

Session :2019-2020

Strictly for Internal Circulation Only

Lecture Notes : 01

**M.A. ENGLISH SEMESTER II
PAPER-V: ENGLISH SOCIETY, LITERATURE
AND THOUGHT (20th CENTURY)
UNIT-IV DRAMA**

**Dr. Meenakshi Pawha
Associate Professor
Department of English and Modern European Languages
University of Lucknow**

TOM STOPPARD AS A PLAYWRIGHT

With special reference to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

Introduction

Theatre is a living art and consequently it continually responds to the world around it. As that world changes so does theatre. Furthermore theatre is a product of human imagination; it remains as unpredictable as the minds of those who create it. In fact, “this constant interaction between human imagination and a changing cultural environment is suggestive of the ecological balance between living organisms and their biological environment.” (Hansen 6). Just as living organisms must adapt or die out, so must the art of theatre adapt.

Any art lives in a balanced relationship with the society which supports it. This is especially true of theatre, an art which only happens when relatively large numbers of people are assembled at the same space at the same time.

For ten years and more after the Second World War, the British theatre lived quietly with little argument; its scattered forces were reassembled and work was put on hand to restore the production lines that had been in action before hostilities began. “Some few oddities were accommodated like a revival of verse drama (Brown 1) - but that innovation did not challenge old theatrical forms or literary felicities- and translations or adaptations of plays by Federico Garcia Lorca, Jean Giradoux and Jean Anouilh.

Reports from abroad that praised the “epic” theatre of Bertolt Brecht, the “holy” theatre of Antonin Artaud, or the “absurd” theatre of Eugene Ionesco did not dent the self absorption of those who were busy restaging Shakespeare, Anton Chekov, Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and the Restoration comedy.

The picture of the British variety of the ‘affluent society’ in the 50s and the 60s was convincing enough to the natives of the British Isles as well as to any foreign visitor. The problem of unemployment was pushed to the

background, people were better fed and better clothed; they were more cars on the roads and more television sets in British homes.

But affluence had its areas of darkness. The nation spent millions of pounds on mass consumption of gadgets, and entertainments, but it could not afford to build a single new hospital or prison, during 1950s-60, and affluence moreover, brought in disquieting social problems. One of the fruits of the welfare state was deep rise in crime, particularly among teenagers. Criminologists indicated possible links between a fast changing society of this kind and the alarming increase in juvenile offenders, illegitimacy, prostitution and drug-taking. Traditional values were being discarded by the youth and an uneasy quest for new values strained the post-war community structure. A fairly sizeable section of population felt either completely left out or partially crippled by insurmountable difficulties. It was the image of a nation with a high proportion young people, struggling to adjust itself to an expending economy and an outdated socio-moral convention. Even those who enjoyed the material prosperity like Arthur Seaton in Ann Sillitoe's *Saturday and Sunday Morning*, could not feel a sense of communal belongingness, and were aware of the loneliness in the society.

This paradoxical situation, affluence enjoyed by a section of the community, and a large section left uncared for was bound to have its impact on drama. The welfare state raised high hopes but most of its promises remained unfulfilled. This dissatisfaction over the gap between the expected and the existing provided the initial inspiration of what is known as the 'New Drama'. A child of the post-war conditions, it aspired to visualise, at least at the first stage, the new society's tensions and paradoxes, its myths and frustrations. The theatre more than any other form of art, perhaps is a place not only for social comment which there is plenty in the new drama, but of social contemplation too.

Theatre is the place wherein we not only discover the language of social protest, we also learnt to contemplate the grandeur of human activities and the futility of human efforts; the facts of the period find their way into plays and its dreams and illusions radiate from them. Changes in the economic structure of the society, introduction of new modes and styles in the industrial and habits of a country are followed by a sort of reshuffling in the behaviour pattern of groups, realignments of sections of interest and appearance of new forces. New ideas gain currency, areas of human

relationship are reviewed and social priorities readjusted. In this process of overall change, post-war British theatre has undergone a veritable cultural revolution-although it is impossible to demonstrate to what extent the different areas of social and individual behaviour have been controlled and moulded by the rapid economic changes-and the British theatre has been representing with astonishing vitality the dominant moods and the changing cultural images. While a section of the contemporary theatre- John Osborne, Ann Jellicoe, Arnold Wesker for instance, assiduously strives to present problems, and perplexities of an emerging society, its spiritual apprehensions and yearnings are more prominently treasured by playwrights like Pinter and Arden.

Bold and passionate plays were being written in English at this time, but the authors were all Americans- Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill. These works were staged in London and they were received like rare trophies from another world or all like survivals from another world or like survival from an earlier turmoil that had been represented already in the pre-war plays of Sean O'Casey and John Millington Synge. As the new European dramatists went largely and unperformed and unconsidered, so no one seems to have thought of imitating these trans- Atlantic authors, still less of founding a new kind of British drama.

At its best "the rehabilitated theatre was intriguing, temperamental and less frequently, thoughtful."(2) but by common consent, all its business was carried on without noise or passion, as if a prolonged convalescence had to take its agreeable course in order to ensure full recovery from the shock and rigours of war. Seldom were present-day issues posed on the stage, and few science could be seen in the theatre in the far-reaching and totally unprecedented changes that were taking place in thought, feeling, and society throughout the world.

Theatre practice in the years following World War II was extremely diversified. It borrowed, combined, and modified elements from various modern movements, adapted staging devices from many earlier periods and explored new techniques both in writing and staging.

Until the 1950s realism continued to be the most common theatrical style, although by late 1940s it had been modified considerably. Various modern movements had by that time conditioned audiences to accept

simplification, suggestion, and distortion as basic techniques in art. In the theatre the result was great emphasis on theatricality, less dependence on illusionism, and more willingness to recognise that art is different from reality. Stage settings, for example, came to rely on suggestion instead of detailed representation of period and place. Although locales were still indicated pictorially, many details were eliminated. Similarly play structure became freer and less dependent on the techniques of the “well-made” play than it had been in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There also was a trend towards a large number of scenes and away from the division of acts, and experimentation with dramatic techniques became common.

These modifications came about in part because of changes in man himself and his world. In the late nineteenth century, discoveries of science were hailed and liberated the people from irrational explanations of social phenomena. But such advanced control of atomic energy (with all its potentialities for benefit and misuse) reemphasised the need for moral and spiritual values capable of guiding such power. With the realisation that science cannot provide moral answers came a lessening of faith in the scientific method as the only source of truth. Furthermore, psychology has shown increasingly that many of man's most powerful motivations are subconscious and cannot be deduced from purely external signs. Reality, then was no longer thought to be so simple as in the late nineteenth century, and the means for representing it in the theatre consequently became more flexible. As realism gradually absorbed irrational elements from other movements, it also borrowed dramatic and theatrical techniques from them. Thus post-war realism represented in part a fusion of elements made familiar and acceptable by earlier approaches.

Though competition from other media aroused anxiety in the post-war era, most producers merely continued pre-war practices without any extreme break with the past. Thus, for a time, modified realism remained the major mode. But during the 1950s the absurdists posed a serious challenge, both to established theatrical practices and to earlier views of man.

Absurdism is a term coined by Martin Esslin around 1960, to describe the preceding decade. It was never a conscious movement like many of those that had preceded it. Those writers considered it to be its prime exponents—Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet—did share convictions

however, that permit grouping them into a common school. The basic conception of the human condition can be briefly summarised:

Absurdism is a logical extension of the nineteenth-century scientific outlook.(Brockett 339). The naturalists argued that the only truths are those that can be apprehended through the five senses and verified by the scientific method. Human beings' most difficult decisions normally involve moral questions (that is, the rightness or wrongness of possible courses of action) which are not subject to scientific verification. From a strictly naturalistic point of view, morality lies outside the realm of objective truth. The naturalists never stated this view, for inspite of their attempts to restrict truth to scientific fact, they still believed for the most part, in objective standards of morality.

The absurdists choose to see all aspects of human existence in this light, for to them all values, knowledge, and behaviour are equally illogical. Adrift in a chaotic universe, human beings construct whatever fictions they can to help themselves survive. The absurdists assume that the world is entirely neutral, that facts and events do not have meanings, but the humans arbitrarily assign meanings to them. Thus, if we regard an action as immoral, it does not necessarily mean that the act is immoral, only that we have chosen to label it as such. The concept of morality itself is regarded as a human fabrication without logical foundation. To the absurdist, ultimate truth consists of the chaos, contradictions and inanities that make up every day existence. Truth is the lack of logic, order and certainty. Since there is no objective truth, each person may construct a set of values by which he lives, but he must be willing to recognize ultimately his values are based on verifiable premises. The prominent dramatists who are called the absurdists are Samuel Beckett (*Endgame, Krapp's Last Tape, Not I, Waiting for Godot*) Eugene Ionesco (*The Chairs, Rhinoceros, Exit the King*) and Jean Genet (*The Maids, The Balcony, The Deathwatch*). By the 1960s absurdism had been so widely disseminated that its techniques were being used by those who did not share its philosophical basis. Thus after its initial strength waned, absurdism was partially assimilated into other movements.

'First Wave' of the New Drama

On May 8, 1956, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, Open at London's Royal Court Theatre. Celebrated as "the most vivid British play of the

decade”,(Cornis, Roger, Voilet Ketels 8) it sparked an extraordinary Renaissance in playwrighting, acting, directing, and stage design. It put into the language of theatre criticism new phrases such as ‘kitchen sink drama’ and ‘angry young man.’

Thus, the New Drama took its place, in our every day vocabulary along with ‘angry young man’, ‘theatre of the absurd’, ‘theatre of cruelty’, ‘comedy of menace’, and such others. And when almost at once the purely journalistic excitement began to subside-before we knew for sure where this New drama was coming from and what it was, people began asking in print where it was going and where it had gone-the term remained “like a fossil left on the shore by a retreating tide.” (Taylor 7).

“In the early 1960s the English theatre seems suddenly to have found itself.”(Biggsby 1). It celebrated with naive enthusiasm its belated discovery of naturalism and its new found social concern. For a brief period playwrights tended to regard themselves as the cutting edge of social revolution in which they would articulate the frustration of a new generation, growing up in a society that seemed not merely complacent to the point of inertia but dangerously blind eye to the vital forces which lay encysted within a decaying art. Despite the fact that this fervour gave birth to a disturbing sentimentality rather than the hard-edged social or political analysis, the energy which had been released so suddenly created a compelling paradigm for the new writer.

New dramas there have certainly been by the hundreds, in past years and new dramatist too. But it became evident almost at once that they did not add up to a movement, and did not for that matter show any signs of waiting to. The revolution, if revolution there had been was much more importantly a revolution in the *theatre* than a revolution in *drama*. *Look back in Anger* had been produced but it was hardly a revolutionary sort of drama; indeed as Osborne himself observed a little later it was a formal, rather old-fashioned play cast in an easily recognisable realistic mould, and with only a certain unfamiliarity of tone (the angry young man tone) distinguish it from many plays which had gone before. Or did it found a school of social protest drama; any expectations of that kind were rapidly knocked on the head by the next arrivals among new dramatists-Ann Jellicoe, N.F.Simpson, John Arden and Harold Pinter.

The external situation of the theatre did not remain unchanged. With the passage of time it brought about a natural, inevitable change in audiences: a generation died, was scarred off or just drifted away into other activities, a new generation with new ideas and even more influential, new preconceptions come into the theatre and an increasing fragmentation and specialisation among the public at large.

‘Second Wave’ of New Drama

This is the situation which the ‘First Wave’ of the New Drama helped to make, and now stood to benefit from. But they can never quite adjust to the strangeness of it, and this marks them off in many ways from the ‘Second Wave’, those who have invaded the scene after the first battles of the New Drama have been fought and won, when the authority of the Lord Chamberlain, was in rapid decline or abolished altogether, when the theatre was no longer one coherent thing, (essentially West-End commercials) a citadel which had to be stormed, but might just be a basement somewhere, where two or three happened to be gathered together. It is the writers of the second wave, those who began to come into prominence towards the middle of the 1960s, writers who have gained and held attention through the 1960s and 1970s and into the 1980s and the 1990s are: Alan Ayckbourn, Edward Bond, Peter Shaffer, Peter Nichols, Tom Stoppard and David Storey. The more interesting younger writers -David Hare, Howard Brenton, Hampton and Stephen Poliakoff- and some who have written only a few plays- Trevor Griffiths, David Edgar and David Rudkin, too are part of the second wave of new drama.

Biographical Details : Tom Stoppard (1937-)

Tom Stoppard, original name Tomas Straussler, in full Sir Tom Stoppard, (born July 3, 1937, Zlín, Czechoslovakia [now in Czech Republic]), Czech-born British playwright and screenwriter whose work is marked by verbal brilliance, ingenious action, and structural dexterity.

Stoppard’s father was working in Singapore in the late 1930s. After the Japanese invasion, his father stayed on and was killed, but Stoppard’s mother and her two sons escaped to India, where in 1946 she married a

British officer, Kenneth Stoppard. Soon afterward the family went to live in England. Tom Stoppard—he had assumed his stepfather’s surname—quit school and started his career as a journalist in Bristol in 1954. He began to write plays in 1960 after moving to London.

Stoppard came to the British theatre in 1967 and at a time when dramatists were increasingly judged by their political commitment and approximation to social truth by their willingness to tackle anything from the class system to Vietnam. Stoppard achieved fame with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and his early works deal with such issues as whether it is better to withdraw stylishly from chaos or engage with life as it is, whether morality is the result of social conditioning, of eternal God given laws, whether the language itself is a precise instrument or whether something is governed by subjective coloration, whether it is possible to discern design and meaning in the pattern of history or whether one should leave oneself open to randomness. Stoppard’s early plays are philosophical, clever, prankish and funny: “a union between a play of ideas and comedy of farce.”(Billington 11).

Stoppard is a leading playwright in contemporary theatre. Like George Bernard Shaw, and Oscar Wilde with whom he is often compared,” Stoppard examines serious issues within the context of comedy,”(Matuz 389) often conveying weighty moral and philosophical themes through such comedic devices as word-games and slapstick, because Stoppard uses humour while addressing complex questions pertaining to authority, morality, the existence of God, the power of words to represent reality, and the role and function of art. His style of drama has thus been termed “philosophical farce”. Stoppard’s theatre sometimes draws upon Shakespeare's plays for a framework in which to present modern concerns. His place also reflect the influence of Samuel Beckett into absurd view of existence; of Wilde in its use of comedy; and of the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello in the use of drama as a means of probing the nature of illusion and reality. Although some critics consider Stoppard’s theatrical devices to be a smokescreen concealing a lack of profundity, who's praise him for his wit and virtuosity.

Like so many young dramatists ,Stoppard found his best platform as a beginner in radio and television rather than the theatre. He also wrote a novel *Lord Malquist and Mr.Moon* (1965). He says, mainly because the publisher “ was mad enough to want to commission a novel”,(Taylor 7)

from him, and it seems like a good idea at that time. Actually, once embarked on it he rather enjoyed it, but he felt that his natural sympathies are entirely with drama in one form or another.

Stoppard's practical attitude to his craft is in part the legacy of the journalistic background which also helps to account for the considerable range of reading to which his plays bear witness. His interest in philosophy revealed in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Jumpers* prompted many to assume that he must be a graduate. But as he told Ronald Hayman:

A lot of my reading has resulted from the sheer necessity of having something to deliver... You read the works of Norman Mailer in fourteen days in order to write an article of about 1,200 words (18).

Themes

Stoppard's plays cover an eclectic array of themes and topics. From the world of science, he has tapped into the metaphoric potential of quantum physics and chaos theory. From philosophy, he has dramatized logical positivism, Wittgenstein's language games, and debates over whether morality is relative and socially constructed or grounded in metaphysical absolutes. Questions about the social responsibilities of the artist, journalist, and politician appear in plays that examine the role and nature of art, the relative merits of a free press, and the injustices and human rights violations of pre-perestroika Eastern Bloc politics. He has explored the nature of love and the requirements of intimate human relationships. He has considered the effects of colonialism as seen through a conflict of cultures and aesthetics. Interwoven through many of these plays are the recurrent issues of the nature of personal identity as well as the unreliability or variability of human memory and perspective. Cumulatively, Stoppard's work has been concerned with the social, moral, metaphysical, and personal condition of being human in an unstable, uncertain world.

While comedy is always a central feature, Stoppard has consciously explored different narrative techniques. He once remarked that ultimately he would like "to have done a bit of absolutely everything" (Watts, "Tom Stoppard," 47). Indeed, eclecticism is one of the hallmarks of Stoppard's canon, and it is a trait that makes his work appear fresh, vital, and enduring. While he has treated a diversity of subjects, a constant in

Stoppard's work has been his preoccupation with aesthetics, with the formal properties of play construction, and above all with style. For Stoppard, a writer's only obligation is "to write well" (Freedman), and plays are "good" or "important" if the writing is "of a very high order" and not because of its social content (Hudson, Itzin, and Trussler 68). While Stoppard champions style, it is not, as Thomas Whitaker asserts, an end in itself. Stoppard's stylistic bravura and theatricality are always yoked to, and in service of, some more substantial ideas, ideas often antithetical to Whitaker's interpretations.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard is found exploring such themes as identity, chance, freedom and death, the play centres two minor characters from *Hamlet*. While waiting to act their roles in Shakespeare's tragedy Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pass the time by telling jokes and musing upon reality, in the same way that the two tramps occupy themselves in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern depict the absurdity of life, though these two characters who have bit parts in a play not of their making and who are capable of only acting out their dramatic destiny. They are bewildered by their predicament and face death as they search for the meaning of their existence.

While examining these themes, Stoppard makes extensive use of puns and paradox, which have become standard devices in his theatre. Stoppard's theatre has moved from depicting the absurd view of existence to attacks on absurdity through art and philosophy; from political detachment to commitment for personal and artistic freedom and from wild, theatrical farce toward more conventional comedy. His ardent concern for truth and his willingness to present conflicting viewpoints have led critics to regard him as a moralistic playwright with a positive view of humanity. With the success of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in 1967, Stoppard secured a foothold in the dramatic world that forced him to develop what emerged as his eclectic but distinctive style.

The most striking characteristics of Stoppard's work is his unremitting self-consciousness. On the first level, this introspective quality manifests itself in his deliberate mining of theatrical resources. "Along with other postwar dramatists, he has reclaimed and revamped the vehicles for direct address to the audience, notably the music-hall and the Renaissance

soliloquy, which violate the fourth wall of representational dramaturgy” (85). Stoppard’s experience as a reviewer taught him not only the formulas of drama but also what works well on stage. His borrowings from Wilde, and Shakespeare, as well as his parodies, are indicative of his consciousness of writing in a dramatic tradition.

The criterion of theatrical success tends to be whether the play works. It works, if it is absorbing, exciting, moving or funny to watch so that we would like to watch it again. With the exception of *Enter a Free Man*, most of Stoppard’s plays fulfill the criterion of theatrical success. Among the most-notable stage plays were *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974; Tony Award for best play), *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1978), *Night and Day* (1978), *Undiscovered Country* (1980, adapted from a play by Arthur Schnitzler), and *On the Razzle* (1981, adapted from a play by Johann Nestroy). The Tony-winning *The Real Thing* (1982), Stoppard’s first romantic comedy, deals with art and reality and features a playwright as a protagonist. *Arcadia*, which juxtaposes 19th-century Romanticism and 20th-century chaos theory and is set in a Derbyshire country house, premiered in 1993, and *The Invention of Love*, about A.E. Housman, was first staged in 1997. The trilogy *The Coast of Utopia* (*Voyage*, *Shipwreck*, and *Salvage*), first performed in 2002, explores the lives and debates of a circle of 19th-century Russian émigré intellectuals; it received both a Tony Award and a Laurence Olivier Award for best play. *Heroes* (2005), translated from a play by Gérard Sibleyras, is set in a retirement home for French soldiers, and it received an Olivier Award for best new comedy. *Rock ’n’ Roll* (2006) jumps between England and Czechoslovakia during the period 1968–90. In *The Hard Problem* (2015), Stoppard explores consciousness.

In his latest play *Leopoldstadt* (2020), he tells the story of a Jewish family in Vienna, as the twentieth century begins. Stoppard, 82, revealed in an interview to *The Guardian* that *Leopoldstadt* may be his last play. It was not until the early 1990s that Stoppard discovered the extent of his Jewish heritage and the death of many relatives in Nazi concentration camp.

Stoppard wrote a number of radio plays, including *In the Native State* (1991), which was reworked as the stage play *Indian Ink* (1995). He also wrote a number of notable television plays, such as *Professional Foul* (1977). Among his early screenplays are those for *The Romantic Englishwoman* (1975), *Despair* (1978), and *Brazil* (1985), as well as for a

film version (1990) of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* that he also directed. In 1999 the screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), cowritten by Stoppard and Marc Norman, won an Academy Award. Stoppard also adapted the French screenplay for the English-language film *Vatel* (2000), about a 17th-century chef, and wrote the screenplay for *Enigma* (2001), which chronicles the English effort to break the German Enigma code. He later penned scripts for a lavish miniseries (2012) based on novelist Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy *Parade's End* and for a film adaptation (2012) of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Stoppard also cowrote the historical drama *Tulip Fever* (2017), which is set in 17th-century Amsterdam.

Stoppard's numerous other honours included the Japan Art Association's Praemium Imperiale prize for theatre/film (2009). He was knighted in 1997.

Stoppard is a self-confessed aesthetic reactionary. That is, at a time when the avant-garde and theatre was de-emphasising language, stressing performance over text, preferring group compositions to the insights of the individual author, he believed in the primacy of words:

I have an enormous love for language itself. For a lot of writers the language they use is merely a fairly efficient tool. For me, the particular use of a particular word in the right place or a group of words in the right order, to create a particular effect is important; it gives me more pleasure than to make a point which I might consider to be profound. (Stoppard 47).

At a time when committed artists are asserting that art necessarily derives from social commitment, he regards it at times as a formalist exercise and at others as a moral gesture. As he has explained, "I don't set out...to write a play that will demand a new kind of theatre and a new kind of audience. But my feeling still is that the theatre ought to start from writing, come what may, though in my view it is a delusion that a play is the end product of an idea: in my experience the idea is the end product of a play." (Biggsby 41). In an article entitled *Something to Declare* published in 1968, he confessed that he had 'very few social preoccupations', writing instead "out of a love of language and an avowedly intellectual fascination with things I find difficult to express." Some writers, he continued, "write because they burn with a cause which they further by writing it. I burn

with no causes. I cannot say that I write with any social objective. One writes because one loves writing.” (Stoppard 47).

Stoppard catapulted to international acclaim overnight with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Only did he become the youngest playwright to have a play staged by the National Theatre, but that production was hailed as “most important event in the British professional theatre of two decades”(Hobson 49). Stoppard works with a brilliance, an intellectual agility, and a capacity of mind as well as with that have no rival on the contemporary stage. According to T.E.Kalem, “British playwright, Tom Stoppard ideas like cigarettes and emits the smoke with puffs of mirth. (85). “The virtuoso dialogue of his plays and the brilliant inventiveness of his theatricality have tended to obscure the serious inventions underlying his comedy.” (Innes 325). What is the contention of Brendan Gill that “the high fooling with language distinguishes Stoppard from almost all his contemporaries” (Gill 23). “Perhaps our only true ‘University Wit’, Stoppard seems to have distilled the best qualities of the Absurdist while extending comedy beyond the ‘humours’, ‘manners’ and ‘social satire’ tradition of English comedy to a new kind of a philosophical comedy, bringing to it a fresh level of verbal energy and metaphysical wit.”(Barnes 237). “Tom Stoppard is one of the most successful and also one of the most puzzling of the new British playwrights. His place hint at deeper philosophical meanings and reflect on the state of our society.”(Kerensky 165).

The most striking, and strikingly individual effect Stoppard’s plays make comes from their evident concern with structure, with overall pattern. Where other dramatists produce big and untidy effects, spilling out their materials generously, and often too generously, with little apparent concern for economy, concentration and scrupulous adaptation of means to ends, Stoppard works by neatness, precision, a meticulous tying of loose ends. He likes and works towards the feeling of completeness as one piece after another falls into place, and finds it very important for him that the structure of this plays should lock finally with a ‘clunk’ at the end. With the singular exception of *Enter a Free Man*, distinct Stoppardian ‘clunk’ is evinced in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *Jumpers*, *Travesties*, *Dirty-Linen*, *Rough Crossing*, *Night and Day*, *The Real Thing*, *Indian Ink*, *Arcadia*, *Coast of Utopia*.

Such unalloyed claim was to last for a short time, as charges began to be made that labelled his plays as “detached cerebral exercises in wit which lacked a sense of felt life, that his humour was merely a grin without a cat.” (Roberts 85).

Attacking Stoppardian theatre for not seeking to alter the nature of the society of which it is a part, Philip Roberts disparages the plays as a political opportunities for wit, parody and metaphysical dalliance. In response to the charge of being apolitical, as early as 1974, Stoppard voiced his belief that all political acts have a model basis to them and are meaningless without it.”(Stoppard 85).

Roberts would deny that Stoppard is a serious artist because of the playwright's alleged refusal to believe in the efficacy, in any sense, of theatre to affect anything, including an audience. (Roberts 85). Tynan concludes similarly that Stoppard rejects any pretensions that art might have to change, challenge, criticise the world, or to modify, however marginally, our view of it. (46)“Art is important”, Stoppard asserts, “because it provides the moral matrix, moral sensibilities from which we make a judgement about the world.” (14)

Thus, when Stoppard did begin to write plays which dealt explicitly with social situations, they were not the profound transformation wrenching metamorphosis in his work which many critics have supposed. There was, Stoppard insists, “ no sudden conversion to the road to Damascus”, (Shulman 3) no epiphany in which he discovered that politics was what really mattered, that the body politic was the ultimate frame of reference. Sometimes, Stoppard’s work is compared with Harold Pinter, but Stoppard’s highly distinctive tone is very different from Pinter’s. But Pinter’s ‘comedy of menace’ works through revealing sinister undercurrents in everyday situations and a verbal elusiveness, Stoppard uses verbal wit, visual humour and physical farce to illustrate clearly defined topics ; free will versus fate (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*); the existence of God (*Jumpers*); the functions of art (*Travesties*); nature of freedom (*Enter A Free Man*); and the responsibility of the press (*Dirty-Linen* and *Night and Day*).

What separates Stoppard from the masses of current British playwrights is that his strength lies in his preoccupation with our essentially humanity. Seeing only surface dazzle, self-conscious wit, verbal acrobatics and a

‘toying ‘ with ideas in his work, critics have failed to recognise the unique manner in which each of his comedies is woven around a serious core.

Stoppard remains a witty, gifted, complex dramatist. He writes about serious issues in high-spirited way. He makes one want to argue with him. He constantly challenges one’s notion of what a play can do. For most of the century the conventional idea of the Ibsenite, well-made play has been under attack: Shaw showed in works like *Getting Married* and *Misalliance* that drama could be built out of disquisitory talk, Pirandello proved that it be constructed out of a constant conflict between reality and illusion, Beckett demonstrated in *Waiting for Godot* that it could be denied from a confrontation with the meaninglessness of existence. Stoppard formally owes something to all those writers. But the fascination of his work lies in watching his progress from a drama of manipulative cleverness one that is animatedly profound political and moral convictions and that is inhabited by real, breathing suffering human beings.

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