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Secret Guilt of an Artist: The Real Inspector Hound and Tom Stoppard's Political Voice

Abstract

Tom Stoppard once famously proclaimed his guilt that art is unimportant. The character Moon from Stoppard's early farce *The Real Inspector Hound* presents surprising evidence that Stoppard's view of art in his early years as a playwright may have been more complex than he let on. The circumstances behind Moon's journey into the very art he criticizes are not unlike Tom Stoppard's foray into politically conscious drama. Moon desperately wants the thriller he is reviewing to mean more than it really does. His wish becomes a reality when a third party, Puckeridge, forcibly pulls Moon into the fantasy. Like Moon, Stoppard had a fantasy, a dream-world in which art has the power to enact social change. Stoppard was unwilling or unable to act on that desire alone, until his own Puckeridge, an artist and dissident named Victor Fainberg, compelled him to act on his dream and merge art with politics.

Keywords: Stoppard, *The Real Inspector Hound*, Fainberg, art, politics

Though the characters of Tom Stoppard's early plays struggle to make sense of their worlds, they are famously reluctant to become active participants in those worlds. They observe, they comment, and they contemplate, but they neither enact nor advocate change. They are uncomfortable, yet they show themselves to be wholly unwilling to upset the order of that which discomforts them. Stoppard's characters, at least in the plays from the beginning stages of his career as a playwright (namely *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *Enter a Free Man*, and *The Real Inspector Hound*, all written before 1970) reflected their author, a writer who remained steadfastly apolitical despite mounting criticism of such a nihilistic approach to theatre. However, a chance meeting with a

political dissident named Victor Fainberg in 1976 brought about a shift in Stoppard's writing philosophy, prompting him to pen scripts that directly addressed politics in addition to those that meandered their way through the playgrounds of philosophy. We should not read the characters from Stoppard's initial plays as entirely removed from politics, though. In their endeavors to find grand meanings to their petty existences, we can see the author's desire to eventually engage in politically conscious drama. An unlikely source presents surprising evidence of this yearning for a political voice: the character Moon, from *The Real Inspector Hound*.

On June 17, 1968, *The Real Inspector Hound* premiered at the Criterion Theater in London. It was a rather strange year for such a play to occur. Michael Patterson notes, "It was a particularly exciting time for the theatre (in Great Britain), since the powers of censorship by the Lord Chamberlain had been abolished in 1968, and freedom of expression on stage could now match the new liberties being explored by society at large" (13). While writers like David Hare, Peter Barnes, and John Arden were experimenting with theatre's license to critique, and perhaps even change, the customs and norms of society, Tom Stoppard's play offered something very different. Even though he had already exploded onto the theatrical scene with his wildly popular *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, he was still developing his artistic philosophy, not yet ready to embrace the politically active worldview he would come to adopt in his plays beginning in the late 1970s. *The Real Inspector Hound* is, by Stoppard's own admission, at its heart little more than a farce. A parody of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, Stoppard's play features two critics who find themselves thrust into the world of the play they are reviewing. These two critics are Moon and Birdboot. Moon, as the audience soon learns, is something of an understudy, designated by the newspaper for which he writes as the second-string critic; his assignment to review the play is only due to the unexpected absence of the paper's first-string critic, a reviewer named Higgs. By contrast, Birdboot is the first-string critic for a different newspaper. A lothario with an appetite for young actresses and chocolate, Birdboot is positioned clearly as a foil to Moon. The play-within-a-play begins with Moon and Birdboot observing comfortably from the sidelines, both occasionally composing extemporaneous snippets of their reviews out loud. The show the critics are watching proves to be an exceedingly hokey murder mystery, complete with a housemaid who provides poorly contextualized exposition, radio broadcasts warning of an escaped lunatic roaming the area, and a

murderous love triangle, all taking place in a mansion made inaccessible by rapidly rising flood waters. Aside from Moon's realization that he saw Birdboot with one of the actresses the night before, the first act of the thriller ends with little interaction between the critics and their object of criticism.

The next act changes that, however. It begins with a ringing phone onstage, and, with no actors around to answer, Moon, annoyed by the incessant ringing, proceeds to walk onstage and take the call himself. When the call surprisingly proves to be for Birdboot, Birdboot winds up onstage, eventually surrounded by some of the thriller's actors who treat him as though he is a character in the play-within-a-play. The lines between reality and theatricality become blurred, with Birdboot straddling the boundary between a womanizing critic flirting with actresses and a character in the play-within-a-play professing his love for the female characters. Moon tries to coax Birdboot back to reality and back to his seat, but both of the critics are stunned when Birdboot discovers that the body that has been lying onstage the whole play is, in fact, the body of Higgs, the first-string critic for Moon's paper. Shortly after, Birdboot is shot by an unknown assailant, causing Moon to make his way back onstage to decipher the mystery of who killed his colleagues. In this, Moon proves unsuccessful. In *Hound's* closing moment, Moon is shot by one of the characters in the play-within-a-play, who rips off a disguise and reveals himself to the dying Moon as Moon's own understudy, Puckeridge, the third-string critic for Moon's newspaper.

It would seem fair to say that *The Real Inspector Hound* is not a political work. Indeed, Stoppard insists in his own preface to the play that *Hound* is not "about anything grander than itself" (Stoppard, *Hound* viii). In his subsequent discussions of the play, Stoppard has been comfortable relegating it to farcical status. In an interview printed in *The New York Times* before a 1992 Broadway revival of *Hound*, he insisted on the play's being taken lightly:

***Hound** ... doesn't lend itself to deep scrutiny. It's an entertainment, just like a mechanical toy. It waves a flag, squeaks and turns a turtle and carries on. It's a logical structure with a vein of parody going through it. There's no reason to write a play like that. It's an enjoyment. And that is what it is. One hopes it will work out all right, because in the nature of theater there's this interesting transition*

between the text and the event. The ball can be dropped in many different ways. Or not dropped.

Hound has been a lucky play. It sort of works out all right generally. (qtd. in Goreau H5)

In that same interview, Stoppard commented on his intentions in writing *Arcadia*, which would not premiere until the following year. He noted that part of the fun of the script, which takes place in two different time periods two hundred years apart, was showing how wrong literary critics can be when they look back on the composition of a literary work and make assumptions about the forces that drove it. With that in mind, one must be humble and cautious about arguing that *The Real Inspector Hound* – or any play for that matter, lighthearted or not – means more than its author intended. Even so, a closer look at *Hound* reveals just how deeply Moon wishes for the play-within-a-play to mean more than it actually does. At the risk of sounding too reflexive, this paper seeks to show how there is important meaning to be found in this character's seemingly comic desire for meaning-making.

The tumultuousness of Tom Stoppard's early life would seem to set the stage for a lifelong interest in politics. He was born Tomáš Straussler in Czechoslovakia, the son of two non-observant Jews. He left his native land before the age of two, when his parents chose to leave upon the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939. The Straussler family fled to Singapore, with Tomáš, his brother, and his mother eventually moving on to Australia. His father stayed behind in Singapore, serving as a volunteer doctor for the British Army and dying when Tomáš was four years old. When Tomáš was five, he moved with his mother and brother to India, where they lived until 1946. His mother married Kenneth Stoppard, a British army major, and the family moved to England, with Tomáš having adopted the name Tom along with his stepfather's surname. Tom Stoppard completed his formal education at age seventeen, at which point he began work as a journalist. Along with stints as a humor columnist and feature writer, Stoppard served as a secondary drama critic, a position which brought him into the world of theatre. By 1960, he had written *Enter a Free Man* and was devoting the bulk of his career to playwriting.

Even though his life story was heavily influenced by political forces, Stoppard's early plays stayed as far from politics as possible, at least on the surface. Before the mid-1970s, he was an adamant proponent of art for art's sake. Even seemingly political plays like *Travesties*, which premiered in

1975, exhibit a greater preoccupation with the role of art than with what would be considered exactly politics. In fact, in the decade between 1967 and 1977 it was practically considered in vogue for a critic to question Stoppard's lack of societal and political involvement. A review by Ian Stewart of Stoppard's *Jumpers*, for example, referred to the play as "a gigantic structure of a joke," later going on to say that "what one does notice (about Stoppard's work) is the lack of humanity" (1042). The implication in interviews and reviews seemed to be that Stoppard ought to be ashamed of himself for being so talented a writer but refusing to commit himself to the affairs of the world. This is no surprise, considering Stoppard's early plays were something entirely separate from the emerging movement judging drama in terms of its potential for social motivation (Billington 170). However, the man in question vehemently defended his position as a "pure" artist. For Tom Stoppard, the real business of theatre was recreation and entertainment – an admirable viewpoint, perhaps, but one that went against the prevailing notion of the times. William W. Demastes comments on the way Stoppard's first major success, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, ruffled the feathers of critics through its innocuous playfulness. He refers to the time Stoppard began his playwriting career as a period dominated by a dichotomy in the philosophy of drama's social efficacy:

British theater (had) basically split into two camps, one presenting a politically-active, left-leaning vision that change can occur by utilizing devices of logic and reason, the other believing that logic and reason had exhausted themselves and had in fact generated cataclysmic outcomes (i.e., two world wars) necessitating re-assessments of logic and reason themselves. Naturalist social critique and engagement played alongside absurdist assault and disengagement... (230)

Demastes further observes that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* pleased the critics of neither camp (230), perhaps because Stoppard was unable to situate himself comfortably in one of these two viewpoints. While his plot structures suggested absurdity and playfulness, his content and language suggested a desire to find meaning in the world.

Stoppard's next major play, *The Real Inspector Hound*, faced a similar brand of criticism. Although there were some critics who recognized *Hound* as an innovative success that would stand up to the test of time and achieve a popularity rivaling the very thing it parodied, there were still a handful of

those who couldn't get past Stoppard's art for art's sake (or farce for farce's sake) intention. Philip Hope-Wallace wrote in a review for *The Guardian*, "In total effect it is rather a disappointment and too often facetious" (qtd. in Billington 62). Peter Lewis shared a similar lament in the *Daily Mail*, writing, "I couldn't help wishing he had found a bigger theme to exercise (his jokes) on" (qtd. in Billington 62). Of course, one of the themes that Stoppard tackles in *Hound* is theatre criticism itself, apparently a theme not "big" enough to please the very people who perpetuate it. To be fair, Stoppard has protested on several occasions that "the one thing that *The Real Inspector Hound* isn't about, as far as I'm concerned, is theatre critics" (qtd. in Page 27). The original concept for his work, in fact, involved no critics at all. It was merely a play about two audience members who become entangled in the plot they see onstage.

However, in its final form *The Real Inspector Hound* is not about theatre critics in the same way that *Julius Caesar* is not about Romans. It would be fruitless to give the play a thorough examination without considering it in light of the occupation of its two protagonists, Moon and Birdboot. These are more than just token critics, in spite of their ridiculously bombastic language and inappropriate commentary. Their identification as theatre critics functions not only in characterization, but becomes important in the plot as well. Moon in particular finds his actions in the play (and play-within-a-play) governed by his occupation. As a critic stationed in the audience, he begins *Hound* comfortably aloof, positioned to observe and comment on the action of the murder mystery without having to participate in it. In essence, he is the prototypical Stoppard character. In that same regard, he can be viewed as a reflection of his author.

Moon is a theatre critic, but, even more definitive, he is the second-string critic, a label that has gradually instilled in him a sense of worthlessness and jealousy. Moon's understudy status links him undeniably with the playwright, who actually spent some time as a second-string theater critic himself (Stoppard, *Ambush* 4). Katherine Kelly recognizes Moon's critical monologues as based in part on Stoppard's experience as a drama reviewer in Bristol. "The ponderously serious Moon," she writes, "obsessed with his own ambitions, sounds familiarly Stoppardian in his private reveries" (381). Even the character's name suggests Stoppard might have been thinking of himself. Stoppard's fondness for the moniker Moon, which appears in several of his plays (as well as his one novel, *Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon*), further links the character with the writer. The choice of names

in *Hound* is hardly random. Kathryn Walls, in fact, has written about Stoppard's obsession with naming the characters in that very play (180). While Moon can be viewed as an analogue for Stoppard, his loud-mouthed colleague Birdboot can be seen as a comic satire of those critics who have dismissed Stoppard's plays. Birdboot is a boorish individual who loves himself as much as the women he lusts for; he is the easygoing success, the hackneyed writer who revels in his status as a critic of others' work. He floats through life with a complimentary ticket, munching loudly on brand-name chocolates and chasing after poorly talented actresses who catch his eye. He is the very symbol of self-indulgence (Hu 66). In short, he is the sort of person that Moon (and Stoppard) would hate. It is easy to imagine Birdboot sitting in a chair opposite Stoppard with a box of chocolates in his lap, holding a running tape recorder and asking, "Yes, but your plays – they aren't of a very political sort, are they? You know, the themes aren't exactly of concern to humanity as an instigator for social motivation." At the very beginning of *Hound*, when the two critics first spot each other in the theater, the stage directions indicate Moon seems content to avoid Birdboot: "*They acknowledge each other with constrained waves. MOON looks straight ahead . BIRDBOOT comes down to join him*" (5). Just as Stoppard was unable to avoid the critics who claimed his plays were not serious enough, Moon cannot avoid getting stuck listening to a critic like Birdboot.

This is not to suggest that Moon, as he appears to us, is a wholly unaltered representation of Stoppard while Birdboot is a faithful portrayal of the critics regurgitating questions regarding Stoppard's artistic validity. Moon and Birdboot are not true critics. Rather, they function as parodies of critics. By nature, parody imitates art more than life. It self-consciously and self-critically points us to its own nature (Hutcheon 69). The overly-philosophical soliloquies of Moon and the flippant infidelity of Birdboot are merely elements of caricature. We can laugh when Moon claims in the midst of composing his review that Simon Gascoyne is an outsider who will "strip these comfortable people – these crustaceans in the rock pool of society – strip them of their shell and leave them exposed as the trembling raw meat which, at heart, is all of us" (Stoppard, *Hound* 15). But when we strip away these ridiculous speeches of Moon and the "critic caricature" that is layered on top of him, what we are left with is a man who desperately wants his writing to carry more weight than it does. In short, we are left with Stoppard.

Moon finds himself gradually drawn into the world of the third-rate thriller unfolding before his critical eyes, first as a spectator and later as a participant. *The Real Inspector Hound* is a play about parallel worlds colliding; one is a critical world based on a murderous chain of succession and a desire to be part of the fantasy onstage, while the other is the thriller itself, also grounded in jealousy and murder (Billington 64). The thriller, probably because it appeals to Moon's fantasy of murdering his superior Higgs, earns positive reviews from the critic, at least in the early going. Even though Moon may be a more astute critic than Birdboot, he still joins his partner in praising the thriller. Underneath its hyperbole, Moon's criticism isn't overly glowing praise; most of what he says celebrates life itself rather than the play-within-a-play. As Khaled Sirwah puts it, "Moon represents that class of critics who insist on seeing symbolism and allegory even in the superficial and obvious.... He is more concerned to show off his stylistic cleverness and sophisticated taste than in describing what is really there" (56). Moon, despite his apparent intelligence, proves incapable of seeing the thriller for what it really is: a meaningless farce with little value as entertainment or anything else. What he wants to dissect is something grander. He looks beyond the thriller because it offers little fodder for grand thinking. Stoppard's characters often use their own playfulness as a means of masking their desire to know the truth, using invention and imagination to create surrogate truths when the objective truth is unknowable (Nadel, "Invention" 161). In this vein, Moon reinvents the thriller into something posing grand questions, allowing him to ponder his ideal version of a play rather than the silly little one being performed for him. Eventually, as it turns out, the silly little play *will* forcefully command Moon's attention. It succeeds at sucking him in, even if it has to do it literally rather than figuratively.

Moon and Birdboot present different attitudes in their approach to being pulled into the story. When Birdboot takes up the phone and suddenly finds himself part of the action at Muldoon Manor, he participates aggressively onstage, characteristically failing to question the surface appearance of things (Hu 66). Moon, on the other hand, functions as a reluctant participator in the action of the play-within-a-play. While Birdboot is onstage, Moon maintains a voice of reason and tries to coax him back to his seat. Richard Corballis asserts that Stoppard normally discourages or criticizes all attempts to escape from the mystery of life into a "clockwork" dream world (Corballis 54), much in the same way that Moon reprimands Birdboot. Necessity, however, places Moon

onstage in the role of Inspector Hound. Like his creator Stoppard, Moon cannot resist a puzzle. "Who did this, and why?" Moon asks (Stoppard, *Hound* 40), referring to the murders of Birdboot and Higgs in a line that harkens back to the closing words of the thriller's first act. He devotes himself to logically deciphering the identity of the killer, even going as far as requiring the actors to recreate the scene of the murder to give him a visual template to ponder: "All right! I'm going to find out who did this!" he exclaims. "I want everyone to go to the positions they occupied when the shot was fired" (Stoppard, *Hound* 41). Despite these efforts, he ultimately fails to solve the mystery because, as we find out in the end, the role he is playing is not that of the "real" inspector. In a turn of events mirroring the ending of *The Mousetrap*, the wheelchair-bound Major Magnus rips off his mustache, claiming that he is the real Inspector Hound and that Moon is an impostor. All Moon can do is express his admiration as he is shot dead by the major, who Moon recognizes as Puckeridge, his own understudy and the third-string theatre critic.

Throughout *Hound*, Moon's defining characteristic is his jealousy of the first-string critic, Higgs. When Birdboot reveals that the body that has been lying onstage the whole play is actually Moon's superior, the obvious implication is that Moon was the murderer. Moon, however, swears his innocence, and we have ample reason to believe him when Puckeridge is revealed in the end. Although Moon evidently harbors at least some inkling of malice toward the first-string Higgs, it is a feeling he would never act upon. Moon is an intellect, a critic; he is a man with a spirit capable of the deepest kind of hatred, but he is no murderer. Moon has little in common with Birdboot, a man who carries around color transparencies of his own review reproduced in neon. It isn't the public eye Moon seeks in his desire to be first-string; it is purely the desire to criticize art. "It's not that I think I'm a better critic," Moon says. "I am, but it's not that" (Stoppard, *Hound* 22). Although he goes on to say that Higgs is "standing in my light," what Moon really desires is the power to fill the papers with his verbose reviews whenever he pleases, rather than having his opportunities for criticism left to the discretion of Higgs. Moon only stumbles into his dream world of murder, represented by the thriller, when his colleague Birdboot goes down. Perhaps this sudden display of loyalty for a fellow critic is surprising – it would probably be too much for Moon to come to the aid of, say, Higgs – but the circumstances behind Moon's journey into the very art he criticizes are not unlike those behind Stoppard's foray into politically-conscious drama.

Stoppard's plays in the '60s and early '70s were, as previously stated, little given to furthering an agenda. "I burn with no causes," he asserted. "I cannot say I write with any social objective" (qtd. in Roberts 84). His first play to be produced on the stage, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, set the standard for his early years. There was always a preoccupation with intellect, and there was typically a philosophical – although not political – question that the characters were trying to work out. Stoppard resisted both in his plays and in his interviews the idea that theatre is an agent of change, adopting a consistently joking viewpoint toward both himself and his work (Roberts 85). *The Real Inspector Hound*, although innovative in its own way, made no attempt to break from this form. Moon and Birdboot are lineal descendants of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Crossley 80). The earlier play featured minor characters exploring their purpose in the context of a greater work. *The Real Inspector Hound* itself took on the role of this greater work, and Moon and Birdboot functioned as characters exploring their purpose within the context of a lesser work, the thriller. Ronald Bryden, in fact, claims that what *The Real Inspector Hound* contains is actually "a parody of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*" itself (26).

Parody, according to Linda Hutcheon, is a form of self-reflexivity, a form of inner-art discourse. Critics, however, see it as both parasitic and derivative (2-3). Stoppard's fascination with parody and other types of self-conscious drama set him up as an easy scapegoat for those who saw, or at least wrote about, the responsibility of the artist to comment on society. Rather than being lauded for the innovation to see the theater as a sort of playground for what *isn't* in life, Stoppard was forced to withstand a barrage of attacks for presenting the public with plays that were essentially unreal. While there were some who felt Tom Stoppard was one of the most brilliant playwrights in existence, there were also dissenters who dismissed him as merely brilliant (Delaney 3). It was never something Stoppard publically took issue with, though. Indeed, he took pride in the fact that his drama did not attempt to reach beyond the realms of its own borders. He even went as far as to claim he never felt that art is important. "That's been my secret guilt," he admitted. "I think it's the secret guilt of most artists" (qtd. in Page 87).

Moon had a secret guilt of his own. While Stoppard believed that artists felt guilty about their art being unimportant, Moon felt that criticism was unimportant. After all, if art itself is not an important subject, then how can discussion and interpretation of that subject be important? Moon

was passionate about criticism and had devoted his life to it, but in the back of his mind there was always the nagging guilt that what he was doing lacked real meaning. As a second-string critic, the guilt must have been even more profound. The philosophical review snippets he composes while watching the thriller point to a desire to make something more out of art than what is there:

*MOON: Does it, I repeat, declare its affiliations? There are moments, and I would not begrudge it this, when the play, if we can call it that, and I think on balance we can, aligns itself uncompromisingly on the side of life. Je **suis**, it seems to be saying, **ergo sum**. But is that enough? I think we are entitled to ask. For what in fact is this play concerned with? It is my belief that here we are concerned with what I have referred to elsewhere as the nature of identity. I think we are entitled to ask – and here one is irresistibly reminded of Voltaire’s cry, “**Voilà !**” – I think we are entitled to ask – **Where is God?** (Stoppard, *Hound* 24)*

This is comedy, of course. Moon’s criticism is peppered with malapropisms and absurdly mixed critical clichés. Stoppard is undoubtedly making fun of those critics who expect more from *The Real Inspector Hound* than a simple farce. It would be fair to say that Stoppard is looking ahead and mocking the authors of papers like this very article. Still, Tom Stoppard is also lightly mocking himself by making Moon into a parody of a critic, and, what is more, he earnestly figures the guilt he believes to be shared by playwrights, critics, and anyone else who dares to make a living in the world of art. If an artwork is meaningless in its own right, then an artist – or a critic for that matter – must put a mask on this truth in order to ensure that art is seen as vital.

Moon’s desperate search for meaning goes beyond his pretentious criticism. His dreams of dethroning Higgs, as well as his subtle compassion for Puckeridge, bring to light a need, conscious or unconscious, to instill *some* sort of value system into his work. The idea of a chain-of-succession validates for Moon his place as a critic. Because there can be no objective within the context of art itself, the struggle to be number one emerges as the primary source of meaning for Moon’s criticism. It is a belief that has been sustaining him for years, but he has recently been coming to the realization that even this value system offers no real fulfillment. Unless Higgs somehow vanishes or dies, something for which Moon is not willing to take responsibility, his criticism will

continue to remain essentially meaningless. Moon does confess to Birdboot that his thoughts sometimes drift toward the removal of his superior:

*Sometimes I dream of revolution, a bloody **coup d'état** by the second rank –troupes of actors slaughtered by their understudies, magicians sawn in half by indefatigably smiling glamour girls, cricket teams wiped out by marauding bands of twelfth men [...] an army of assistants and deputies, the seconds-in-command, the runners-up, the right-hand men – storming the palace gates wherein the second son has already mounted the throne committing regicide with a croquet mallet – stand-ins of the world stand up! –*

(**Beat.**) *Sometimes I dream of Higgs. (Stoppard, Hound 7)*

This is a darkly pleasing fantasy, but, unfortunately, Moon knows that all he ever can or will do is dream. However, all that changes when he suddenly finds himself existing in his dream world. Unlike Birdboot, who seems perfectly content participating in the thriller, Moon is never able to fully subscribe to the events going on around him. Part of his mind remains fixed on the seats he and Birdboot have left unoccupied, which are eventually filled in an act of role-reversal by the actors who played Simon Gascoyne and the original Inspector Hound. Moon is uncomfortable playing his alter-ego Inspector Hound in the dream world of the thriller because although this is *similar* to his dream, it is not one he has created. Instead, this dream has been created and is already inhabited by Puckeridge. Both Moon and Puckeridge dream of a world in which Higgs is no more. The obvious difference in their dreams is that in Puckeridge's vision, Moon has been eradicated as well. Because Puckeridge, not Moon, is willing to make his dream into a reality, Moon finds himself condemned.

Just like his creation Moon, Tom Stoppard saw his work as something full of talent but essentially unimportant. Even as a dramatist he remained a critic; while John Osborne used anger to attack the world, Stoppard used the theatre to attack theatre itself (Crossley 77). The attacks that his plays invited, although brushed off by Stoppard, no doubt contributed to this guilt that his work was unimportant. *Hound* prompted more charges that his plays were exercises in wit without a sense of felt life (Delaney 3). On one hand, this criticism brought forth an impassioned defense from the artist. Stoppard resisted time and time again the idea that theatre was an agent of change (Roberts

85). On the other hand, whether he was aware of it or not, the sheer number of theses devoted to the ineffectualness of Tom Stoppard's plays must have been slowly clawing away at his defenses.

Travesties offers a notable example of the playwright's increased focus on the nature of art. The play can be seen Stoppard's attempt to at least partially exorcise his guilt of being an artist (Kelly 382). Philip Roberts considers the way *Travesties*, first produced in 1974, "asks whether an artist has to justify himself in political terms at all," and "whether the words 'revolutionary' and 'artist' are capable of being synonymous or whether they are mutually exclusive, or somewhere in between" (90). *Travesties* pits political and artistic figures like Lenin, Joyce, and Tristan Tzara against one another in a debate over politics and art which is all set within the context of yet another parody (the play itself parodies *The Importance of Being Earnest*). One could view this play as the last defense of Tom Stoppard against his critics; in an interview with Ronald Hayman, Stoppard claims, "One of the impulses in *Travesties* is to try to sort out what my answer would in the end be if I was given enough time to think every time I'm asked why my plays aren't political" (qtd. in Page 46).

This last defense, however, was not enough to keep the critics at bay. The same questions regarding Stoppard's drama kept popping up in reviews and interviews. Even though *Travesties* showed that Stoppard was finally ready to put politics into art, he still wasn't ready to put art into politics. It certainly wasn't that he didn't care. He claimed that he was always morally, if not politically, involved in issues (Page 89). Of course, that begs the question of whether such thinking is even possible. Is it possible to recognize a problem in society's morals and consider yourself moral without taking action to correct the recognized infirmity? A pre-1977 Tom Stoppard would say yes, and he would point you to *Travesties* as the best answer he could give you if you demanded further explanation. Like his creation Moon, Stoppard claimed to have a desire, but he had no desire to take action in order to see that desire fulfilled. He felt he was free from blame because as an artist he had no responsibility to get involved in anyone else's struggles. Stoppard has criticized academics and individuals whom he considers thinkers as opposed to doers (Hu 61). Both Stoppard and Moon, ironically enough, suffered from this very flaw.

Moon's dream world was a world in which there was no Higgs and he was free to criticize drama whenever he pleased. Stoppard had a dream world as well; it was a world in which the artist had the power to create a prolonged effect on the society surrounding him, an effect that goes beyond

the playhouses or the review pages. Clearly, Tom Stoppard was always interested in politics, even if he wasn't willing to write about these issues early in his career. During an interview in 1967, Stoppard confessed himself to be deeply troubled by "the mechanics of society, how more and more people can be accumulating to make use of food or sewage pipes. I sweat and breathe with difficulty and such thoughts. I get very neurotic about all the electricity needed to keep a city lighted" (qtd. in Halton 112). Despite these concerns, as a playwright he remained unconvinced that art could change society, that there was anything an artist could do to alleviate his "secret guilt."

This guilt manifested itself in Stoppard's peculiar knack for writing about the interaction of life and art while suggesting that such interaction was merely farcical. In *The Real Inspector Hound*, the play-within-a-play becomes even more ridiculous once Birdboot and Moon enter it, much to Moon's detriment. Marvin Carlson suggests Moon becomes "trapped by the conflation of his own desires and the dynamics of the fiction he has entered to fulfill them" (435). Entrance into the dream world where art is meaningful requires a steep price of admission; one must become a puppet at the mercy of comic chaos. Small wonder, then, that Stoppard proves reluctant, as Moon did before him, to act upon his dream. In Moon's case, someone else, Puckeridge, had to be the one to finally create the dream world as something tangible and inhabitable. Stoppard would also require a third party in order to turn his dream into a reality.

In April 1976, Stoppard met Victor Fainberg. Fainberg was an artist who had been arrested for demonstrating against the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia. As a sort of punishment for (and a way to put a stop to) his demonstration, he had been declared insane and forced to undergo psychiatric examination. When he spoke out about the abuse he had suffered at the hands of the Soviet psychiatry, he was imprisoned (Jenkins 31). Fainberg was able to recall a frighteningly repressive diagnosis given to him by a doctor in the infamous Arsenal'naya psychiatric hospital in Leningrad: "Your discharge depends upon your conduct. By your conduct we mean your opinions precisely on political questions. Your disease is dissent. As soon as you renounce your opinions and adopt the correct point of view, we'll let you out" (qtd. in Nadel, *Stoppard: A Life* 266).

Fainberg would become, in a sense, Stoppard's Puckeridge. His dream world of a Czechoslovakia free from foreign oppression apparently coincided with Stoppard's proclaimed morals. In one of Moon's moments of overly profound criticism, he recognizes Simon Gascoyne's role in the thriller

as an example of “the classic impact of the catalyst figure” (Stoppard, *Hound* 15). Victor Fainberg, especially when Stoppard’s drama is analyzed with attention to its nature before and after 1977, seems to have functioned as the catalyst figure in Stoppard’s own artistic career.

Stoppard’s meeting with Fainberg persuaded the playwright to believe that the words of one social dissident truly could have a resounding impact. Even though Fainberg’s words existed in a purely political world separate from the realm of art, Stoppard’s own ideas about responsible morality were evidently influenced. André Previn had already commissioned Stoppard to write a play employing a full-size orchestra onstage, and Stoppard was actively searching for a framework in which to employ that idea (Page 55). His meeting with Fainberg coincidentally occurred during this search, and *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* was born.

The play features a wrongly committed Soviet dissident representing Fainberg paired with an inmate who believes he owns an orchestra. Before Stoppard met Fainberg, he had been working on another idea for a play incorporating the orchestra, something in a more comedic vein about a millionaire triangle player who employs a full orchestra. This idea was abandoned when Stoppard met Fainberg and he came up with the idea for *Every Good Boy*, but traces of the original concept of the orchestra play as a comedy persist, at times making for an awkward juxtaposition of comic character types with a serious theme (Kim 92). Evidently, Stoppard was willing to use Fainberg’s experience to rework his old farcical idea into a political play. The desire to make farce into something grander, to transform art from something playfully innocuous into something profoundly meaningful, that served as a defining characteristic of Moon in *Hound* emerges here in Stoppard. With Fainberg serving as the Puckeridge figure, thrusting a half-willing Stoppard into the imagined dream world where drama has real social efficacy, the career of Tom Stoppard as a political playwright begins. *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, despite its brevity as a short play, marks a significant turning point in the timeline of Tom Stoppard’s works. A striking concern with social issues enters Stoppard’s plays starting in 1977 (Page 85). The idea that Stoppard had resisted so vehemently, the idea of art influencing politics, began to play a major role in his work.

Even though *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* marks a turning point, it cannot be said that the play exemplifies a complete one hundred and eighty degree turn in philosophy by the dramatist. Stoppard had already shown a willingness to ponder the issue of politics and art, but he still wasn’t

ready to exploit the two as cooperative agents. The plays he had been writing before *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* seem to evidence a longing for political ramification, but it seems that Stoppard was straining on a leash he was never willing to cut. In *Dirty Linen*, first produced in 1976, Stoppard explores the rights of the individual, something he first looked into in *Jumpers* and then *Travesties* (Jenkins 131). But until the premiere of *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, this treatment had always been confined to the realm of the exploratory. It was the Fainberg meeting and the political realities that Stoppard was forced to confront as a result of this meeting and while working on the play that moved social themes to the center of Stoppard's attention. Even the playwright himself believed that his plays were moving in the direction of being more issue-oriented and less entertaining (Stoppard, *Ambushes* 16).

The works immediately following *Every Good Boy* show an obvious preoccupation with politics. A teleplay that soon followed, *Professional Foul*, dealt with almost exactly the same themes as *Every Good Boy*. Both works comment on the harsh, unwarranted penalties brought upon those who spoke out against the human rights violations in Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s. *Night and Day*, produced in 1978, juxtaposes English labor issues with the setting of post-colonial Africa. This is not to say, however, that Stoppard was completely finished with debates about the nature of art. He returns to this idea significantly in *The Real Thing*, but the political inclination of his work after 1977 is too striking to be ignored.

Even Stoppard's pre-1977 work found itself politicized when Stoppard returned to it later in his career. In 1990, Stoppard served as his own director for a film adaptation of his first successful stage play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Susan C. W. Abbotson writes about the writer/director's efforts to revise his philosophical and logical puzzle into a screenplay that places a newfound emphasis on the need for engagement with the world. Though it was only tangentially explored in the play, "individual moral responsibility becomes the film's central concern" (Abbotson 171). In its original form, *Rosencrantz* was an existential commentary on the lack of identity given to two of *Hamlet's* minor characters. The versions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from Stoppard's stage version seem dimly conscious of their position as characters in some larger drama, but they fail to recognize any point in their even being in such a drama. They float blindly along in the course of events, time being the only thing that stands between them and their inevitable end. The

film version of *Rosencrantz*, by contrast, raises the possibility that the pair could have prevented their own deaths if they had been willing to participate in, and possibly alter, the events of the framing story. Such thinking belies the increasingly political philosophy of Stoppard as an artist. The efficacy of drama as an arm with real social power can be seen in the increased authority with which Stoppard invests the tragedians in the film version. In the play, the players had no control over the events that occurred. In the movie, they have significantly more power, a level of control bordering on omnipotence (Abbotson 175).

At the very least, Stoppard's foray into socially conscious drama in the years that followed his meeting with Fainberg allowed him to write the occasional non-political work without hearing the same criticism thrown at him time and time again. Philip Roberts, in *Critical Quarterly*, claimed that *The Real Inspector Hound* and a similar Stoppard work, *After Magritte*, "reel away from seriousness as from a contagious disease" (87). Even in 1978, Roberts claimed that "although what is said about his (Stoppard's) plays is not his fault, what he says about his plays should make one wonder why the accolades are so fulsome, and why his particular brand of theatre should have drawn so much attention over the years" (84). As the years progressed, though, and it became clear that Tom Stoppard could indeed write plays with social issues, comments like these gradually lost their fire. The point of whether audiences should like Stoppard even though he failed to deal with the current problems of humanity eventually was recognized to be moot. By emerging as a politically conscious writer, Stoppard actually earned himself the bonus prize of being able to be merely philosophical when he pleased. If *Arcadia*, a brilliant 1993 work, had been written in the pre-Victor Fainberg years, it is very likely that the critical adulation for the play would have stopped well short of the resoundingly positive reception it actually received. *Arcadia*, with its story spanning across two time periods, is an exercise in scientific thought and a comment on the continual construction and reconstruction of history, yet to say that it is a political play would be a stretch. In truth, although *Arcadia* is by no means a farce, the shrewd juxtaposition of the two time periods echo the "triple-layered logics" of *The Real Inspector Hound*, rather than bringing to mind any similarities with Stoppard's 'political' plays. Even so, it is these political plays, plays like *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, *Night and Day*, and the more recent *Indian Ink*, another blending of the time periods of present and past, that ensure the success of plays like *Arcadia*. Perhaps there is

something significant in *Indian Ink* itself, in the way that the protagonist, an artist named Nirad Das, earns recognition for his work not solely through his own artistic merit, but due to his engagement in political protests decrying the British Empire's rule over India.

Moon's honor as the first-string critic was short-lived; Puckeridge put an end to that before Moon even had a chance to fully comprehend the gift he had been given. Stoppard, though, has managed to thrive after the third party, Fainberg, thrust him into the world of his dream. Each Stoppard play written since the beginning of the 1980s, regardless of its potential implication for politics, has enjoyed the benefit of relative freedom from issue-conscious criticism. It would be extremely difficult to say that Moon should be grateful to Puckeridge; even though Moon (whether he knew it or not) was acting as the first string, his long imagined goal, in *The Real Inspector Hound*, it is hard to ignore the fact that he was merely a stepping-stone for his liberator. Tom Stoppard, however, has no reason to shy away from the debt that the continued success of his art owes to his real-life Puckeridge.

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