

*Chapter 1***A free man**

As Tom Stoppard tells it, he was lazing in the water off Capri when suddenly he realized he was twenty-three, unpublished, unheard-of, and unlikely to be otherwise.<sup>1</sup> At the end of that vacation, he turned his cards in at Bristol's *Evening World*, where he had worked for two years as feature writer and second-string arts critic, and, armed with their contract for a twice-weekly column,<sup>2</sup> headed metaphorically for deeper waters. The image is teasingly appropriate. His early work, before the success of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, shows him testing his energies, looking for a distinctive style that would allow him, like George Riley, the determined fantasist of his first play, "a walk on the water".

So Stoppard did not burst upon the world like Athene from the head of Zeus; he might not even have become a playwright. Although he has said that young writers in the early sixties thought of the stage as the route to success after John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) and the "new" drama that followed,<sup>3</sup> Stoppard in those years also tried his hand at radio and television scripts, theatre criticism, short stories, and a novel. If his experience as a journalist, reviewing plays at the Bristol Old Vic, had given him a taste for "showbiz", as a freelance writer he was prepared to slog away at such assignments as a season's worth of weekly episodes for *A Student's Diary* on the BBC Overseas Service; these were to depict the day-to-day life of an Arab student in London (though he did not actually know any such student at the time).<sup>4</sup> Those scripts have disappeared, as have the five episodes he wrote for the BBC's long-running daytime radio serial, *Mrs Dale's Diary*. One wonders how Stoppard managed to attune himself to that programme's middle-class respectability without sliding into the parody that the good lady's diary entries invite: "I'm rather worried about Jim [her husband] . . . yesterday, Mother gave us all such a shock." For, in the early work that does survive in print, it is a gift for parody that already stamps large segments as *echt*-Stoppard.

*A Walk on the Water*, the play he wrote in 1960, which he has described somewhat derisively as *The Flowering Death of a Salesman*,<sup>5</sup> may originally have been a pallid reflection of Robert Bolt's *Flowering Cherry* (1958), which itself pays more than passing obeisance to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). However, by the time Stoppard's play reached the West End stage as *Enter a Free Man* (1968), the text had been largely rewritten in a way that moves the

piece from those quasi-realist origins. Its first Act, in particular, now stands as a sustained burst of manic energy that holds its own with the later plays.

By comparison, Bolt's play has dated rather badly. What seemed so effective and moving at the time, especially through the performances of Ralph Richardson and Celia Johnson, adds up to little more than a well-made theatricality which pays lip-service to the new realism of the late 1950s. The set of *Flowering Cherry*, for instance, supports the rhythms of everyday living with its kitchen sink, fridge, stove, and dining-table and, at the final moments, the back wall becomes transparent, in a Millerish way, in order to reveal Jim Cherry's vision of row after row of blossoming fruit trees. But the action itself is simply a conventional middle-class family drama and is shaped to the sentimental demands of effective curtain lines. At the end of the first Act, Isobel Cherry, unable to bear her husband's lying fantasies, runs into the garden where she leans "*against the gate, throws her head back, [and] cries exhaustedly: Oh, let me, let me, let me leave him!*"<sup>6</sup> At the same time, in ironic counterpoint, Jim is at the kitchen table showing off to his daughter's friend in front of his son by reciting the "muse of fire" speech from *Henry V*. Cherry's invocation to "the brightest heaven of invention" neatly underscores his incapacity to distinguish truth from dreams, but psychological realism gives way to theatrical tidiness when his memory fails at the words "But pardon, gentles all . . ." and the curtain falls on the juxtaposition of this repeated phrase and Isobel's reiterated "let me leave him".

The tidiness of *Enter a Free Man* is of a different order since, in Act 1 at least, we are not required to enter the characters' lives or feelings. What may read like two-dimensional realism on the page becomes, on the stage, a series of zany, rapid-fire set pieces which owe more to *The Goon Show* or *Hancock's Half Hour* on BBC radio than to anything in Bolt's play. *Free Man* opens on a mood of bright heartlessness, the essence of this type of comedy in which one character scores off another with a string of destructively witty one-liners. Linda "is eighteen, self-assured, at least on the surface, and can be as cruel or warm as she feels like being".<sup>7</sup> When she sums up her father, George Riley, as "the man who's on his way . . . to the pub on the corner" (10), the lights come up slowly on the suburban bar which shares the stage with the Rileys' living-room (and hallway) where Linda talks to her mother, Persephone. The comic deflation works, as it were, *in absentia*, as Riley bursts through the pub door with a self-dramatizing flourish, "Enter a free man!", and Linda, from the other side of the stage, dismisses him as "Poor old Dad". The buoyancy that is

necessary to keep us at a distance from the comic malice is established by this cheeky wit and by the efficiency and speed of this initial overlap between home and pub. In addition, before any of this action, as the houselights dim, a tinkling version of “Rule Britannia” initiates the bouncy irreverence.

Such overt artifice allows us to sit back and watch George jump through a number of contradictory hoops, and those leaps come so fast upon each other that we have no time either to question their credibility or to feel for George in his trials, other than to offer a smile of recognition as he moves through one frustrating confrontation to the next. Stoppard’s technique here is very like the radio comedy of the 1950s, though that influence may not be a directly conscious one. He envisions George as “a smallish untidy figure in a crumpled suit . . . a soiled fifty with a certain education somewhere in the past: it gives him a tattered dignity now” (9). Stoppard has explained that he allowed for that vaguely distant education so that George might voice his bewildered hopes articulately;<sup>8</sup> that remark probably reflects an original, realist notion of George, but, as rewritten, Riley needs no such motivation. He is funny because like Tony Hancock, for example, he is the paradigm of rumpled self-importance,<sup>9</sup> small in stature but enormous in his own dreams, who reacts to those around him with a predictability which, to us, seems hilariously mechanical but which, to him, seems novel and incomprehensible. He remains undefeated because he never learns from past experience. As Stoppard describes him, he is “unsinkable, despite the slow leak”.

This self-confident inadequacy is constantly tested through collision with someone who is either unintelligent and naive (Bill Kerr or Tony Hancock) or cagey and worldly-wise (Sid James). After Riley’s jaunty entry (undercut by Linda from the sidelines and by an “it’s him again” from the bar), he blithely accosts Brown, an anonymous-looking stranger, in the hope of cadging a drink. Unperturbed by failure, he turns to Able, a dim-witted but admiring sailor, to whom he can display his own superiority until the point of explosion where he is unable to countenance such gormlessness any longer:

RILEY: A man is born free and everywhere he is in chains. Who said that?

ABLE: Houdini?

RILEY (*turning*): Who?

ABLE: —dini.

RILEY: Houdini. No.

ABLE: Give up. (13)

On the other hand, with Harry, “flashy, sharp, well dressed”, he is himself the naive butt. For when Riley explains his latest invention, a supposedly reusable envelope with “gum on both sides of the flap”,

Harry leads him on into ever-increasing fantasy by pretending to take his self-image seriously and so feeding his vanities. By the end of this sequence, Riley is convinced that, with his brains and Harry's capital, his fortune is made: "A partnership – my goodness – did you hear that? I'm walking now, I'm on my way, committed – I'm walking and I'm not going to stop" (23).

At home, Riley's life follows a similar pattern, with his wife as dogged victim and his daughter as the superior sniper, though the fact that they are relatives and female adds a variation. Persephone's absorbed dusting and vacuuming make her an unsatisfactory audience and encourage her husband's my-wife-doesn't-understand-me attitude. Faced with his daughter's barbs, Riley envisions himself as the misunderstood parent, slaving for his family yet lacking respect. The fact that Linda is the sole bread-winner and gives her father weekly pocket money, since, as an "inventor", he does not consider himself a candidate for unemployment benefits, does nothing to deflate Riley's martyred dramatics.

Yet though these clashes of character depend for their effect on a transparent exaggeration of stock situations, Act 1 is no mere formula. The conflicts explode at high speed and are punctuated by extended arias in which Riley gives voice to the injustice of an unappreciative world. That tempo is sustained by flights of rapid, tangled cross-talk reminiscent of *The Goon Show*. Other *Goon* effects are the continuing catch-phrase (Riley's frequent hints that he wants a cigarette or a drink from Able) and the sort of sequence which builds on a cliché from popular fiction. Picking up Harry's suggestion that the innocuous Brown may be an industrial spy, Riley launches into an elaborate parody of a cunning, smooth-talking interrogator:

You can trust me. I'm just an ordinary man like yourself. I know you're only doing your job – it's a dirty business, but when it's all over we're still people, aren't we? The world goes on. I expect you're sick of it all – life on the run – always looking over your shoulder, waiting for the knock on the door, the unguarded word, the endless lies, loss of identity – it's no life at all. (25)

To hold these diverse materials together, Stoppard has organized a tight, economic structure. The pub episode ends with one of Riley's arias, during which he leans against a table, centre stage. The lights slowly go down within the bar, leaving him alone in spotlight until the other half of the set is gradually illuminated and, still talking, he is back in his living-room an hour or so *before* he decided to leave home for ever (as he often does on Saturdays). By backtracking, Stoppard allows us to view Riley's complaints about his family's lack of appreciation with prior knowledge that he will be equally frustrated and inadequate in the outside world. The reversed time-loop also adds

comic point to Riley's delusions. We measure his annoyance over Persephone's placidity against the romantic fiction he weaves around Florence, the girl in the bar who truly does not understand him. Similarly, the fact that we know he will be swept into that romantic fantasy and into his illusory partnership with Harry subverts Riley's criticism of Linda's dream knight-in-armour and her "living in a fool's paradise". The Act ends at the point where it began. "Rule Britannia" tinkles away, but we now realize it issues from one of Riley's latest inventions, a patriotic clock which plays that tune at noon and midnight (inconveniently). Riley has freed himself from his ungrateful family, and when the words repeat themselves as he enters the pub, "a free man", we understand what Linda means by "Poor old Dad".

The second Act, however, does not have the same panache. Partly this is because there are few surprises. The play's energy flags because Riley can only journey downwards; we know there can be no substance behind his dream of success with Harry and Florence. Nor is this predictability offset by any inventiveness in the way the pair effect Riley's awakening. Florence, as was apparent from the start, has not the slightest notion what she means to him, and Harry, tired of yesterday's joke, simply rips open one of Riley's envelopes to show the uselessness of its double-gummed flap. Stoppard makes the pair undisguisedly brusque in order to wring the pathos from Riley's plummeting expectations. Even Able laughs at him, and he leaves the bar, "hurt to anguish". The degree of that hurt signals the major problem with Act 2, for at points like this we are urged to feel for Riley as an individual; he is no longer the farcical automaton. Yet as motivated individuals, rather than cartoon figures who move through a series of stock situations, the characters of *Free Man* wobble disconcertingly.

This change of focus, which pulls the play apart, is detectable from the moment Riley tells his family that he is "going into industry" (61). Linda, no longer the sniper, gently begs him to unpack his bags. If he will "stay and be like other people", they can go together to the Labour Exchange, where he can register and draw benefits until he finds a job that suits him. The cartoon Riley would have reacted to this with blustering pride, but Stoppard requires him to speak "to her with equal gentleness and the same air of explaining to a small child". The mood is sentimental, the tone a quiet yearning, and the rhythms those of Miller's *Willy Loman*.<sup>10</sup>

LINDA: Dad, you don't have to – dad, you're making it up – you *know* you are – you don't have to –

RILEY (*almost jubilant, but still quiet*): I'm not! It's all *true!*

LINDA (*nearly crying*): Dad, you *dreamed* it.

RILEY: No-o-o! You'll see – I'm not *alone* this time – Oh Linda, I'll come back in a Rolls Royce and then you'll believe me again and it'll be happy again. (63)

This passage rings false not simply because it is derivative but because it asks us to ponder family relationships, whereas the earlier, unsinkable Riley was not the sort of figure to invite speculation about his domestic happiness or unhappiness. Similarly, after he leaves, Persephone, whom we have seen two-dimensionally, is suddenly given a brain and a heart as she appeals to Linda's sympathy:<sup>11</sup>

It costs him – every time he comes back he loses a little face and he's lost a lot of face – to you he's lost all of it. You treat him like a crank lodger we've got living upstairs who reads fairy tales and probably wishes he lived in one, but he's ours and we're his, and don't you ever talk about him like that again. (*Spent.*) You can call him the family joke, but it's our family. (*Pause.*) We're still a family. (67–8)

If we are to take this seriously as a revelation of true feeling beneath the cardboard cut-out housewife, we must wonder how she can accept her daughter's escapade with her latest motorcycling knight or, for that matter, how Linda, who has a sharp sense of self-irony, could fall to a succession of hard-riding smoothies.

Fortunately, by the end of the play, the characters are back in a cartoon world, and we no longer have to worry over motivation. We hear the sounds of rain, a clap of thunder, and water begins to pour from a tangle of pipes on the living-room walls. It seems that one of Riley's inventions has actually worked, until it is discovered that there is no way of turning off this indoor-rain-machine for houseplants. As Linda rushes around with buckets and saucepans, Riley appears to admit defeat, only “the trouble is, I think I was *meant* to be an inventor” (84). The final moment is nicely ambiguous. Though Riley agrees to go down to the Labour Exchange “and inquire”, Linda is prepared to wait and see how he feels in the morning and offers him an extra five shillings, since his week's pocket money went at the pub. Riley accepts it, “just to tide me over”, and enters the sum in his notebook, as he has done every week for the past three years. He may yet be free from the dole and once again afloat.

Flawed though it is, *Free Man* is not as weak as Stoppard himself has said. To some extent it is “a play written about other people's characters”<sup>12</sup> but, revised over the years, it shows a talent for verbal fireworks and a sensitivity to the possibilities of stage space, even if dialogue, action, and content are not yet interlocked or distinctively Stoppardian. As *A Walk on the Water* it was performed on commercial television in 1963, but to little notice during the aftershock of Ken-

nedy's assassination, and staged in Hamburg the following year, where *Old Riley geht über'n Ozean* was booed by an audience who expected kitchen-sink naturalism. The play was broadcast on BBC radio (1965) and, in its final form, presented after the acclaim given *Rosencrantz*, it suffered by comparison and was dubbed "disappointingly arch and obvious".<sup>13</sup> *Free Man* opened in March 1968 and closed two months later.

A second play from the early sixties, *The Gamblers*, never did receive a professional performance, though it was produced at the University of Bristol in 1965. Stoppard has jokingly referred to it as "Waiting for Godot in the Condemned Cell", yet he also describes it as "my 'first' play – that is the first play I regard as *mine*, after I'd cleared the decks with *A Walk on the Water*".<sup>14</sup> The text has not been published, but the passages that have appeared in print<sup>15</sup> do offer a foretaste of Stoppard's themes, style, and fascination with the arbitrary nature of the human condition. In particular, the play's two characters seem initially to be on opposing sides of a political revolution but are in fact two halves of the same coin. The Prisoner, who used to be the jailer before joining the insurgents, awaits execution simply because the revolt failed; had it not done so, the man who is now his jailer would be in prison since he is the regime's chief executioner. The Prisoner gambled and lost, though, by the play's end, the wheel of chance has revolved again and the Jailer, having decided the Prisoner is not the stuff of martyrs, changes places. The expectant crowd will not realize the difference: the Jailer wears the Prisoner's hood; the Prisoner dons the executioner's mask; they are indistinguishable, as they always have been. So, too, are the opposed forces in the larger scheme of things:

They're two parts of the same wheel, and the wheel spins. Do you know what I mean? . . . The life cycle of government, from the popular to the unpopular. The wheel goes slowly round till you get back to the starting point, and it's time for another revolution.

Yet however the wheel spins, from revolution to revolution, the Prisoner would always remain anonymous and unheroic.

He is entirely aware of his own littleness and of the ironies of his situation; a cog in the wheel, and a weak one at that, he has only become important because the victorious party needed a victim of some consequence and so promoted him into a captive 'leader'. That self-consciousness towards the ironies of one's own eternal inadequacy was to become one of the hallmarks of Stoppard's work. It distinguishes the Prisoner from a figure like George Riley, who has no such sense of inevitable failure. That knowing fatalism belongs to Beckett's Vladimir, and *Godot* has also provided Stoppard with a way



of dramatizing human littleness through music-hall slapstick. In an attempt to reach God, since He will not come down and burst the prison open, the Prisoner clammers up a pile of furniture and on to the Jailer's back. When that achieves nothing, he urges the Jailer to stand on him. This sequence also exemplifies the Beckett joke which Stoppard admiringly defines as "a constant process of elaborate structure and sudden – and total – dismantlement".<sup>16</sup> It is particularly funny when a speaker boobytraps himself:

JAILER: You are the sun on the horizon. (*Consciously theatrical*) . . . The sun of hope and truth about to flood a golden land of equality and fraternity – and – and –

PRISONER: Liberty.

JAILER: Liberty! Yes! A golden land where liberty is – *compulsory!*

Although Stoppard will never share Beckett's view of life's empty absurdity, that influence does lead him to toy with metaphysics and away from the routines of situation comedy. He has his own version of "nothing is certain", and those perceptions begin to inform the argument of *The Gamblers*. Its plot, on the other hand, owes something to Nabokov, whom Stoppard also admires. Yet the exchange of prisoner for jailer is a contrived one; the play's shaping does not convey the necessity which the characters purport to be trapped by.

Form and content support each other perfectly, however, in the three radio scripts Stoppard wrote between 1964 and 1966. His inventiveness seems to burgeon in response to the discipline and challenge of creating pictures and action in sound only. Released from the pressure of a large-scale narrative, he can concentrate entirely on pattern as a means of saying and looking at an idea through his own idiosyncratic fancy. The tight spiral of the first script, *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot*, re-creates both the hero's ascending distress and the imprisoning circumstances he tries to break from. In *'M' Is for Moon among Other Things*, Stoppard prods below the patterns and begins to *explore* the pathos of imprisoned littleness. Here, he finds a distinctive way for his characters to voice their bewilderment towards themselves and life around them, and this develops into the playful metaphysics of *If You're Glad I'll Be Frank*. In all three plays he draws the listener into that world and into his characters' unease by condensing plot, dialogue, and sounds, so forcing us to deduce much of what is happening, to participate, to share in those little lives. As he gains assurance, Stoppard begins, through sound and dialogue, to "ambush" his audiences. In these scripts, he finds his own voice and his own vision of life's puzzling uncertainty.



*The Dissolution of Dominic Boot*, broadcast by the BBC in early 1964, is a candyfloss confection upon the moving-wheel theme, stripped of all metaphorical suggestion. The idea is as simple as it is entertaining: “The peg for *Dominic Boot* – a man riding around in a taxi trying to raise the money he needs to catch up with the meter – is the only self-propelled idea-for-a-play I ever had and I think I wrote it in a day.”<sup>17</sup> Stoppard extends one dramatic image (in the vein of Riley’s spy-interrogation) into fifteen minutes of action-packed panic. Sound effects, dialogue, and particularly deft cross-cutting between scenes create a sort of short-hand language which the listener must interpret in order to keep up.

No sound is wasted, and many serve a double function by furthering the action and weaving secondary threads that tie the episodes closely together. The opening moments illustrate this economic multiplicity:

*Fade in street – traffic.*

VIVIAN: Well, thanks for the lunch – oh golly, it’s raining.

DOMINIC: Better run for it.

VIVIAN: Don’t be silly . . . . (*Up*) Hey, taxi!

DOMINIC: I say, Viv . . .

VIVIAN: Come on, you can drop me off. (*To driver*) Just round the corner, Derby Street Library.

(*They get in – taxi drives.*)

DOMINIC: Look, Vivian, I haven’t got . . .

VIVIAN: Dash it – that’s taken about ten shillings out of my two-guinea hairdo – honestly, I’m furious. Don’t you ever have an umbrella?

DOMINIC: Not when it’s raining. (49)

Vivian is instantly characterized as a demanding, self-centred shrew who gives Dominic no chance to confess to his lack of cash. In fact, one of the major jokes is that we never do hear him actually explain his predicament to anyone. The hairdo and missing umbrella, besides instigating the taxi-ride and Vivian’s grumbles, are two of the connecting threads. A few scenes later, Dominic’s mother, who is equally critical and self-absorbed (no wonder she “likes that girl”), joins him in the taxi to talk about her hair and his never having an umbrella. This then occasions the next sequence, a few words from the cabbie about who used to cut his own mum’s hair, and that snatch of family history enables Stoppard to mask a crucial piece of information when later, amidst continued chat about who cuts whose hair, Dominic learns that the driver owns a shop: “clothes, furniture, stuff, second-hand” (56). By the final sequence, Dominic – still umbrellaless and soaking wet – has sold everything he owns, except for a pair of pyjamas, to the driver in exchange for the fare.

By building repeated patterns of dialogue and by cutting rapidly from scene to scene, Stoppard is able to dispense with large sections of the plot. This technique draws the listener more intimately into the action since it forces him to piece things together for himself. After Vivian has left the taxi, we hear Dominic's inner thoughts and the chink of coins as he tries to meet the fare. Against the noise of the idling engine, the driver, silent up till then, asks (a shade sarcastically) if he is waiting for the rain to stop: "No, um, the Metropolitan Bank, Blackfriars, please." We instantly cut to the bank as a cashier asks Dominic to step to the end of the counter. Whereupon, through a brief interview and a tangle of muddled names, we deduce that Dominic is overdrawn and that the bank has already refused two cheques from the restaurant he lunched at with Vivian. The action then moves swiftly to a second bank where the repeating pattern suggests Dominic's troubles in two brief lines. We can guess the rest for ourselves.

Whole playlets about the characters' lives are also implied by the dialogue. The changing relationship between Dominic and the driver is particularly well-managed. The latter is introduced as a silent presence at the receiving end of Vivian's orders, and when he does speak, his slight sarcasm immediately conjures up the cliché of a world-weary cabbie, though he is moved to some wonderment when Dominic asks to be taken to a third bank. As the ride grows longer, the driver regales his passenger with a family detail or two, but never beyond a certain point: business is business. Such hard-nosed camaraderie then motivates the parody scene in which he bargains for Dominic's belongings, dismissing them as junk which, for a friend (his erstwhile passenger is now "Dom"), he agrees to cart away for ten bob. Dominic does not find his actual friends much more forthcoming. Stoppard has him borrow fourpence from the driver and ring up Charles. Tone of voice creates levels of meaning, especially on radio, and this solo phone-call allows the actor wide scope to manipulate stress and pause to suggest how distant a friend Charles is and how disgusted he feels at being asked to repay a loan by someone who can afford to travel around by cab.

Stoppard's ongoing preoccupation with characters who are called either Boot or Moon seems to have begun about this time. Having moved to London, he was writing theatre reviews and miscellaneous snippets for *Scene* magazine and would often sign them "William Boot", the name of a journalist in Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop*. In Stoppard's imagination, anyone called Boot shows a certain aggressiveness in trying to shape his life, whereas a Moon is more kicked against than kicking.<sup>18</sup> In some ways, Dominic may seem like a Moon until