

T. S. – The First Seventy Years Laszlo Upor

Abstract

„...what you are about to read here is not my life-story but the central character’s (so there *is* a central character and there is, yes, a story); you can’t, on the other hand, invent anything yourself“ – explained /argued P.E., a *noble* Hungarian mathematician (later on an internationally renowned, multi-award winning writer) on the back sleeve of his first book¹.

The central character of Tom Stoppard’s life-story is The Drama *that is being written* and that on the whole (and in its process) reflects or *pre-flects* countless motifs of The Life *as it happens*. This isn’t so obvious in his case and, exactly *because* of this, a parallel investigation of Life and Oeuvre seems an especially worthwhile (and exciting) adventure. In his plays Stoppard might have made up all so many things beautiful and good; still they can’t be *all* his inventions...

Stoppard is and isn’t visible behind his writing. His writer self is unmistakable but not obtrusive. He is like those rare fine actors who never peep out from behind their masks and still *act* on their audiences with the combined charm of the character’s personality and their own. But Stoppard never takes on *one* character. No: he turns *not less than a whole universe* inside out – and back. This turning-out – plus the constant change of angles – is the very core of the Stoppardian attitude/approach.

Stoppard can’t be considered a “modern” author, that is, he doesn’t follow or set trends. He is continuously changing tracks and re-defining himself, though. Thus, to divide his career and label the “periods” is both easy and difficult. One can draw lines after, roughly, each decade worth of Stoppard and arrange the plays in neat little units. Between 1966 and 1974 **Rosencrantz...**, **Jumpers** and **Travesties** seem to build up to something together. The next period’s highlight, very different in style and content, is **The Real Thing** in 1982. Later comes the 1993 masterpiece, **Arcadia**, which is also the first play of the virtual “Remembrance Trilogy” (with **Indian Ink** and **The Invention of Love**). The all-too grandiose Russian venture, this time a veritable trilogy: **The Coast of Utopia**, takes a new, although uneven, path in 2002. And **Rock and Roll**, in 2006, is a certain turning back – a fascinating re-arrangement of old ideas and tools.

However, this is far from being a true picture of Stoppard’s oeuvre. Not only many other “minor” plays add more shades and details to it but also a very dense fabric of cross-references, of ever-changing and ever-developing recurring/ twin-motifs provide to the authenticity of the whole.

This very special and unique system/frame of motifs – that make fine links between the furthest-lying of his plays even – is what is worth to examine in the working, in its effects. Especially rewarding is to observe it in its fully developed form when, in a lucky moment, this motif-system meets a time-structure “quietly” developed in the Remembrance trilogy.

“They say the writing is like an onion: more and more layers can be peeled off of it” – paraphrases above mentioned young P.E.’s alter-ego the Peer Gyntian metaphor in the quoted text. Then, interrupting himself, he argues: “Not at all: writing is like a balloon: more and more layers can be peeled off of it!”

In my paper I aim to peel off more and more layers of Tom Stoppard’s writing and prove that it will not burst.

¹ Péter Esterházy – descendant of a famous family in pre-war Hungarian aristocracy – graduated as a mathematician before he became a professional writer. A pure coincidence, but the author of this paper also graduated as a mathematician...