather the sheer generosity and depth of his thematic reach. He once said that Beckett had "redefined the minima of theatrical validity." In Billington's words, "Stoppard has done the opposite by exploring theatre's maximum potential." The question "What are his plays about?" should be answered, in the idiom of the man himself, by asking another question in return. What are they not about?