

Cambridge University Press

0521379741 - The Theatre of Tom Stoppard, Second Edition - Anthony Jenkins
Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The Theatre of Tom Stoppard

Cambridge University Press

0521379741 - The Theatre of Tom Stoppard, Second Edition - Anthony Jenkins
Frontmatter

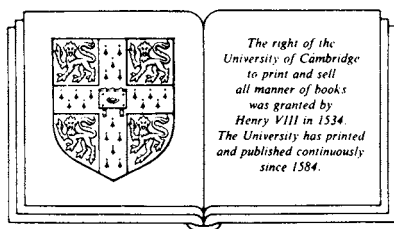
[More information](#)

The Theatre of Tom Stoppard

Anthony Jenkins

University of Victoria, British Columbia

Second edition



Cambridge University Press

Cambridge

New York New Rochelle

Melbourne Sydney

Cambridge University Press
0521379741 - The Theatre of Tom Stoppard, Second Edition - Anthony Jenkins
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1987, 1989

First published 1987

Reprinted 1988

Second edition 1989

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Jenkins, Anthony

The theatre of Tom Stoppard – 2nd ed.

1. Stoppard, Tom – Criticism and interpretation

I. Title

822'.914 PR6069.T6Z/

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Jenkins, Anthony, 1936–

The theatre of Tom Stoppard.

Bibliography.

1. Stoppard, Tom – Criticism and interpretations.

I. Title.

PR6069.T6Z7 1987 822'.914 86–21572

ISBN 0 521 37391 3 hard covers

ISBN 0 521 37974 1 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

FP

Cambridge University Press

0521379741 - The Theatre of Tom Stoppard, Second Edition - Anthony Jenkins
Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For MARION,
BRONWYN and MEGAN

Knowing, being known . . .
Having that is being rich.

Contents

Fore words	page ix
1 A free man	1
<i>Enter a Free Man, p. 1 – The Gamblers, p. 7 – The Dissolution of Dominic Boot, p. 9 – ‘M’ Is for Moon among Other Things, p. 11 – If You’re Glad I’ll Be Frank, p. 14 – A Separate Peace, p. 19 – Neutral Ground, p. 21 – This Way Out with Samuel Boot, p. 23</i>	
2 Now you see him	24
<i>Three stories: ‘Reunion’, p. 24, ‘Life, Times: Fragments’, p. 26, ‘The Story’, p. 27 – Lord Malquist and Mr Moon, p. 28 – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, p. 37</i>	
3 Victims of perspective	50
<i>The Real Inspector Hound, p. 50 – After Magritte, p. 54 – Teeth, p. 59 – Albert’s Bridge, p. 61 – Where Are They Now?, p. 65</i>	
4 Trapped in language	72
<i>Another Moon Called Earth, p. 73 – Jumpers, p. 76</i>	
5 What did you do, Dada?	99
<i>Dogg’s Our Pet, p. 101 – Artist Descending a Staircase, p. 105 – Travesties, p. 115</i>	
6 Ethics and manners	125
<i>Dirty Linen and New-Found-Land, p. 125 – Every Good Boy Deserves Favour, p. 131 – Professional Foul, p. 136 – Night and Day, p. 142</i>	

Cambridge University Press

0521379741 - The Theatre of Tom Stoppard, Second Edition - Anthony Jenkins

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

7	The real thing?	154
	<i>Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth, p. 155 – The Real Thing, p. 159 – The Dog It Was That Died, p. 172 – Squaring the Circle, p. 176</i>	
	After words	183
	<i>Hapgood, p. 183</i>	
	Notes	193

Fore words

Had *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon* become a best-seller in the autumn of 1966 and had *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* vanished – as Ros and Guil do – after that year's Fringe Festival at Edinburgh, the modern theatre could have lost its most adroit manipulator of stage pictures. I mention this not just as an interesting might-have-been but as a way of isolating Tom Stoppard's particular brand of theatricality. *Malquist* gives us the punster and word magician who skips from one chimera to the next with the same playfulness that animates his radio and stage scripts. The novel obviously comes from the centre of Stoppard's imagination. Its distorting mirrors and cartoon characters are fundamental to the way Stoppard perceives life, and must have an important place in any discussion of his theatre. Yet despite the theatricality of the novel's dialogue and illusory pictures, ultimately a relationship between reader, narrator and story cannot be likened to one which involves audience, performers and 'happening'. It is this idiomatic difference which Stoppard seizes upon to make things work on stage or in the sound studio.

In Stoppard's theatre, the stage is, first and foremost, a stage, just as the radio is a box of sounds. Two attendant lords tossing a coin on a bare stage create an immediacy which does not translate into a *description* of two coin-tossing attendants. The picture itself is an event and depends on the various rhythms at each spin of the coin, the actors' facial and bodily gestures, the speaking silences between them. More particularly, this image embodies the *play* which will follow and transport us into a chancy, bewildering, ominous world, at the same time that it stresses the fact that we watch two performers using all their skill as two bungling players. *Rosencrantz* explores the boundary between seductive reality and overt bravura. Its opening sequence also makes capital out of our subconscious feeling that, at any moment, something can go wrong with a performance. Stoppard flaunts that risk-taking in the first scene of *Jumpers* where things do go wrong with Dotty, the chanteuse, and might do so, in an unplanned way, for the actors who jump in from the wings, stumble about with a tray of glasses, or swing to and fro in an aerial striptease. Both episodes provide us with a means of looking at the rest of the evening's play, just as the elaborate sound picture which begins *Artist Descending a Staircase* affects our interpretation of every other episode. Should a scene seem realistic, Stoppard encourages us to

forget we are in a theatre or listening to the radio and then subverts that convincing illusion with images which are equally convincing and disruptively contradictory.

This fascination with the way words and images convey meaning, connecting thought to speech or title to picture, shows Stoppard's temperamental affinity with Wittgenstein and Magritte. But it also has something to do with the fact that though he is supremely at home with the English language he does not take it for granted. He was eighteen months old when his family left Czechoslovakia. His father, Dr Eugene Straussler, worked as a medical officer for the Bata shoe company. Just before the Nazi invasion, the Strausslers were transferred from Zlin to Singapore, and in 1942, as the Japanese moved against Malaya, Mrs Straussler and her two sons were evacuated to India. Dr Straussler stayed behind and was killed some time after the Japanese occupation. In Darjeeling, Tom's mother met Kenneth Stoppard, a major with the British Army in India. They were married in 1946, and the boys took their stepfather's name. Soon after that, the Stoppards moved to England and, round about 1950, settled in Bristol. Surrounded by English in Singapore, Stoppard did not 'live' it until he went to his first school in India so that, like Wilde or Shaw, he came to the language not as a foreigner but as someone who was fractionally 'other', and so saw more clearly that words are signs. Samuel Beckett, born beyond the pale, cultivated that awareness by writing *Godot* in French and then translating it back into English; for Stoppard, that invigorating estrangement, however subliminal, remains an accident of history.

In *The Real Thing*, Henry says to Annie, "I don't think writers are sacred, but words are". To demonstrate that, Stoppard has him pick up a cricket bat and explain how pieces of wood have been put together with intricate simplicity. The analogy between writer and batsman could not be more English; it also combines elegance and play to serious intent. That same combination of stylish play worries some of Stoppard's critics. The most vociferous tend to be American, perhaps because they take less delight in elegant glances to silly mid-on and prefer words to be smacked into the stands by a non-nonsense baseball bat. Walter Kerr's *New York Times* review of *Dirty Linen* (1977) offers the most famous critique of Stoppard's games: "Intellectually restless as a hummingbird, and just as incapable of lighting anywhere, the playwright has a gift for making the randomness of his flights funny . . . Busy as Mr Stoppard's mind is, it is also lazy; he will settle for the first thing that pops into his head."

His detractors, at home and away, find him heartlessly intellectual, cold, obsessed with patterns. To them he seems an essentially frivo-

lous dazzler who has little or nothing of substance to say. However, since *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977) ushered in a line of more obviously ‘political’ plays, that picture of him has changed. John Russell Taylor in his retrospective article, “From *Rosencrantz* to *The Real Thing*”, for *Plays and Players* (1984) has fixed him with a neat, amusing pin: “Enfant Terrible shapes up as Grand Old Man, intellectual joker finds sense of responsibility, Tin Man welds heart to sleeve. It is neat, tidy, and dramatically satisfying as a progression.” But Poor Tom is still a-cold, for Taylor adds that “one may be left with a sneaking feeling that one preferred the rake unreformed, the joker unsobered”.

Stoppard’s career seems to me to be all of a piece. Though his style has become more reticent and his statements more direct, he continues to exploit the play in plays. *Squaring the Circle* (1984) is as jokey about ways of looking and saying as *Rosencrantz* was. He has always been completely serious about frivolity and stylishness as ways to make ideas fly. And though his beliefs are surprisingly uncomplicated, they come from a benevolent, if sceptical mind. His assurance that, beneath their confusion and cruelties, human beings *are* worthwhile and that the proof of this lies in man’s ongoing search for a just community may sound unfashionably optimistic but it generates the play in all his major works. There is no despair in Stoppard, yet to call *Rosencrantz* “Beckett without tears” (Robert Brustein: *New Republic*, 1967) ignores the very human bewilderment and terror that eventually overtake the jolly pair. It is this humanity which interests me in Stoppard, and it appears much earlier than most commentators allow.

The radio plays contain the essence of those qualities. Each achieves a delicate balance between form and content, play and pain. The medium’s intimacy allows us to concentrate while words slither or somersault; without the distraction of visual pictures, we move steadily closer to the littleness behind his characters’ desperate or jaunty loquacity. Yet the verbal ebullience never works loose from the supporting structure. Each of these plays, from *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot* to *The Dog It Was That Died*, is a miniature marvel. That balance is much harder to attain in the theatre because everything, including the central idea, has to be bigger, but it is by that union of form, idea, and human passion that the plays either stand, wobble or fall. *Jumpers* achieves a brilliant unity and, on a lesser scale as a sort of staged radio play, so does *Every Good Boy*, while *Rosencrantz* (a mite too ‘talky’) and *The Real Thing* (problems with focus in the last two scenes) have a flawed splendour. It took Stoppard longer to translate his particular kind of theatricality into the vocabulary of the television

cameras: his early farce, *Teeth*, is a one-shot triumph and *Professional Foul* and *Squaring the Circle* show him continuing to test himself and the medium.

Despite these verdicts, I do not intend to rank the plays into leagues and divisions, like one of Stoppard's Dogg football results: "Tube Clock dock, Handbag dock; Haddock Clock quite, Haddock Foglamp trog". My main purpose is to show how and where they work or don't as performances and strategies, since play scripts, like music scores, are difficult to realize from the printed page. Because I also want to show their interconnection, I approach them chronologically, as steps on a journey to the 'real' Tom Stoppard – or to as much of him as they allow us to see. For that reason, I ignore his adaptations from other writers, though those plays also have moments of ingenious staging. In focusing on the texts as theatrical games, I have avoided nods of approval or gestures of rage to this or that particular critic; instead, the essential names appear in the notes. Naturally my ideas have been shaped by a host of conflicting opinions, to which David Bratt's *Tom Stoppard: A Reference Guide* (Boston, 1982) gave useful directions. But I would like to acknowledge those which have been especially influential. Stoppard's own interviews, notably in Ronald Hayman's *Tom Stoppard* (1974 and 1976), *Theatre Quarterly* (1974), and *Gambit* (1981), have been my sheet-anchor, while Kenneth Tynan's profile in *Show People* (1979), Jim Hunter's *Tom Stoppard's Plays* (1982), and Tim Brassell's *Tom Stoppard* (1985) gave me ideas to ponder and reckon with. Except for Dogg's *Our Pet* (Interaction Inprint), all quotation from Stoppard's work comes, as noted, from the standard British or American editions of Faber & Faber or Grove Press.

I am most indebted to Colleen Donnelly, who typed and retyped with unflagging energy, accuracy and dedication, and to Doreen Thompson, whose own work on Stoppard over the years has challenged and stimulated mine. In addition, she generously provided me with the materials she had gathered for her MA thesis, *Soya Beans and Cricket Bats*. The staff of the University Library in Victoria and the National Sound Archive in Kensington were always helpful. I am also grateful to the University of Victoria's English Department, to my colleagues, Joan Coldwell, David Thatcher, Bill Benzie, and to my wife, Marion, for support, advice and encouragement along the way.