

Introduction

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In the long first scene of *Leopoldstadt*, Tom Stoppard's late masterpiece about a Viennese Jewish family in the first half of the twentieth century, the characters engage in a spirited, multilayered conversation about a range of cultural topics. They discuss Arthur Schnitzler's scandalous play *La Ronde*, Gustav Mahler's second symphony, the Riemann Hypothesis in number theory, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, the controversy over Gustav Klimt's painting *Philosophy* for the Vienna University Great Hall, and, most consequentially, as it turns out, the debate occasioned by Theodor Herzl's 1896 pamphlet *Der Judenstaat*, calling for the formation of a Jewish state. 'Don't fall for this Judenstaat idiocy', Hermann Merz tells his mathematician brother-in-law Ludwig, played in the opening production by Stoppard's son, Ed. 'Do you want to do mathematics in the desert or in the city where Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven *overlapped*, and where Brahms used to come to our house? We're Austrians. Viennese. Doctors come from all over the world to study here. Philosophers. Architects. A city of art lovers and intellectuals like no other'.¹

The scene is quintessentially Stoppardian in its breadth of allusion, its wide array of topics from the arts, humanities, and sciences, its intellectual wit, and the sheer articulateness of its dozen or so characters. It is also, as the play eventually makes evident, Stoppardian in a more personal sense. The scene documents the cultural significance, as well as the vulnerability, of Jews in the Austro-Hungarian empire and the growing threat of anti-Semitism. In the final scene of the play, set in 1955, a character whose experiences are parallel to the young Stoppard's learns the truth about his family from its two other surviving members. Leo, a successful young comic writer who has lived most of his life in Britain after his mother married an Englishman, looks over a family tree drawn by his cousin Rosa. Like Stoppard's, most of Leo's family perished in the Holocaust; the play ends with a long, slow roll-call of the dead.

The complexity of Stoppard's own life-experiences, together with the scope and variety of his work, demand that his extraordinary career be viewed in context, indeed in a whole range of contexts: historical, aesthetic, political, intellectual, and biographical. *Tom Stoppard in Context* situates Stoppard in the world he lived through as well as in the diverse cultural landscapes his works explore. Playwright, screenwriter, activist, and public intellectual, Stoppard has had a long and complex career. His personal history has intersected with some of the pivotal events of the last century, from World War II and decolonization to the Cold War and the rise of globalism. Stoppard's work is distinguished by its range and scope, its verbal wit, and the dazzling array of artistic, historical, and scientific topics with which he engages. *Tom Stoppard in Context* provides illuminating perspectives on the world that shaped Stoppard's intellectual and artistic outlook as well as insights into the career and achievements of one of the most important modern playwrights.

Like all volumes in the *Literature in Context* series, *Tom Stoppard in Context* is designed to move directionally from context to literature, rather than the reverse. From the geopolitics of the post-war world in which Stoppard came of age to the conditions of the London theatre scene in the era of his ascendance, each entry provides readers with a compact contextual sense of the historical and intellectual landscape out of which Stoppard's theatre emerged. At the same time, the entries move beyond background reading and actively probe Stoppard's particular relationship to the events and entities at hand: why they proved of interest to him, personally or professionally; how he engaged them in his works and why that should inform our understanding of his plays; and, in certain cases, how the historical context changed in turn in response to Stoppard's engagements and interventions. Contributors, selected equally for their relevant contextual expertise as for their familiarity with Stoppard's work, provide readers with a unique window into the historical and cultural landscapes that made Tom Stoppard's world and works.

The opening section, *Origins*, is the most biographical, and explores Stoppard's eventful early life. Born Tomáš Stráussler² in Czechoslovakia in 1937, Stoppard experienced drastic losses and displacements in the first decade of his life, ending up with a new name and country. Stoppard has noted that his work, from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* onward, often deals with characters of unstable identity, who are frequently called by the wrong names. Only late in life did Stoppard come fully to understand his Jewish identity and tragic family history – subjects he dramatises powerfully in *Leopoldstadt*. His birthplace, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech

Republic and Slovakia), is also an important context for his work: a country marked by successive incursions of fascism and communism and finally riven by political and cultural division. Though his family left when he was a child, Stoppard continued to engage with his homeland through his human rights work, his friendship with playwright and Czech president Václav Havel, and his late play *Rock 'n' Roll*. Stoppard's refugee childhood also took him to Singapore and India, where his life intersected with the tangled politics of empire and its aftermath, reflected in works like *In the Native State* and *Indian Ink*. After his mother remarried, Stoppard took on a new persona as a British subject. His identity continued to evolve in his adopted homeland, from his schooling in Yorkshire, to his work as a journalist in Bristol, to his social and cultural ascent in the world of the London theatre and his eventual purchase of a Palladian country house, reflected in his play *Arcadia*.

The biographical and geographical contexts of the first section are succeeded by literary and intellectual contexts in the second, *Influences*. Though he was an indifferent student and left school at seventeen, Stoppard developed into a voracious reader and autodidact, and his works show the profound impact of a number of important writers. Shakespeare, of course, provided the raw material for Stoppard's breakthrough hit *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and the inspiration, decades later, for one of Stoppard's most successful film ventures in *Shakespeare in Love*. Russian literature and culture are touchstones to which Stoppard has repeatedly returned, from his ongoing critical engagement with revolutionary movements (from Herzen to Lenin and beyond) to his adaptations of Tolstoy and Chekhov. Stoppard's brilliant verbal wit locates him in the theatrical tradition of another influence, Oscar Wilde. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the central intertext of Stoppard's *Travesties* and Wilde himself plays a significant role in *The Invention of Love*. Samuel Beckett has haunted Stoppard's plays without ever appearing directly in them: *Waiting for Godot* is a kind of artistic template for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and *Jumpers* ends with an oblique but forceful acknowledgment of Beckett's influence. Finally, Vaclav Havel is a playwright whose political example was as powerful for Stoppard as his artistic work. Havel's Charter 77 work for human rights inspired Stoppard's own interventions on the part of dissident writers. Stoppard later dedicated *Rock 'n' Roll*, the play that most directly engages his own Czech background, to Havel, who became a close personal friend.

The third section of the book, *Ideas*, seeks to contextualise Stoppard's lifelong engagement with various realms of intellectual inquiry. The

playwright's fascination with philosophy informed early pieces like *Jumpers* and *Dogg's Hamlet*, based on engagements with logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy respectively, as well as later works like his radio play *Darkside*, which dramatises a famous thought experiment in contemporary moral philosophy, and *The Hard Problem*, which intermixes a wrenching personal drama with questions of consciousness and the philosophy of mind. Stoppard's affinity for philosophical abstraction is equally matched by his interest in the hard sciences, spanning the disciplines of physics, biology, neuroscience, and ecology and informing plays from *Hapgood* (particle physics) to *Arcadia* (thermodynamics, biology, and ecology) to *The Hard Problem* (neuroscience and evolution). Though he won renown as a man of letters, Stoppard also has shown a recurring attention to numbers and numerical thinking in everything from discussions of statistics and probability in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* to a prolonged consideration of chaos theory and biostatistics in *Arcadia* to debates over algorithms in *The Hard Problem*. Such intellectual pursuits were never separate from lived experience for Stoppard, and life itself was often viewed as an intellectual quandary. Hence the recurring themes of memory, history, and biography that show up both as the subject of his plays and as the objects for which characters in those plays are often (fruitlessly) searching, informing an engagement with heady themes of meta-history and meta-biography in deeply recursive works like *Travesties* and *Arcadia*. Even love could be an intellectual issue for Stoppard, and meditations on eros both historical and personal inform plays like *The Invention of Love* and *The Real Thing*.

For Stoppard, the world of ideas was never far from the world of art itself, and the next section of the book, *Aesthetics*, places the playwright's work in the context of the various artistic movements and forms it has drawn from and engaged. Theories of art are often explicitly scrutinised in Stoppard's plays, most famously in the aesthetic debates of *Travesties*, *The Real Thing*, and *Arcadia* as well as in lesser-known works like *Artist Descending a Staircase*. Often such debates turn on the tension between classicism and romanticism, a wide-ranging theme in the history of European arts and letters that is explored directly in plays like *Arcadia* and *The Invention of Love* and obliquely throughout much of Stoppard's oeuvre. At the same time, Stoppard is deeply indebted to the twentieth-century movements of literary and artistic modernism and to the aesthetic-political disruptions of the avant-garde: influences that come to the fore in *Travesties* but that can be seen even in his screenwriting work. Of all the artistic forms that Stoppard has parodied, scrutinised, and embraced

within his prolific output, none has been so powerful an influence as music. From the pop music obsessions discussed in *The Real Thing* to the intertexts of the Plastic People of the Universe and Pink Floyd in *Rock 'n' Roll* and *Darkside* to the classical music collaborations of *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* and *Penelope*, Stoppard's work has long been interlaced with this lifelong love.

The next section of the book, *Politics*, turns to questions of Stoppard's political commitments. Born into the vast geopolitical chaos of the Second World War and having come of age as an artist in the midst of the Cold War and the dissolution of the British Empire, Stoppard's work has frequently taken a political bent. As with so many things with Stoppard, political questions are often approached intellectually: issues of ideology formation and the philosophical frameworks of political commitment form the explicit subject of his epic *Coast of Utopia* trilogy, which traces Russian thought in the century before that country's Communist revolution, and lie underneath much of *Leopoldstadt* as well. Both the lived reality and legacy of Communism has often been at the fore of Stoppard's writing, a theme explored across various Eastern European geographies in *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (the USSR), *Squaring the Circle* (Poland), and *Rock 'n' Roll* (Czechoslovakia), among other works. Of course, the rise of Communism had dramatic effects on life in the West as well, and the thematics of the Cold War, including the daily ambient threat of nuclear annihilation, permeate much of Stoppard's writing – implicitly in the absurdity and fatalism of early plays like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and explicitly in works dealing with interactions across the Iron Curtain like *Professional Foul* and *Rock 'n' Roll*. Though Stoppard was often vague on his own domestic political commitments, he was an adamant supporter of international human rights, a topic of special concern given his friendship with Havel, a one-time political prisoner. In addition to informing his advocacy work throughout the Cold War, questions of human rights form the centrepiece of works including *If You're Glad I'll Be Frank*, *Cahoot's Macbeth*, *Professional Foul*, and others. Stoppard's political imagination also extended beyond Europe, and his plays have occasionally turned to the political and social realities of post-colonial life – issues of personal concern given Stoppard's early years in British Singapore and India. Such topics inform plays like *Night and Day*, set in a fictional African country in the wake of decolonisation, and *Indian Ink*, set partly in a quasi-independent 'native state' within 1930s India, and laced with Stoppard's own nostalgia for his childhood in the last days of the British Raj.

The book's final section, *Page, Stage, and Screen*, details and contextualises Stoppard's diverse artistic career. He came to prominence during a fertile period for the British theatre, though he set himself apart from both the kitchen-sink edginess of the Royal Court and the severity of continental Absurdism. Stoppard distinguished himself with literate, upmarket plays for the National Theatre and the West End, providing intellectual challenges and exhilarating verbal wit for both audiences and actors. Alongside his original works were a number of adaptations and translations, often drawing on literary classics or lesser-known texts from Central and Eastern Europe. Stoppard's early career as a reporter and theatre critic also informed his work for the stage, as issues of journalistic ethics recur throughout his career. While Stoppard is best known as a playwright, he made contributions in a range of media, from his one novel *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon* to some very significant work for radio and screens large and small. Stoppard's screenwriting is both one of the most and least visible aspects of his output, ranging from the Oscar-winning screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love* (for which he shared credit with Marc Norman) to various instances of uncredited script-doctoring and several intriguing unproduced screenplays. These form a key part of the large and varied archive of Stoppard's work, which brings together the interests, engagements, and artistic productions of a career spanning more than six decades. This volume aims to provide a suitably broad array of perspectives on that career, and to put in context one of the most important writers of our time.

Notes

- 1 Tom Stoppard, *Leopoldstadt* (London: Faber & Faber, 2020), 21.
- 2 The Czech surname of Stoppard's family has sometimes appeared in print without an umlaut, or with the umlaut over the u. Stráussler seems to be the original form of the name, and it appears thus on documents such as Stoppard's mother's passport. After Czech independence in 1918 some German-speaking Jewish families altered their names to sound more Czech (which could in some cases mean removing the umlaut), but Stoppard's family seems to have retained the umlaut up through 1937.

PART I

Origins

CHAPTER I

*Name, Family, and Identity**William Baker*

Tom Stoppard's theatrical career began with questions of identity. 'Who am I then?' asks Rosencrantz of his partner Guildenstern in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), as the two friends are about to embark on a bit of role-playing. 'You're yourself', Guildenstern replies – sometimes a difficult role to play, as Stoppard well knew.¹ This biographical prologue will consider the effect early displacements had on the man who began life as Tomáš Stráussler. This chapter will also provide the historical context around Stoppard's discovery, late in life, of his own Jewish identity and the death of his grandparents in the Holocaust – discoveries that in important ways changed the playwright's very concept of who he was.

Stoppard was born Tomáš Stráussler on 3 July 1937, the second son of Eugen Stráussler and Marta (*née* Becková), in Zlín, Czechoslovakia. Stoppard's father worked for the Baťa Shoe Company as a physician, reporting directly to the chief physician, Dr Bohuslav Albert. Zlín is a city on the Dřevnice River in southeastern Moravia, in what is now the Czech Republic. The development of the modern city is closely connected to the Baťa Shoe Company, which originated there, and which made Zlín virtually a company town before going on to expand internationally. Between 1932 and 1939 Zlín grew nearly twofold, with more than half of the population employed in some way by Baťa.

Stoppard's father, Dr Eugen Stráussler, was born into an assimilated non-religious Jewish family on 7 January 1908, in the small town of Podmokly in northwestern Bohemia. Tom's paternal grandfather, Julius, who was born in 1878, was employed by the state railway system. Just after the First World War began, Julius was transferred to Vienna following the creation of the Czech Railways in 1918. His son Eugen attended primary school in Vienna. Stoppard's grandfather then moved to the large industrial city of Brno, where Eugen went to the grammar school and then on to study medicine at Brno University. Unlike at other Eastern and Central European Universities, there appear to have been no official or unofficial

restrictions upon Jewish students, such as those that operated, for instance, at the time in the Medical Faculty in Vienna – a practice Stoppard alludes to in his 2020 play *Leopoldstadt*. Brno had a Jewish community, including an Orthodox one, and Jews in the city were allowed to live, marry, and work wherever they wished – an uncommon circumstance in that era.

In 1932, when he was 24, the newly qualified Dr Eugen Sträussler's application to work for the newly created Bat'a Company Hospital in Zlín was accepted. His hiring without references was 'a testimony to his accomplishments and his family's reputation for reliability and hard work'.² Stoppard's father started work on 4 February 1943, with his official appointment letter dated on the first of the month. Private practice or any other gainful activity was not allowed; however, if he proved to be successful, there was the possibility of promotion. After four years he was promoted to assistant chief consultant. Stoppard knew very little of his father but he recounted that, during the late 1990s on a visit to Prague, he met the daughter of his father's supervisor at Bat'a, who told him that his father 'had stitched up severe cuts caused when she put her hand through the pane of glass'. Ira Nadel observes that 'the scar, a trace of Eugen Sträussler, stared at him as he touched it fifty-six years after his father's death, the only tangible sign of his existence'.³

Tom Stoppard's mother, Marta Becková (whose family name was subsequently shortened to Beck), the daughter of Rudolf and Regina Becková, was born on 11 July 1911 at Rousínov, a small village in the Rakovník district of Bohemia, in what is now the Czech Republic. Jewish settlement in Rousínov dated back hundreds of years, and by the mid-nineteenth century comprised half the town's population.⁴ Stoppard observes that in his mother's family there were many mixed marriages with Gentiles, the proportion being about half-and-half. Her grandparents had become Catholics; when she joined Bat'a at the age of eighteen, Catholicism was listed as her religion. She started to ski and went to dances with her mother in attendance. On one of her skiing outings she met a young doctor, Eugen Sträussler, who then invited her to a hospital dance. Marta described her husband 'as having unconventional good looks, intelligence, modesty and much charm'. Such 'qualities ... [were] evident in his younger son', Tom. Both were 'good-humored, optimistic and empathetic; his outlook on life was positive and pictures always show him smiling'.⁵

Eugen and Marta Sträussler married on Saturday, 23 June 1934 in Zlín, in what was a non-Jewish wedding. From 1919 on, there was the possibility of a choice between civil and church weddings. A month following

the wedding, they moved to Zálešná near Zlín, where between 1934 and 1938 the Bat'a Shoe Company built 334 townhouses for its employees.⁶ Though Marta had worked various jobs since meeting Eugen, first as a hospital secretary and then as a nurse and later for Bat'a as well, she ceased to work when expecting a baby. Her son, Tom's elder brother Petr (subsequently anglicised to Peter) was born on 21 August 1935. By the time of the birth of Eugen and Marta's second son, Tomáš (nicknamed Tomik), on 3 July 1937, there were storm clouds on the horizon.

Just over a year after Stoppard's birth – and a year to the day after the death of the first president of independent Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Masaryk, on 21 September 1938 – the new president Edvard Beneš acquiesced to Germany's demands for partition of the country. Under the Munich agreement of eight days later, wherein Great Britain and France capitulated to the Nazis, the formerly independent country lost about one-third of its territory, population, and national income. Naturally, in such a situation of upheaval, the Jewish population was very vulnerable, and its plight was made more acute by the Nazi persecution of Jews in Germany itself. On 30 October 1938, 13,000 Polish Jews were expelled from Germany and forced to leave behind their money and property. On 7 November 1938, a German diplomat in the German Embassy in Paris was assassinated. Hitler's response was the 'Kristallnacht' of 9 November 1938, and the destruction of Jewish property in Berlin and elsewhere. Clearly, the writing was on the wall for European Jewry.

Not that it had been easy for Czech Jews. Conversions to Catholicism by this Jewish population represented an attempt to disguise an escape from origins, the past and fate, or inevitability – a concern that reoccurs in Stoppard's work. Many Jews forgot their traditions and customs: they were not at home culturally in Vienna, with its endemic anti-Semitism, and regarded by Czech nationalists as too similar to German in language and culture to be truly Czech. The Bat'a Company had Jewish employees all over the world and its top officials were worried about their own situation, given the Nazi habit of seizing money and businesses. The Germans crossed into Czechoslovakia on 14 March 1939. That morning the Bat'a hospital director gathered fifteen Jewish doctors at his home and told them that they would have to leave the country. The firm would send them to Bat'a businesses in Singapore, the Philippines, and Africa. In the meantime, the Sträußlers obtained their passports on 19 September 1938, anticipating the 21 September Prague demonstration against the capitulation to the Germans and a fortnight prior to the Munich agreement giving Hitler control of the Sudetenland.