

## **SIZING UP ETERNITY**

(ON THE LITERARY ACHIEVEMENT OF SIR TOM STOPPARD)

by

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We are all sizing up eternity on the sly. While we carry on with our little daily lives we also have an eye to being part of something bigger than ourselves. We light candles, we hang icons from our rearview mirrors, we stick posters of our idols in our bedrooms, we quote the great and the good, we buy CDs and DVDs so that we can be exactly the same as the millions of other true believers, we imitate the models in the ads, we collect relics and autographs, we dream of having our picture taken with the stars, of some all-seeing eye having a snapshot of us, of recognising ourselves in a celestial mirror; we yearn to immortalise the moment, to have the light of fame shine down on us as well. We try hard to run away from the ephemeral, to rub shoulders with immortality.

Everyone has their sights set on eternity - scientists, poets, philosophers. Archimedes said if he only had a fulcrum and a big enough lever he could lift the Earth with one hand. Those who are particularly enamoured of eternity are the politicians. They chop it and hack it as they see fit, usually with tragic and comic consequences.

We size each other up all the time. He is richer than me, she is more

beautiful, more talented. This sizing-up is not always bad – it gives us motivation. We weigh each other up in a rough, wholesale kind of way, based on shallow impressions. We keep account of who has got ahead and who has been thrown on the rubbish dump. And so the wheel goes round, the shooters become targets, the playwrights become dramatic characters, and the directors get directed themselves.

But now to our laureate. I won't bother about his biography, which you can read in books. The internet has an inexhaustible wealth of facts about him. I'm going to take the liberty of making a private confession about how I have been sizing up Tom Stoppard over the last fifty years.

The first time I spy a play by somebody called Tom Stoppard is in 1971 in the library of Graham and Peggy Reid in their prefab in Taftalidzhe. They warmly recommend I read it. I look into the eyes of the writer on the back cover as if I want to take his measure. I don't find the play an easy read with my English of the time, but it's plain to see it's great. Estragon and Vladimir aren't waiting for Godot here but meeting Hamlet instead. Stoppard says that he started the play as a Beckettian exercise in style.

In 1972, as a playwriting student in Belgrade, I wrote a Stoppardian exercise in style. In it, Spase from *The Macedonian Blood Wedding* meets Estragon and Vladimir. In Atelje 212 I watch a performance of *Jumpers*. On the stage is a bunch of gymnasts. I don't get it all but I can feel it's the writer's intention that I don't get it all, that he's playing games with my capacity and my need to get it all. This isn't fast food, it needs chewing.

I'm in London in 1975 as a tourist. Here is this Stoppard again in the West End with a new production. He's never out of the repertoire, a new baby each year. In front of the theatre I see Diana Rigg, the famous Emma Peel from my childhood days. Dammit, I think to myself.

I read *Travesties*. Aha! So they deal with the revolution as well, they're interested in Lenin and the Communist Utopia too. But they do that with casual satire, an approach that in our part of the world is not all that socially desirable.

I watch *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in the Dramski Teatar directed by Zlatko Slavenski, my younger colleague from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts. Here's that man Stoppard again in the middle of Karposh III, in my theatre.

I watch the film of the play, which Stoppard himself directed in 1990. And where of all places did they film it? In Yugoslavia.

In the theatre in Canterbury there's a touring production of *Arcadia*. We're all pricking up our ears in the audience. It's hard to pick out the harmonies, it's like jazz. There are no predictable chords or obvious arias. This bloke really does whatever he wants.

I see the film *Shakespeare in Love*. Great screenplay by Stoppard. It won him an Oscar. I hear he's also written the screenplay of *Empire of the Sun* for Spielberg and *Brazil* for Terry Gilliam. There is no mercy in the great big market out there.

Raina Koshka and Buba Arsovska, my good English Department friends, both top translators, are preparing a collection of translations of key Stoppard

texts. In the Afterword Raina writes about the intertextuality in the approach. The book is published in the *Stars of World Literature* series.

In 2007 at a theatre conference in Warsaw I meet Natalia Koliada, a theatre director from Belarus. Her Belarus Free Theatre is subject to state repression. They work underground; she and her husband are in and out of gaol. One year later they put on one of my plays and then they come to London. I go to see them and find out they have come at Tom Stoppard's personal invitation. He has signed a petition to the President of Belarus protesting the suppression of human rights.

I read that he has written a play called *Rock 'n' Roll* about the politics and music of the 1960s. This is a direct incursion into my territory, which I take personally. And it goes without saying how insulting it is that he still has a full head of hair and impeccable dress sense.

In February this year Cvetan Vrazhivirski calls to say that Tom Stoppard has accepted the Tabernakul Prize. What are we going to do now?

I go on my summer holidays with his plays in my suitcase. My wife and I read them and giggle like children. In his early plays Stoppard sizes up the world with the yardstick of farce, intellectual topsy turvy and philosophical satire. He's like an acolyte of Wittgenstein's in the way he enjoys the undercurrents of language, linguistic games and the limits of meaning.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) the main protagonists are two marginal characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. From time to time they

take part in the action, and sense they are part of some complicated plot, but they have no insight into their lives and don't know what their real roles are.

In *The Real Inspector Hound* (1970) two theatre critics watch and comment on a performance of an old-fashioned whodunnit. Suddenly one of them becomes part of the action on the stage and gets sucked into the performance. There is an overlapping of the front-stage and back-stage worlds, of the real and the surreal. The two critics are killed by a third critic, disguised as a dramatic character. *Ad absurdum par excellence*.

This is similar to the one-act play *After Magritte* (1970), in which an unhinged inspector is trying to figure out what unhinged events are taking place in an unhinged family. This could be an episode of *Monty Python*.

In *Jumpers* (1972) the main character is George, a professor of moral philosophy, married to his ex-student, Doty. She wants to become a pop singer and she has the Dean of the Faculty for a lover. Another inspector enters. He finds George with a turtle in one hand, a bow and arrow in the other, and with shaving cream on his face. In the house there is a group of suspicious acrobats doing exercises. They are all lecturers of philosophy, who in their free time practise the Classical ideal of a healthy mind in a healthy body.

In *Travesties* (1974) a middle-ranking clerk evokes his warped and selective memories of Zurich in 1915, where, sitting next to each other in the town's library, were James Joyce, writing his novel *Ulysses*, Lenin, preparing a revolution, and Tristan Tzara, writing *Dada Manifesto*. At one point their

manuscripts get mixed up. The piece is a brilliant analysis of the unstable nature of memory and history.

*The Real Thing* (1982) deals with the thin line between fidelity and infidelity, the true and the false, the chasm between the living word and the cliché. It is hard to calibrate the moral compass. The dilettante, even with the best of moral and political intentions, produces bad literature, propaganda.

Alongside this mighty farcical voice, Stoppard uses another register and yardstick. This becomes more pronounced at the end of the 70s when Margaret Thatcher's dictatorial right wing comes to power in Britain, spawning a whole new generation of left-oriented playwrights. Artists are not satisfied with just interpreting the world, they now want to change it. Those who have already given us a playful diagnosis now offer a bitter cure. Stoppard applies the Drama of the Absurd to political commitment. He raises his voice in the fight for human rights, he is close to the work of Amnesty International, he is a friend of Václav Havel and a supporter of Charter 77.

In her *Origins of Totalitarianism* of 1951 Hannah Arendt writes that we live in times of radical evil in systems "in which all people have become equally superfluous", in a world that has renounced itself. According to Arendt, in this "illusion of democracy" people are impoverished, insecure and apolitical, regardless of which party they belong to. "Civic responsibilities are understood as an unnecessary waste of already limited time and energy". The majority passively agrees to "total domination from the inside", to a dictatorship.

As a democrat with pedigree Stoppard dramatises this state of siege. He seeks to square the circle between individual freedom and social responsibility. He wonders where the axis is between active commitment and standing on the sidelines. How can we be political without politicking? Stoppard doesn't believe in didactic theatre. In an interview he says: "Plays are story forms from which one can draw huge lessons, but they aren't the lesson. I think that's always been true from Antiquity." He says the newspapers can be useful as attempts to change the world in the short term, but that the fundamental change in human consciousness wrought by the theatre has a more lasting effect in the long run.

The TV play *Professional Foul* (1977) is dedicated to Václav Havel. A Cambridge professor of ethics goes to a conference in Prague. He meets an ex-student of his, who has become a dissident and now asks him to take a manuscript of his to the West. They talk in the lobby of the hotel because the room is bugged. The professor faces a moral dilemma. He realises that "the important truths are simple and monolithic. The essentials of a given situation speak for themselves, and language is as capable of obscuring the truth as of revealing it".

In the play *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977) the protagonist is a political prisoner in the Soviet Union being treated as a psychiatric patient.

*Night and Day* (1978) is a play about the freedom of the press and of speech, "the last line of defence of all other freedoms". The action takes place in an ex-colony in Africa where civil war begins, attracting a wild bunch of journalists and photographers hungry for sensation.

The short plays *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979) are shortened versions of Shakespeare's plays. A group of dissidents perform in private homes and one day a police inspector turns up in the audience.

Stoppard's play *Arcadia* (1993) poses the question of how to interpret the past and how to prove the truth in the middle of conspiracy, chaos and entropy.

In *The Coast of Utopia* (2002) the main characters are Bakunin, Belinsky and Herzen, the Russian radical thinkers of the 19th century. It is a vast dramatic trilogy in which Stoppard digs for the roots and contradictions of political thought about freedom and democracy.

In his play *Rock 'n' Roll* (2006) the protagonist Jan, a young Czech, considers himself enough of a dissident in the Sixties by listening to rock 'n' roll. He believes that "culture is politics". In his opinion the political hyperactivity of his friends is "moral exhibitionism". He thinks the same as them but he doesn't have the courage to act like them, which he considers a question of character. Another character, Max, a hardened communist, asks whether there is "a decent middle ground" between theory and practice, how to live "in truth", in a "society which lies to itself". Living in truth requires not only having a conscience, but also having courage.

In August I write an email to Sir Tom. I tell him that I would very much like to meet him. He calls me and says he has a lot on his plate but let's meet up, only don't ask him about the refugee crisis, he wouldn't know what to say. We meet for lunch. He's tall, spry, focussed, a chain smoker, an intellectual



heavyweight, carrying the scars of literary battles over half a century old.

He has never been to our neck of the woods. What can I tell him about the way the wind blows here in Macedonia? Where shall I start? Shall I start with how insulted we are that we've been eyeing up the EU and NATO for a long time, but all in vain? That they don't allow us to call ourselves by the name we go by? That the world considers us a suspicious zone of risk with a special visa regime? That we've been cheated by a cruel transition period in which the few had their eye on our national wealth and transferred it to their private accounts? That it's not enough for us to have external foes sizing us up but that we have split internally as well? That we live in a culture of irreconcilable exclusions and divisions? Without telling him anything, I think he knows it all – by analogy.

Shall we, when the guest comes, keep him in the living room and put on a show for him, or take him to the kitchen and have a quarrel in front of him as we are so good at doing? Shall I translate for him the mumblings and mutterings: *What do we need these luxuries for when we can't make ends meet? We give prizes to foreigners as if we're begging for their endorsement. Why don't they give **us** a prize sometimes so we can have something to celebrate? He'll go away and we'll stay here to devour each other.*

But that's not how it is. I consider Stoppard as one of our own. We have much to learn from his devastating analysis of the traps of the mind and politics, from his merciless critique of all moral posturing and fake social facades. One of his characters sings: "Two and two are roughly four". We have a brilliant phrase for this: we say 'three and a half'. 'Don't do a three and a half on me.' To a great

extent our reality is three and a half, and it is as if Stoppard is writing about that, as if he is sending us, with a personal dedication, the sarcastic but healing message: the situation is hopeless but not serious.

My friend Cvetan 'Tabernakul' Vrazhivirski has unerring intuition. He says people want to rub shoulders with famous writers, see them walk amongst them in the marketplace, be able to size them up. Well if that's the case, here is Stoppard in the flesh and there are his shoulders – go for it! *Sorry, Stoppard, mate, can I ask you something? Got the Nobel Prize yet? Not all plain sailing for you either. Want a pint?*

I need to rub shoulders with Stoppard too, to confess to him as to an older brother, to ask for advice and consolation, to tell him that my heart is broken, but I discover that another writer has already asked him that, to which he replied that a writer must have a heart ready to break every day.

In Stoppard's plays they are all sizing up eternity and trying to get a piece of it: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the professors of moral philosophy, the little free man who's dreaming of becoming a famous inventor, Joyce and Tzara and Lenin, Carr and Bakunin and Belinsky and Herzen, the writers and critics and theoreticians, the jumpers and the inspectors who believe they have finally grasped something significant.

In his farces Stoppard wisely sizes up the world and breaks down the walls of logic. The result is subversive because it leads to the limits of the mind, to hysterical laughter, the zero point of anarchic freedom, where meaning gets

undermined and obliterated. But, paradoxically, meaning regenerates itself in this process of radical deconstruction. As Cepenkov says: “Where you fall down is where you must get up again.”

Stoppard is a bravura acrobat and a language virtuoso. He says "language is a precise instrument, crudely applied". Hence misunderstandings and nonsense over and over again. Stoppard's plays go to the backstage of language and of history and show what a scandal it is to be alive. In them the mind catches its own tail in its mouth and swallows itself. In his best plays there is a perfect balance between comic form and deeply serious subject matter.

As Beckett examines the final frontiers of theatrical reduction and minimalism, so Stoppard examines the final frontiers of dramatic expansion and maximalism. And here somewhere is the key to his literary achievement.

Hats off to you, Sir Tom.