Artist Descending a Staircase: Blending Radio and Theatre in Production

An Interdisciplinary Senior Project

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Artist Descending a Staircase: Blending Radio and Theatre in Production.

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by

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This production of the short play *Artist Descending a Staircase*, by Tom Stoppard, originally written for broadcast on the radio, is an example of translating a play from its original medium into the tradition of Western theatre. In many instances, the play reflects its original status as a radio drama through, for example, jokes that rely on misleading sound effects and highly descriptive dialogue. Because the message of a play is often particularly relevant to its original intended audience and cultural context, to convey to an audience accustomed to the theatre tradition the meaning of a play written for a different medium, such as radio, it is necessary to blend the styles of radio and theatre into a production that reflects the significant elements of each.

Before discussing radio and theatre, however, it is important to spend a brief space discussing Tom Stoppard as an author. His fascination with language and love of asking and exploring questions that he does not necessarily answer are reflected in *Artist Descending a Staircase*. Understanding the way in which Stoppard writes and themes that appear consistently in his plays is extremely helpful in interpreting *Artist Descending a Staircase*.

With regards to the medium of radio, the engagement of the audience, the use of sound and sound effects, and the exploitation of reality are particularly significant. Because radio is an aural medium, the audience is required to create their own visualizations of the characters, settings, and events of the play based solely on the information offered by the sounds, voices, and sound effects of the production. Furthermore, because of the lack of concrete visual information, radio dramatists are more able to toy with concepts of reality, introducing impossible physical situations or playing with the ambiguous existence of a silent character.

In the medium of theatre, it is the engagement of the audience and the style of production that are particularly important. In live theatre the audience and the performance exist in a dynamic relationship; the response of the audience affects the performance as much as the performance affects the audience response. The director engages the audience through the style of the production, communicating the bigger ideas of the production, the information that is not contained merely in the dialogue. The chosen style affects every decision, and must be consistent and appropriate to the play to be effective.

The field of semiotics is also important to this discussion, as it reveals that humans interpret signs such as words or images based on a shared cultural context and prior personal experiences. It is important for directors to understand that every image, sound, and word that happens on stage contains a great deal of meaning for the members of the audience. The signs used in a production, from the dialogue to the color of the lights, are used to convey the message of the play to the viewers.

This production of *Artist Descending a Staircase* is intended to fuse elements of the radio and theatre mediums into a whole that, while a performed live onstage, explore the play's roots as a radio play. To this end, the sound effects of the play are done largely live and made a point of great focus. Other elements of the production are neutral or suggested, rather than fully and elaborately constructed, allowing the audience more imaginative freedom than is usual in theatre. Because of this blending of radio and theatre, it is possible to stage *Artist Descending a Staircase* in a live theatre setting without completely removing it from its context as a radio play and thereby losing original intent of the playwright.

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Introduction

The Beginning

Originally, I did not intend to use *Artist Descending a Staircase* in this project. The play I had first chosen, however, was full-length, and seemed perhaps too much to take on for my first stab at directing. I therefore set that first play aside and hit the library to find a new one-act script. I borrowed several volumes of one-act compilations, including a book of four radio plays by Tom Stoppard that I grabbed on a whim, having enjoyed other plays he has written. After reading through the scripts, I narrowed my selection to two. One of them was about the evolution of a relationship between a teacher and her student. The other was *Artist Descending a Staircase*.

I enjoyed the teacher-student play. I thought the subject matter was interesting and the play had a small cast and would be relatively easy to produce. *Artist Descending a Staircase*, on the other hand, had a larger cast and would, I knew, be very difficult to produce. The problem was, it had me hooked. I loved the witty dialogue and artistic discussions the play contained. I found the characters both interesting and compelling. The twist at the end had me marveling every time I read the play. The most compelling aspect of the play, however, was I could already see a wide variety of possibilities for my production.

I very much enjoy watching traditional-style theatre, by which I mean classic, older plays such as *Oklahoma* and *Arsenic and Old Lace*. However, in production, I do not find such plays particularly interesting. When working on a show, I prefer experimental and concept theatre. I like plays that provide a variety of opportunities for the director
and designers to draw novel conclusions or investigate aspects of life and the human condition.

The teacher-student play I considered reminded me too much of modern plays written in the traditional style. There was nothing new in the play that grabbed me or surprised me. *Artist Descending a Staircase*, however, intrigued me intellectually. Superficially it was about three men and a woman and the romantic complications that arose between them, but it was also about the meaning of art and the value of the artist in society. I could see many directions to take the play, and many opportunities for decisions that would allow me to express myself creatively and uniquely. However, the most exciting thing about the play to me was that it did not draw any conclusions; it merely asked thought-provoking, intelligent questions, provided some arguments for different sides of the central question of art, and then left the final answer up to the audience.

I have often been frustrated by the demand to find answers to questions that are much more provocative and educational when the points are debated without concern for the answers. Being able to say ‘I do not have the answer’ is, to me, a far greater mark of intelligence than deciding on an answer and closing oneself off to other possibilities of inquiry. Weighing the pros and cons of the two shows, there clearly was little choice. I selected *Artist Descending a Staircase* and began to research and plan my production.

**The Aim of the Production**

While I recognized the significance of the art debate, the primary debate in *Artist Descending a Staircase*, it is not an issue I wanted to focus on as the theme of my
production. There is an important difference between the theme of a play and the theme of a production. The art debate is clearly an important theme in the play itself – indeed, it is largely what the play is about. However, a creative and innovative production theme digs below the surface, offering greater insight into a play than is found in the dialogue and action. The production theme does not reveal to the audience what the script is about; it is a tool used to reveal an element of the deeper meaning the director has found within the play.

In any play there are numerous possible issues and themes to explore through production. However, if directors choose to focus on too many of these possibilities, they run the risk of turning their production into an incomprehensible mess of conflicting or incongruous signs and meanings, which makes it difficult for an audience to untangle and interpret. The director should choose a single theme or element from a play, and focus intently on conveying it to the audience as clearly and thoroughly as possible. The director should also try to find some new insight to bring to a show; theatre is not a stagnant medium, but is instead about innovation and creativity. Each different production of a play should strive to say something about the play that has never been said before. Even the old favorites have unplumbed depths for the director to explore and new facets to share with the audience.

When translating a play from any outside medium, such as radio, into the style of theatre, there is a danger of losing the meaning of the play. While it is true that the plot remains the same, the context of the play has been totally altered. Plays are not written independent of their medium; the style of the play and the importance of elements other than dialogue for story-telling, for example, are strongly influenced and may even be
dependent upon the mores, standards, traditions, and abilities of their original medium. Because of this, in order to create a theatrical production of a play that does not ignore the original context of the play, it is important for the director and designers conduct thorough research. Furthermore, the director should try to be true to the original context of the play. This does not mean, of course, that the director must faithfully reproduce every element for a traditional production of the play. That goes against the innovative and creative nature of theatre. However, I think when doing a play from outside the theatre context, it is beneficial for the director to try to create a fusion between the two styles.

My overall goal with *Artist Descending a Staircase* was to create a production that represented a harmonious amalgamation of radio and theatrical styles. Although I staged *Artist Descending a Staircase*, complete with lights, set, costumes, props, and, most importantly, sound, I strove to preserve the *feel* of a radio drama. I drew from the genre of radio several elements that I felt were particularly indicative of the style and that were important to the play, and attempted to fuse them seamlessly with the style of a modern stage production.

In the next few chapters I will discuss the elements of radio I chose to use in my production, as well as elements of theatre and the semiotics, the study of signs, which were also very important in my production. I then will examine the incorporation of all the elements into a cohesive whole production and the success or failure of this process.
Chapter 1: Tom Stoppard

Biography

Tom Stoppard was born Tomas Straussler on July third, 1937 in Zlin, Czechoslovakia. His father was Dr. Eugene Straussler, company physician for the Bata Shoe Company and, in 1939, Dr. Straussler was transferred to Singapore, allowing the family to escape the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia. When the Japanese invaded Singapore in 1942, women and children were evacuated first and so Tomas, his mother Martha, and his older brother were moved to India. His father, remaining behind, was captured and killed. Mrs. Straussler worked as a “manageress” (Delaney 52) at a Bata shoe shop in Darjeeling and Tomas attended an American-run school with many international and Indian students at which the language of instruction was English. At the end of the war, in 1945, Mrs. Straussler married a major in the British army named Kenneth Stoppard and Tomas Straussler became Tom Stoppard. In 1946, the family moved to England.

Stoppard attended Dolphin School in Nottinghamshire and Pocklington School in Yorkshire, finishing when he was seventeen. His experiences in these schools turned him away from education. In an interview with the editors of Theatre Quarterly, as recorded in Tom Stoppard in Conversation, Stoppard notes that he “left school thoroughly bored by the idea of anything intellectual…totally bored and alienated by everyone from Shakespeare to Dickens besides” (Delaney 53). As a result of his less-than-positive experience with education, when he left school in 1954 Stoppard avoided university and sought a job in journalism because of his admiration of big-name roving reporters. He was hired by the Western Daily Press to write news and feature articles and continued in
journalism for six years, transferring to the now-defunct *Bristol Evening World* in 1958 to review films and serve as the second-string theatre critic. Here he developed a desire to write more creative works and in 1960 he quit the paper and penned a play called *A Walk on the Water*.

Between 1960 and 1962 Stoppard had three short stories published, and in 1962 he took a job writing theatre reviews for a new magazine called *Scene* in London. Fortunately, just as *Scene* folded, in 1963, after only eight months production, *A Walk on the Water* was produced as a television play. In 1964 Stoppard began to write what is arguably his most well known play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

In 1965 he married Jose Ingle, with whom he has two children and whom he divorced in 1972, after which he married Dr. Miriam Moore-Robinson with whom he also has two children.

In 1966 *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* was performed for the first time for the Edinburgh Festival and *Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon*, Stoppard’s only full-length novel, was published. Since 1966, Stoppard has proved a prolific writer, penning upwards of twenty-three full length and short stage plays and adaptations, six radio plays including *Artist Descending a Staircase* in 1972, and either penning or contributing to upwards of twenty television and film scripts.

**The Writer**

Stoppard once maintained, “ideas are the end-product of the play, not the other way round” (Delaney 4). By this he meant that playwrights do not sit down, pick an explicit idea to express with their writing, and then create a play around this idea. Instead,
playwrights write a play as it appears in their head and it is only once this play is complete that they can get down to the business of identifying what the play is trying to say and what ideas are expressed. “One writes what one writes because that is what comes out” (Delaney 25) Stoppard said, and likened the arrival of a thought to being struck by lightning. So much time is spent searching for something to write about, waiting to be struck, that when it finally happens “one has this surge of relief, that there is perhaps one more play left in one, and the last thing one worries about are these circumstantial and social aspects of what one is doing and what the effect is in the universe of the theatre” (Delaney 25).

According to Stoppard, the above-mentioned thought that ideas come from the play rather than the play from ideas was abandoned around the time he began writing *Jumpers*, his full-length play that was first staged in 1972. However, his new approach to writing plays, while slightly more conventional, is no less organic. Stoppard begins with an abstract thought. He conceives of an idea, perhaps even an internal debate, about which he wants to write. For example, in his more recent play *Professional Foul*, this prompting idea is simply “some innocent from a free society goes to a totalitarian society and just sort of gets dirty” (Delaney 121). Stoppard knows there is a play somewhere in this idea, but he does not begin writing the play by thinking “first A will happen, then B, then C” and so on. Indeed, Stoppard admits that creating a frame in which to use his idea is extremely difficult and that, eventually, the story must finally create itself, making its own demands.

Stoppard’s second assessment of his own creative process appears to be a more mature and learned version of the first. In both assessments he describes the
uncontrollable nature of the creative impulse, but in the second assessment he admits to
providing structural support for his creativity, a method I applied to my own work.

Prior to the first rehearsal of my production of *Artist Descending a Staircase*, I read
through the script many times. I formed a production concept – the integration of
stylistic elements of radio drama into a staged theatre production – and I determined
several broad means, including live sound operators, through which I might realize this
production concept. However, I did not sit down with the script and meticulously plan
out every detail and every point of the production, just as Stoppard would not lay out the
progression of actions and events in his writing. In my own experience, creative choices
are difficult to pre-plan. They are instinctive and often accomplished in flashes of
insight, much like Stoppard’s lightning strike. Sometimes I struggled for days to find the
right gesture to accompany a line, trying out and rejecting one after another, only to have
the answer suddenly appear. At the time, I was unable to articulate what made one
gesture the ‘right choice,’ but watching the finished product, the significance was clear:
the gesture contained an emotional nuance, expressing the unspoken subtext of the scene.

For myself and, I believe for Stoppard as well, the creative process is instinctive,
based on gut reactions. However, the provision of a basic framework upon which to
build is necessary. It is rarely clear what the finished product will look like until it is
completed, and often it is not until the completed piece has been examined that the
instincts and the gut reactions can be understood.

Stoppard has been criticized for his lack of social motivation in his writing. He is
not, he claims, a political author. This is not to say that his works do not contain political
or social themes, for certainly some of his works, particularly *Every Good Boy Deserves*
Favour,\textsuperscript{1} represent political events and ideas. However, Stoppard denies that he writes with any political conviction; his works may touch upon some of the same areas as socially minded plays, such as Angels in America\textsuperscript{2} or Rent\textsuperscript{3}, but, unlike these more socially minded plays, making a political statement is not Stoppard’s primary aim. While he may debate a political or social issue, he does not attempt to advocate any one side or even to reach any particular conclusion regarding the issue. In fact, Stoppard opposes the whole idea that the purpose of a play is to ask a question and then to provide an answer. It is a great failing of playwrights, Stoppard says, to believe that a play is “setting out to say something and then saying it” (Kelly 141). The questions asked, and the process of asking them, are of far greater value than trying to answer.

The story of a play is, for Stoppard, a vehicle for exploring an idea or conflict. He discusses plays in terms of mathematical equations:

\begin{quote}
I mean, writing a play is to write some kind of equation; it’s got to be an elegant equation. When you start working with actors, and a director, and the designer, and sound cues—all kinds of other variables enter the equation and you have to…parse together the pieces, so that the equation remains elegant and comes out to the same answer (Delaney 118).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{1} In Every Good Boy Deserves Favour, the protagonist is a dissident being held in a Soviet psychiatric hospital for his political beliefs. He is forced to share a cell with a lunatic who believes he and his triangle are part of a larger symphony orchestra. The protagonist is eventually forced to decide between his convictions and freedom when a KGB officer confuses him with his cellmate, inadvertently offering him release.

\textsuperscript{2} Angels in America tells the story of two men struggling with AIDS in the eighties. One man, Prior, is abandoned by his boyfriend Louis when he becomes sick. The other, Roy, denies he has the disease, claiming it is not something that happens to affluent people like himself. The play focuses on the religious, political, social, and emotional impacts of the disease on the lives of the characters and their families.

\textsuperscript{3} Set in New York City, Rent examines the inequalities of social class and the hardships of AIDS, drug use, and relationships among a group of friends including starving artists, street performers, exotic dancers, and social activists.
With such a scientific approach to playwriting and production, it is no surprise that Stoppard himself claims that writing characters is not his strongest suit. He is simply not particularly interested in characters and, as a result, the plays he writes are much less about the people in them and much more about the ideas being considered and debated. The characters are vehicles for the ideas of the show, mouths to express Stoppard’s inner debate. As such, background details are of little concern to Stoppard when creating characters, which can be enormously frustrating to actors. He comments, however, that while he cares little for characters, that is the primary concern of the actors, who work to bring depth and humanity to roles in which it is not inherently written.

Stoppard penchant for asking, debating, but never answering questions is one of the things I find most compelling about his work. Stoppard encourages the audience to actively participate in his plays, asking questions and spending the length of a play examining many possible sides of the issue. He entreats the audience to mull over the opinions of various characters seeking not the answer, but a more thorough understanding of the question. Handing the audience the answer at the end of the play would neatly wrap the issue up and allow it to be set aside, but refusing to answer the question compels the audience to keep pondering long after they have left the theatre.

In *Artist Descending a Staircase*, Stoppard aims his queries at avant-garde art. Throughout the play, his characters ponder the meaning and function of art – particularly art of the avant-garde—and of artists. Often, the feel of his debate is mocking and amused, as in this moment between the characters Sophie and Martello in which Martello describes the artistic piece he is currently working on:

**MARTELLO**: Well, actually it’s called ‘The Cripple’. It’s going to be a wooden man with a real leg.
SOPHIE: A sort of joke.
MARTELLO: Yes.
SOPHIE: And will you actually use a real leg?
MARTELLO: Well, no, of course not. I shall have to make it.
SOPHIE: What will you make it of?
MARTELLO: Well, wood...of course.
(Stoppard 42)

The tone of the art debate, however, is perhaps most clearly set in the second scene when Beauchamp and Donner argue over Beauchamp’s sound art. Donner declares Beauchamp’s recording to be rubbish. Beauchamp attempts to interpret the use of the word rubbish as a comment on the nature of human existence, but Donner stops him coldly by renouncing avant-garde art in favor of more traditional fare. “I very much enjoyed my years in that child’s garden of easy victories known as the avant garde, but I am now engaged in the infinitely more difficult task of painting what the eye sees” (Stoppard 15). Beauchamp is not to be deterred, however, responding tritely in reference to Donner’s work: “Well, I’ve never seen a naked woman sitting in a garden with a unicorn eating the roses” (Stoppard 15).

Such is the nature of Stoppard’s debate. He allows his characters to play with the idea of avant-garde art, to defend it and renounce it, and to embrace it without really understanding it, but he never moves to conclude the discussion. The audience is left at the end with a little more knowledge as to the sides of the discussion, but they must reach a conclusion for themselves, if they so choose.

Whereas the issues addressed in more socially minded plays such as *Angels in America* and *Rent* tend to be on a national social scale, the questions Stoppard asks are on a human scale. *Angels and America* and *Rent* confront the problems of AIDS, poverty, and power, Stoppard considers, in *Artist Descending a Staircase*, how one determines
the value of art and what exactly qualifies as art. Even one of Stoppard’s seemingly
political plays, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* is only set against the backdrop of the
Soviet Union. The question of the play is not about politics, it is about a man struggling
to choose between his personal convictions and his duty to his son.

Yet, Stoppard cannot declare himself completely apolitical with regards to his
work. It could be argued that, by declaring himself a non-political writer, Stoppard is, in
fact, making a political statement, i.e. he does not write about politics because it is not
worth writing about. Furthermore, though *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* is not, at
its heart, about the Soviet Union, there is little doubt in the play of Stoppard’s beliefs
regarding the country and its political system. Politics and social commentary are not,
however, the foci of Stoppard’s work, nor is it his goal to, through his plays, sway
audiences to his view of politics and society. Because of this, Stoppard can certainly be
called a non-politically active playwright, if not a completely apolitical one.

Dialogue itself is one of Stoppard’s small pleasures in play writing. He places deep
value in “well chosen words nicely put together” (Delaney 2) and confesses to his love,
admiration, and awe of the English language. Furthermore, his desires for the audience
are simple. He wants them to be thoroughly and continuously entertained and hopes that,
above all other things, they take away from the theatre a feeling that their money has
been well spent.

However, those leaving the theatre meeting these expectations are most likely a
rather select group, as Stoppard is often recognized as writing for a relatively specific “in
group.” Stoppard liberally peppers his writing with British literary references, some
obvious and some quite obscure and, while in some of his jokes catching the reference is
only an added bonus, another layer of humor, for other jokes understanding the reference is vital. Furthermore, as might be expected from a playwright professing to a great love of words, the dialogue is quick and sharp; jokes fly and ideas and philosophies are raised, examined, and discarded in the blink of an eye.

Stoppard’s penchant for in-jokes and cultural references, witty dialogue, and absurd situations is readily apparent in *Artist Descending a Staircase*. The script, for example is peppered with references to avant-garde artists such as Tristan Tzara and Edith Sitwell, but the references are passing, muddled, and often slightly ridiculous. Beauchamp refers to Tristan Tzara, a Dadaist artist, as Tarzan for several lines, informing Donner “in 1915 you told Tarzan he was too conservative” (Stoppard 22). This is a double joke. The first part is quite obvious, the substituting of Tarzan for Tzara. The second is slightly more buried, requiring the audience to know of Tzara and to recognize that, as an avant-garde artist, he was far from a conservative figure. This is an excellent example of a Stoppard joke that works on its own, but is decidedly funnier if one gets the reference.

Because of this melding of humor, literature, and philosophy, Lucina Gabbard observes in her book *The Stoppard Plays* that Stoppard has the greatest appeal for the intellectual and the escapist (1). Said Harold Hobson of the *Sunday Times*: “Tom Stoppard…works with a brilliance, an intellectual agility, and a capacity of mind as well as wit that have no rival on the contemporary stage” (Brassell 1). Critics and fans alike find that a strong educational background, sophistication, and intelligence are requirements for a Stoppard audience, interesting given Stoppard’s own disdain for education and lack of University. I, however, suspect that literary critics and the
university elite may not be giving audiences enough credit. There are critics who would say the same of Beckett’s famed play *Waiting for Godot*, and yet a touring production of the play had great success and observed a staggering level of comprehension in prison inmates, most of whom, it can be fairly safely assumed, were at least not well educated. In *Staging Modern Playwrights*, Sidney Homan recounts his experiences touring the Florida prison system with *Waiting for Godot* and his amazement at the ability of men with little formal education or background in theatre to take a difficult play and apply it readily and accurately to their own experiences. Certainly the average Stoppard audience is also capable of such personal insights, regardless of their education in the British literary classics.

However, as may be expected, this perceived intellectual requirement has still drawn the ire of many critics. “Too clever by half” (Kelly 204) is a common complaint, as is the observation that Stoppard’s flurry of words is merely a cover for the fact that he has nothing to say. The criticism I found most interesting, however, comes from Phillip Roberts of the *Critical Quarterly*.

Stoppard’s work is beloved by those for whom theatre is an end and not a means, a ramification and not a modifier of the *status quo*… He is the wittiest of the our West End playwrights and his plays assure the reactionary that theatre was and is what they always trusted it was, anodyne and anaesthetizing (Brassell 1).

Roberts accuses Stoppard of not using his plays to alter, but rather to merely chronicle the *status quo*. Roberts fails to recognize that this is exactly what Stoppard means to do.

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*Waiting for Godot* is about two men, Vladimir and Estragon, who meet at a tree in the road. They wait for Godot to arrive and in the meantime discuss a range of subjects, from death, to time, to free will. They try many times to leave by various means, but always talk themselves out of it and continue to wait for Godot, who, by the end of the play, has yet to arrive.
Stoppard likes to use his work to question the status quo of human existence, to examine it and debate its merits. However, he believes that it is a failing of playwrights to believe that they must answer the questions their literary investigations may raise. A play in which the playwright attempts to modify the status quo, as Roberts wishes Stoppard to do, would be attempting to answer the questions raised and solve the problems found rather than merely drawing attention to the questions and raising the issues, an act which goes against Stoppard’s professed artistic ideals.
Chapter 2: Summary of *Artist Descending a Staircase*

*Artist Descending a Staircase* opens with two elderly men, Martello and Beauchamp, listening to a tape recorder in a 1970s studio apartment the two until-recently shared with a third man, Donner. Donner is currently lying dead at the bottom of the stairs, and Martello and Beauchamp are listening intently to the tape that seems to have captured the sounds of his death. The recording plays as follows:

a) DONNER dozing: an irregular droning noise.
b) Careful footsteps approach. The effect is stealthy. A board creaks.
c) This wakes up DONNER, i.e., the droning stops in mid-beat.
d) The footsteps freeze.
e) DONNER’s voice, unalarmed: ‘Ah! There you are…’
f) Two more quick steps, and then: *Thump!*
g) DONNER cries out.
h) Wood cracks as he falls through a balustrade.
i) He falls heavily down the stairs, with a final sickening thump when he hits the bottom. Silence.
   (Stoppard, 1)

The tape begins to play again as the men discuss what they have heard. They have obviously been listening repeatedly. Beauchamp and Martello each accuse the other of killing Donner, listing their grievances with him. The name Sophie comes up several times. It seems Donner was unrequitedly in love with her.

Scene two takes place in the same studio apartment a few hours before the events in scene one. Beauchamp is playing a tape of “squeaks, gurgles, crackles, and other unharmonious noises,” (Stoppard 14) for Donner while Donner works on a traditional-style painting of a girl and a unicorn. Beauchamp asks for an opinion on his sound art and is told it is rubbish. As they argue about art and their differing recollections of past
events and people, Donner tries to convince Beauchamp to give up avant-garde art and Beauchamp tries to kill a fly so it will not interfere with his new sound recording.

Scene three occurs a week before the first two scenes. Martello is trying to scrape sugar for tea from Donner’s edible statue of the Venus de Milo while Donner, who has not yet given up the avant-garde, works on another edible piece. They converse, disagreeing in their memories of people and events just as Beauchamp and Donner did in the second act. Their argument becomes heated when Donner learns that the art piece Martello is working on is meant to represent Sophie.

Scene four takes place in an upper room in Lambeth in 1922. Sophie and Beauchamp are finishing packing up suitcases. Martello comes up and speaks with Sophie, telling how each of the three men got his nickname after Beauchamp carries one of the pieces of luggage downstairs. When Donner appears Sophie confesses that she knows Beauchamp is leaving her and, after Martello hastily exits, Donner confesses his own love for her, which she rejects.

Scene five takes place in the same upper room in Lambeth in 1920. Martello is bringing Sophie to meet the others for the first time. As they climb the stairs a game of ping-pong is heard but no game is in evidence when they enter the room. Because Sophie is blind, she does not realize that there is no game going on until she attempts to congratulate the winner and is told it is one of Beauchamp’s recordings. Over tea, which Sophie pours, much to Beauchamp and Donner’s amazement, Sophie and Martello relate how they met and how Sophie admired the three of them from afar at a gallery showing before she completely lost her sight. She fell in love with one of them then but, as she
cannot now see, she does not know which one. She finally resorts to describing the painting by the man she fell in love with and they conclude that the man was Beauchamp.

Scene six is set in 1914 in the French countryside. The three men are on a walking tour, although Beauchamp is riding, and they are attempting to have a deep discussion of art and the place of the artist in the world. Donner is out of sorts because everything on the trip seems to have gone wrong, from having their money stolen to an annoying abundance of flies as they walk. They become aware, as they walk, of more and more soldiers driving past them. They hear the sounds of gunfire and explosions and see men digging ditches, but they do not realize that World War I is starting around them. When they finally do realize that there is a war going on, only Donner seems to worry about their predicament.

Scene seven returns to the upper room in Lambeth and 1920. The three men are playing a game with Sophie, calling out directions for her to walk around the room in an attempt to disorient her. At the end of the game they ask her where she is and she answers correctly: exactly where she began. Sophie then exclaims she must be going and Beauchamp offers to walk her home, at which point Donner says they will all walk her home. However, Martello intervenes, saying only Beauchamp is necessary and Donner, clearly disappointed and hurt, says goodbye and cautions her not to fall.

Scene eight is still in the room at Lambeth, but in 1922. Sophie, quite agitated about Beauchamp leaving her, addresses Donner with her despair, but receives no answer. At the end of this scene, Sophie plunges to her death from the upstairs window, although the script does not clarify whether she kills herself in a fit of anguish and frustration at his silence or whether she, in her despair, stumbles and accidentally falls.
Scene nine returns to the studio apartment and the 1970s, one week before the first scene. It is revealed that Donner never answered Sophie in the previous scene because he was, in fact, not in the room. Indeed, Sophie nearly struck him when she fell from the window. Martello tries to be practical about something that happened so long in the past, but Donner is still heart broken. He says he would have stayed with her and married her if she had lived. Martello finally reveals something that has been nagging at his mind. From one perspective, the painting Sophie described as being the work of the man she loved easily matched the description of a work Beauchamp had painted. However, seen from a slightly different perspective, her description could have matched a painting Donner had on display that day. Martello reveals that he believes she meant to describe Donner’s painting, but that they misinterpreted her words. Donner is shattered by this news.

In scene ten, Beauchamp and Donner are again in the studio apartment, only a few hours before the events of scene one. Beauchamp is still chasing the elusive fly and aggravating Donner with his insensitive comments about Donner’s painting of Sophie. Beauchamp leaves to find Martello in the pub, asking Donner to set his tape playing once he has left. Beauchamp leaves and the fly moves closer and closer to the mike, creating an odd buzzing sound which finally distorts into the sound heard at the very beginning of the Donner tape and taken to be Donner’s snores.

In the final scene, scene eleven, Martello and Beauchamp are listening to the tape of Donner’s death again. It begins with the same droning sound heard at the end of the previous scene. Martello and Beauchamp are preparing to carry Donner upstairs when
Beauchamp suddenly diverts to kill the fly that is still buzzing around. What follows is a sound for sound recreation of the tape as Beauchamp creeps up on the fly:

a) Fly droning.
b) Careful footsteps approach. A board creaks.
c) The fly settles.
d) BEAUCHAMP halts.
e) BEAUCHAMP: ‘Ah! There you are.’
f) Two more quick steps and then: Thump!’
g) BEAUCHAMP: Got him!

(Stoppard 92)

The mystery of Donner’s death is solved for the audience; in swatting the fly he tripped, crashed through the balustrade, and fell down the stairs. It is left unclear, however, whether Martello and Beauchamp have reached the same conclusion.
Chapter 3: Radio Drama

Defining Radio Drama

As stated previously, *Artist Descending a Staircase* is a radio play, meaning it was written for broadcast over the airwaves rather than staging in a theatrical space. This fact has many implications for my production. Because I am trying, with my production to create a sort of merger between the mediums of radio and theatre, an understanding of the conventions, abilities, and limitations of the radio format is vital in order to understand what I tried to accomplish. However, before any of this research can be addressed, it is important to define what is meant by the term ‘radio play’ or ‘radio drama.’ It is a term that will be used often throughout the remainder of this paper, and it is important to begin by explaining what I believe radio drama entails and what I mean when I use the term.

In much the same way that today’s books and plays are often translated to films and films may be novelized, radio drama has historically been an adaptable medium. Some of the first broadcasts that might be considered radio drama were excerpts of Shakespearean plays. Because of their highly descriptive, scene-setting dialogue, a by-product of the technical limitations of Shakespeare’s own theatre, these plays were well-suited to the radio medium and the adaptation process often consisted simply of making some cuts in the interest of time and content. (Drakakis 3) In its early years radio established a tradition of adapting works from other mediums. This tradition has continued until, John Drakakis notes, “this process of adapting plays, novels, and short stories has, over the years, grown to such an extent that radio must be considered a primary means by which many people gain access to the literature and drama of the past” (3). The process of adaptation, furthermore, goes both ways, in that many authors seek
additional means of sharing their radio dramas, reworking them for broadcast on television, in movies, and on the stage (Lewis 29).

It is because of this habit of adapting works from other mediums that a clear definition of what constitutes radio drama is so elusive. Few critical studies of radio drama exist and, though radio has always pushed to be evaluated on its own merits, often the only real basis for evaluation can be found in comparison to the mediums from which it derives much of its material, theatre and literature (Drakakis 3). Indeed, the comparison to theatre has been, at times, so pervasive that Horst P. Priessnitz, in his essay *British Radio Drama: a Survey* found in Lewis’ book, comments “the ‘undefinable [sic] nature of radio drama’ may well have its roots in the time-honoured notion that the radio play is a simple offshoot of the theatre play, with no claim of its own to critical reflection” (32).

Due to this lack of comprehensive literature and study, many authors, when writing about radio drama, tend to create their own definitions and standards for inclusion in the genre. Priessnitz, for example, also offers this rather noncommittal quote by Paul Ferris as a comment on the definition, or lack thereof, of radio drama:

No one has ever established exactly what ‘radio drama’ includes. It obviously includes a play by Pinter and it obviously doesn’t include a reconstruction of the loss of the airship R-101, but in between there are many less definable programmes (32).

Lewis himself acknowledges that radio drama is a sort of ‘cover-all’ term, encompassing “daily serials…adaptations of stage plays…short stories and novels…and even television plays…as well as original work written specifically for the medium and exploiting its unique qualities” (8). He goes on to make a distinction between “‘radio drama,’” original work written for the radio and “‘radio drama,’” work that is broadcast on the radio (8).
In his essay *Icon or Symbol: The Writer and The ‘Medium,’* found in Lewis’ book, Jonathan Raban builds upon this distinction between original radio works and work broadcast on the radio:

In my own work for radio I have found myself writing pieces that have not really been plays at all. Is *Under Milk Wood* really a play? Or Beckett’s *Embers*? They are certainly radio fictions; but to call them plays is to use a loose metaphor. They are both original forms. They have a good deal in common with printed prose. They have something of the theatre in them. They owe a great deal to the conventions and the technology of radio itself. The world of radio fiction is a great deal baggier, more inclined to telling rather than showing, more hospitable to the ruminant storyteller, than are any other kind of drama. There are plays on radio, but they compete for airspace with pieces of fiction whose only real claim to being plays is that they require actors to read them (89).

I find a lot to agree with in these assessments. ‘Radio drama’ is used to encompass a wide variety of programs from adapted and original plays to soap operas, while there are still more programs that are difficult to qualify. I strongly agree with Raban’s assertion that many works on the radio fall under no other established heading. They are works composed specifically for the radio and make use of the conventions and abilities particular to the medium. However, I do not necessarily agree with Paul Ferris, who that declares a reconstruction of the loss of an airship to be outside the realm of radio drama. This wholly depends on what Ferris means by reconstruction. If he means a news program detailing the events of the loss, perhaps with a few ‘dramatic reenactments’ of the events, then I agree that the reconstruction should not be considered radio drama. If, however, Ferris’ reconstruction is a largely fictionalized recreation of the events, or a retelling of the loss from the point of view of a crew member or passenger using historical facts but obviously necessitating fictionalization, then the reconstruction should most certainly count as radio drama. It is a dramatization of real life events written for
broadcast on the radio, thus exploiting the abilities of the medium, but also limited by its capabilities. This, I think, is an excellent set of criteria for determining a program’s status as radio drama. At least for the purposes of this project, I believe that radio drama should be defined as any fictional work, dramatization, or adaptation that is intended for broadcast on the radio and written to fit within and utilize the conventions, limitations, and possibilities of that medium.

**Imagination and the Audience**

In 1924, when the BBC aired the first play written specifically for radio performance, the broadcast was prefaced by an encouragement to the audience to turn out the lights while they enjoyed the program. It was thought that the audience would only be able to appreciate a play broadcast in an eyeless medium if they were similarly blind (Crook 62). Furthermore, this theme was continued in the broadcast itself, the first line of which was “the lights have gone out” (Drakakis 20). In his book *British Radio Drama*, Drakakis quotes Richard Hughes regarding his thoughts when writing the first radio play, *A Comedy of Danger*:

I argued to myself like this. There had never been before anything which people had had to take in by their ears only—anything dramatic, I mean—so it occurred to me that obviously the best thing was to choose a theme which would happen entirely in the dark…And I was hoping that everybody would listen in the dark and get the feeling of the darkness that way (Drakakis 20).

These early conceptions of radio as a sightless medium are understandable; a medium that offers no visual stimulation must certainly be considered blind. What Hughes and others in the early days of radio underestimated, however, was the power and abilities of the imaginations the audience would bring to bear on the aural information
radio provided. Indeed, it is because of this need for imaginative power that Frances Gray, in her essay in Peter Lewis’ *Radio Drama*, declares, “the stage of radio is darkness and silence, the darkness of the listener’s skull” (Lewis 49). Radio, then, is a medium which takes a basically blank canvas, describes to the listener more or less what the painting should contain, and then hands them the brush and allows them to create it how they will. The audience allows another’s words, sounds, and ideas to infiltrate their consciousness and then builds a world based on these words. This world, however, is not entirely their own, as the impetus comes from an outside source, and it is this internalized realization of the world described by another that defines the intimate nature of radio.

Says Gray:

> As soon as we hear a word in a radio play, we are close to the experience it signifies; in fact the sound is literally inside us. To submit to this kind of invasion, to allow another’s picture of the universe to enter and undermine our own, is to become vulnerable… (Lewis 51).

Here Gray is not attempting to assert that the listener is picturing the exact universe imagined by the authors of the radio play in the way that all viewers might receive the same view of the universe of a television play. She is merely explaining that, by listening to the radio play, the audience is opening their minds to worlds and ideas conceived by someone other than themselves and then integrating these ideas, if only for the duration of the program, into a personal and individual construction of the author’s universe. They are, in essence, allowing an alien world to not only reside in their mind, but to grow there.

Tim Crook, in his book *Radio Drama; Theory and Practice*, takes this idea of radio as the theatre of the mind a step further. He recounts a group of participants who were asked to visualize a radio advertisement as they listened. “Participants had difficulty
describing what they ‘saw’ when listening. The RAB [Radio Advertising Bureau] concluded that the theatre of the mind was in fact ‘the theatre of the gut’: ‘the theatre of the mind is an emotional theatre, where feelings are the primary currency, mixed with mood, memories, and imagination’” (Crook 61). In this way, Crook supposes, an audience does not precisely visualize the action of a radio play at all. Instead, what they ‘see’ is more like a memory, combining strong images with impressions and emotions. Fine details are not necessarily present or acknowledged, as they would be in television or some other more visual medium, unless they are made a point of by the dialogue. John Drakakis highlights this idea clearly when he quotes dramatist Henry Reed:

> It is a MYTH [sic] that Radio has any capacity for inducing in the mind of the listener anything in the nature of PARTICULARIZED VISUALIZATION [sic]. You might, once in an evening persuade him to see one of those great stage directions; but not, I think, more than one. For when radio has to suggest a scene to the listener, it does best to give only a brief powerful hint from which, with the help of specifically written dialogue designed to an end, the listener can without effort and perhaps only half-consciously, construct a scene from the innumerable landscapes or roomscapes (!) bundled away in his own memory (23).

The audience has ideas and impressions of settings and characters based on what they may discern by listening. The sound of a cuckoo in an interior setting asserts the idea of “cuckoo clock” and calls to mind, perhaps, a cuckoo clock the listener possessed as a child, or a certain fondness for that kind of clock. It may even tell the listener something about the character to which it belongs, if they have any kind of preconceptions about cuckoo clocks and their owners. The sound of the cuckoo may call to mind all of this, but it does not reveal the exact details, such as size or shape, of the clock. These things are not important; it is the presence of the clock that registers in the mind of the audience, along with all associations and emotional attachments.
In light of this imaginative power, it is no more appropriate to call radio a blind medium than it is to call literature a blind medium (Lewis 81). The information read from the page of a book is interpreted and transformed by the human imagination into pictures and images representative of the places, people, and things in the story. In much the same way, the audience internalizes the information found in the voices and sounds of a radio broadcast and translates that information into pictures and images. Tim Crook quotes radio drama director and producer Donald McWhinnie as saying:

The radio performance works on the mind in the same way as poetry does; it liberates and evokes. It does not act as stimulus to direct scenic representation; that would be narrow and fruitless. It makes possible a universe of shape, detail, emotion and idea, which is bound by no inhibiting limitations of space and capacity” (66).

Radio drama, then, is more adaptable than any technically visual medium because, rather than inducing blindness, it allows the audience to see with more flexibility and creativity; there is not a single sea, there are as many seas as there are members of the audience.

**Sound and Sound Effects**

Says Peter Lewis in the Introduction to his book *Radio Drama*, “on radio, to be is to be heard; existence is sound, as is essence” (5). Radio is purely an aural medium. In some ways this may be limiting to the writer, as the entirety of a play, character, and setting must be conveyed without the help of visual image or written word. However, the radio also possesses great flexibility. It is as easy to set a play on Mars as it is to set it in a café, because all that is required is for a narrator of character to tell the audience where they are. The stage is set and shaped by voice and sound alone, and it must be
maintained via these. In the first days of radio, writers were concerned that this kind of storytelling could be confusing or intimidating to their audiences used to reading and the theatre. Because of this concern, playwright Tyrone Guthrie chose to preface each playing of his radio drama *These Flowers Are Not for You to Pick* with an announcement informing the audience that the events about to take place happen in the mind of a lone female character and that the audience is, in effect, listening in on her thoughts (Lewis 52). By 1942, however, Louis MacNiece, another radio playwright, saw no need to warn the audience that they were about to be taken in to the mind of Christopher Columbus in his radio drama of the same name. Furthermore, he had no compunctions about doing so using a rather complicated storytelling device. “Confident that he can take the listener directly into the mind of a complex man, MacNiece uses the device of splitting a mind into different voices, a device only the radio can exploit without difficulties of staging” (Lewis 52).

As radio dramatists became more confident in the abilities of their audience, themselves, and the medium, they began to experiment with the peculiarities of radio as a storytelling medium. For example, following the caveat that existence in radio is only determined by sound, the introduction of a character that does not speak raises a variety of questions that would go unasked and unthought-of on television or the stage. In *A Slight Ache*, Harold Pinter exploits these questions thoroughly, introducing a mute matchseller who “could just as easily be an hallucination as a character” (Lewis 5). Without the presence of a voice, it is impossible for the audience to confirm the matchseller’s existence.
In a study conducted by G.W. Allport and H. Cantrill, they observed: “‘probably most people who listen to radio speakers feel assured that some of their judgments are dependable’” (Drakakis 24). Based on simply hearing a voice on the radio, listeners feel capable of presenting confident judgments on attributes such as intelligence, physical appearance, and morality. Radio drama depends on this stereotyping ability, creating characters with recognizable voices and individual speech mannerisms and relying on the listener to draw on unconscious, untrained social and psychological information and observation to infer-nearly instantly- characteristics to each voice. Moreover, the demand that the audience get to know a character based solely on their voice can establish a more intimate relationship between character and audience than may be found in television or the stage. “Without the visual distractions the smallest subtleties of the voice become apparent a seize the imagination” (Lewis 51). The words of a character gain more potency and import when they are all the audience has to go on.

In radio, however, the voices of the characters are not always adequate to tell the story. Sometimes, outside noises are required to frame the setting and to tell us other things about the world of the play than can be inferred from dialogue alone. In the early days of radio, producers and directors relied on the dialogue to tell the audience all they needed to know, in much the same way that the text of a book does. However, it was found that, when listening to the radio, the audience was not convinced by dialogue that described sounds the people in the world of the radio play heard.

…some writers and directors had to resort to this type of confusing dialogue: “I wonder why that car is stopping in front of our house?” To which audiences…would ask each other, “What car? I didn’t hear a car. Did you hear a car?” It was obvious that this deceptive use of dialogue to describe sounds couldn’t continue and that what was needed was for the
audience to hear the actual sounds, or at least what they imagined were the actual sounds (Mott 7).

This realization was the birth of sound effects. New employees were hired, sound technicians whose job it was to make the world of the radio more rich, layered, and, most importantly, convincing for the audience. They did so by creating sounds ranging from a sudden rainstorm to a door and doorbell, all live in the studio while the actors read their parts into another set of microphones. These sound effects became vital to the medium, bringing radio drama to new levels of realism.

Sound effects also spawned what is known as the radiophonic joke. These jokes, particular to radio, worked by raising the expectations of the audience through the use of familiar sound effects. Once the appropriate ideas were established, the expectations were thwarted humorously by an incongruous sound.

The tramp of marching feet and the sound of soldiers whistling…features a story about Roman legions – who, however, whistle, *Lili Marlene*; a frenzied medley of sea shanties is topped by the words, ‘and so we joined the army’; Big Ben establishes London at midnight – but after the build-up chimes, the hour chime itself is replaced by an impotent little plink (Lewis 59).

These jokes are all simple examples of humorous parody and the refutation of the audiences’ expectations. However, the fact that such jokes even exist says something important about sound effects, and radio in general. To the audience, what they hear seems real. They are capable of hearing the tramping feet and whistling and identifying this sound as representing the march of soldiers, and combine this knowledge with knowledge of a Roman setting to create the idea of a Roman legion marching to war.

Furthermore, the audience responds to the consistency of these sounds. Once a sound has been established as thunder, it recalls thunder every time it is heard. These abilities, and
the audiences' conviction in the truth behind their interpretation of what they hear, make the radiophonic joke, the comic denial of these expectations, possible.

However, no matter how convinced an audience might be of what they hear, says Robert Mott in the preface to his book *Radio Sound Effects*, radio is “the art of deception.” (Mott vii) While the sound of a breaking window or an opening door might be created by smashing glass or by opening a prop door, the truth of a sound is rarely what the audience thinks they hear. Rainfall, for example, may be simulated by allowing grains of birdseed to fall at random onto a sheet of wax paper, and what is heard as thunder may actually be the sound of a bowling ball rolling down a trough into a drum. (Mott 7) What is important is not how the sounds are made, but that they are convincing to an audience. These simulated sounds add a dimension of reality to a radio drama that cannot be accomplished with dialogue alone and differentiate the radio play from a story read aloud.

Indeed, sound effects can make a production, but they can also break it. An effect must be convincing. If the raindrops sound like birdseed dropped on a piece of paper or the marching feet of a soldier sound like a man in wingtips, then the veracity of the effect will be lost and the audience will lose faith in the production. However, the audience must also be willing to be deceived. It is unlikely that the majority of listeners are going to think that there actually is a Rolls Royce being driven in the studio, that it is somehow raining indoors, or that Big Ben has been moved to the studio just so it is clear the story takes place in London. “…The listener ‘knows subconsciously’ that the conventionalized sound effect being heard is ‘very far from the real thing’” (Crook 72). Yet, if the sound effect is sufficiently convincing, the audience is willing to overlook their own knowledge
that all is not what it seems to be. It is when the sound effect is too far off that the listener refuses to be beguiled. “Radio drama [has] failed in its attempt to establish visualization when a listener would say ‘I can see the man knocking the coconut shells together’” (Crook 72). The idea of ‘horse’ has been lost for the listener, and with it, their willingness to believe in the world of the radio drama.

The need for sound effects to be convincing does not imply, however, that radio drama must be thoroughly realistic. While a bad sound effect is likely to shock the listener and to destroy belief in the truth of the sound, a fantastic character such as a vampire, or a unicorn, can be easily integrated into a story with fuss only from the literally-minded. The human imagination will allow for impossible or implausible characters and situations if they appear well rationalized and suited to the story, though it is hesitant to accept a sound or other story element that seems grossly out of place or other than it purports to be.

**Ambiguous Storytelling**

Says Peter Lewis, in his introduction to *Radio Drama*: “Radio can present a more fleetingly intangible world than any other art form employing words… The radio play is particularly at home in rendering a dream world without a consistent or solid reality” (10). Radio is able to manipulate reality for the listener in a way that television and the stage are not, because radio does not need to rely on illusion, elaborate make-up, or editing to create fantastic settings and characters. The limit of radio is the imagination of the audience. In more recent years especially, radio dramatists and playwrights have taken full advantage of the freedom of reality allowed by the medium. Plays are written
for radio that could not be performed to the same effect, because radio allows the listener to suspend judgment on what is reality and what is not in a way that cannot be accomplished in other mediums. For example, if a production of the previously mentioned *A Slight Ache* by Pinter were to be staged or televised, the director would need to decide whether the mute matchseller was real or a hallucination; it could not be left to the ambiguity of a moment of silence as in a radio production. Removing the doubt and the questions from the play removes an entire layer of meaning, a layer that is one of the special properties of radio drama. Because of the fluidity and uncertainty of reality, playwrights and dramatists are able to ask questions about life and humanity that are difficult, if not impossible to thoroughly raise in other mediums. This kind of innate flexibility, however, can be problematic. If a director or a writer wants someone or something to remain in a scene, the audience must be constantly reminded of its existence. A scene set by the ocean must have a continuous backdrop of wave sounds lest the location be lost to the audience. A clock sitting on a mantle must be heard or mentioned frequently because, without visual reminders, the listener may forget its presence.

Radio drama is a highly flexible genre dependent on the faith and imagination of its audience. The audience must be willing to suspend their natural disbelief and to accept that the sounds they hear really are what they are meant to represent, rather than clever effects produced in a studio. Furthermore, the audience must be active rather than passive; they must be able and willing to bring the words and sounds they hear to life in their own imaginations. Radio programs often challenge the reality the listener knows,
and the audience must be willing to give up their own realities and accept an alien reality as their own for the duration of the program.
Chapter 4: Theatre

The Act of Theatre

In his book, *A Sense of Direction*, William Ball outlines what can be considered the bare bones of theatre; a basic description of the act of theatre itself.

A play in a theatre is a peculiar convention. …It is absurd, it’s ungainly, it’s awkward, it’s unbelievable, it’s inexplicable. In our society, as busy and playful as it is, a thousand people walk up to a little window and pay for the privilege of going into a dark room and sitting there for three hours while a group of people at the other end of the dark room impersonate human behavior. At the conclusion of the process, the thousand people who have been sitting silently and motionlessly in the dark clap their hands, signifying satisfaction, and return to their regular lives (4).

This is a very generalized assessment of theatre, but it makes one very important point: it is not only the content of the action that happens on stage that defines theatre, but also the context of the action.

Says Peter Brook in his book *The Empty Stage*: “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (Brook 9).

According to Brook, the most basic requirements of theatre are an established stage, an action, and a witness. In his book *Contemporary Stage Directing*, George Black attempts to build on Brook’s assessment, stating:

Suppose you are seated in a theatre. There is nothing going on, no set on the stage, no props, no light except for the bare-bulb worklight. You look up and see someone – a technician or stagehand, probably – walk across the stage and disappear into the wings (29).

This, according to Black, is not theatre, because it has no particular meaning; it is merely a moment of life. In Black’s example, the technician intends nothing behind the action of crossing the stage, and may even be unaware of the witness. The witness does not expect
the technician to be performing an act of theatre, and so does not watch with the eyes of an engaged audience member. In order for an act of theatre to occur, Black proposes, there must be an established stage, an action, a witness, and a tacit understanding between the actor and the witness that what occurs on the stage is meaningful and meant to be seen.

The Audience

It is easy to see at least part of the importance of the audience in the theatre. “Actors playing to an empty house are just in rehearsal” (Homan 107). By themselves, the actions of the performers have no meaning. It is the audience that gives the actions meaning by acknowledging and interpreting them and which, along with the performers, creates the theatrical experience.

The physical, real-time presence of the audience is also one factor that makes theatre different than television and film, genres that are, in many other senses, similar. This difference stems from the fact that a live audience alters each performance. No two nights of a show are precisely the same because the reactions of the audience differ each night. What seems very funny to the audience of Friday may fall flat for the audience of Saturday. As with radio, the theatre audience must be willing to be deceived, to suspend their disbelief for an evening and engage with the action onstage. Some audiences are reluctant to do this. For other audiences, a technical error or an actor who flubs or forgets a line one night, might force them out of their receptive, willingly deceived state, altering their perception of events in the play and therefore their response to it. As Peter Mudford observes in his book Making Theatre, “[The play] exists in the simultaneous
presence of actors and the audience. A play only exists in the living present of the performance, creating its sense of inner vibration between audience and stage” (2).

The presence of an audience gives meaning to the action happening on stage, but it is also up to the director to make the action meaningful for the audience. The play, the city, and the group performing the production draw different kinds of audiences. 

*Oklahoma* performed in a rural high school theatre will draw a very different crowd than will *Oklahoma* performed on Broadway. Similarly, a play with a reputation for being modern and avant-garde will draw a very different crowd than will a more traditional play performed on the same college campus. The director must keep the demographic of the target audience in mind when working. “Some people discount the need to make a play live for a specific audience, yet theatre has no choice but to be contemporary. Because audience perception changes with time, interpreting a play necessarily involves making choices about what it means to the present” (Bloom 14). A director must translate a period piece into a format the current audience can understand. This is not to say that all period pieces must be updated and their setting moved forward in time. However, a director must realize that the audience, when watching a play, brings their own contemporary worldview as an interpretive tool, regardless of when it was written or when it was set. If the director wishes the audience to obtain a clear and accurate understanding of the play, then the director must uncover the play’s significance in light of current times, and must portray this significance in a manner the audience can understand.

The audience, however, is not always specialized; while in some settings or for some plays an audience can be counted on to be entirely ‘intellectual,’ ‘avant-garde,’
‘blue-collar,’ or any other grouping, more often, an audience is a mix of these. In these cases, the director cannot rely on a particularly intellectual approach to the play to be accessible all members of the audience. Director Peter Brook, in the book *Between Two Silences: Talking with Peter Brook*, by Dale Moffitt, describes why he enjoys working with a diverse audience:

If you’ve compared the experience of a specialized audience and a mixed audience, the mixed audience is more enjoyable and more rewarding, and in playing to it you realize that there are two things you have to do to work with a very broadly mixed audience: You have to be clear, that is, you can’t mystify, and you have to start finding something that interests all those levels of the audience right away. So, there’s a certain simplicity that you have to have, and then you have to go step by step so that you don’t lose any of the audience (24).

A director must anticipate the abilities and limitations of the audience in order to tailor a production appropriately. An audience can be willing to imbue a performance with theatrical meaning, but if the director fails to communicate the ideas of the play in a way that the audience can grasp, then the theatrical experience is lost.

One of the primary way in which a director communicates the important ideas or concepts of the play to the audience is through the style of the play.

Production style comprises the choices a director makes regarding every aspect, from casting to curtain calls. Because visual images are always present, set, costume, and lighting design is often the most assertive ingredient of production style. But for a production to be coherent, the acting style must correlate with the visual elements (Bloom 95).

Every element in a production is therefore affected by the style the director has chosen. The style is the primary way in which the director communicates to the audience the bigger ideas of the production, the information that is not contained merely in the dialogue. This is why Nancy Kindelan refers to style as the “psychology of production” (11); it offers the audience a glimpse into the subtextual world of the play through
gesture, sound, and image. It reveals to the audience what is happening beneath the surface of the play.

The Style of Production

Robert Cohen and John Harrop, in their book, *Creative Play Directing*, describe style as either intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic style comes directly from the text and is a representation of what the play meant at the time it was written; the attitudes of the playwright, the era, and the theatrical environment of the time all influence the intrinsic style of the text. An understanding of a play’s intrinsic style yields a better understanding of what the play meant in its day, which can, in turn, lead to a better understanding of what it means in ours.

The intrinsic style of a play, however, should not be used as the basis for a production. It is important for the director to understand why a play was written and what kind of meanings the play held for audiences in its day, but if the play is always directed with consideration only of the intrinsic style, it would be difficult for multiple productions to each develop an individuality of expression. Each production would seem much like the others because it would be following the same intrinsic style.

Extrinsic style, on the other hand, is what the play is made to say in its current production. It is “the manner in which the director projects to the audience what he or she wishes to say through the vehicle of the play” (Cohen & Harrop 222-223). Using the extrinsic style of the play, the director is able to create an individual interpretation and to make a statement about the play that is based on opinion and personal insight as well as the explicit text. For example, a director may feel that Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* has many
parallels to a certain event in the U.S. Civil War and so may choose to set the play in that time period. This stylistic choice can then lead the audience to greater insight about the Civil War, and may also enable them to see *Henry IV* in a new light. Extrinsic style allows the director and audience to learn something new about the play and their own world with each production.

However, a director must also be careful that stylistic choices are sufficiently motivated and that he or she has a clear understanding of their own style. “To make a clear statement through style, the director must have a consistent idea of what that style is to be” (Cohen & Harrop 223). If the director is updating *Henry IV* to the Civil War, then he or she must have extensive knowledge of that era. If not, then the style will seem superficial and will be ineffective. It is important for directors to remember that every choice they make must be well rationalized; something should not be done merely because it would be impressive. “A glib or stylized production may occur when a playscript has been given a hasty interpretation, when there is lack of understanding of the play, or when artists feel the production will not be successful without a gimmick” (Kindelan 11). In order for a style to be appropriate for a production, the style must have a solid, well-planned connection to the text and must not be superficial. This kind of stylistic choice will only come after several in-depth readings of the script have been done. Furthermore, the style must be followed throughout the play, and choices that do not fit with the style must not be used, no matter how ‘cool’ they seem. In this way, a director will develop a rational style that can be followed clearly throughout the production and that will, without confusion, convey a deeper meaning of the play to the audience.
Two of my most important concerns when directing this play were relating the play to the audience and developing a cohesive style for the production. The other theatrical elements employed, lights, set, costumes, etc. were all tools used to express the style and connect with the audience. For this reason, I think that this background in the importance of the audience in theatre and the development and use of a style will be useful in later chapters when discussing my particular production.
Chapter 5: Semiotics

Defining Semiotics

Radio and theatre lead (and mislead) their audiences via signs. The rise and fall of a curtain have a special significance to a theatre audience, as does the cadence of voice to a radio audience. Understanding the way directors and designers use signs to convey meaning to the audience first entails understanding what a sign is, and how it works.

The study of semiotics originated with Hippocrates in the late fifth century B.C., when he founded a branch of medicine dedicated to studying and interpreting the symptoms of disease. This idea of one thing (i.e. a rash) being indicative of something else (i.e. a skin allergy) quickly caught the attention of fourth century B.C. philosophers like Aristotle who moved the symptom – really a sign – into everyday life.

Aristotle defined the sign as consisting of three dimensions: (1) the physical part of the sign itself (e.g., the sounds that make up the word *cat*); (2) the referent to which it calls attention (a certain category of feline mammal); and (3) its evocation of a meaning (what the referent entails psychologically and socially). These three dimensions are simultaneous: i.e., it is impossible to think of the word *cat* (a vocal sign made up of the sounds *c-a-t*), without thinking at the same time of the type of mammal to which it refers (the feline mammal), and without experiencing the personal and social meaning(s) that such a referent entails (Sebeok 4).

The sign then, according to Aristotle, encompasses not only the physical representation and the object being represented, but also the emotional, cognitive, and associative ties that the person observing the sign may make.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Charles S. Peirce, an American philosopher, established a definition and function of semiotics that has become the basis for much of current semiotic theory. Peirce’s model of semiotics followed very closely the model posed by Aristotle; He divided the sign into three parts: the representamen, the
object, and the interpretant. The relationship of these three parts is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Peirce’s Division of the Sign. (Smith 61)

As quoted in Howard Smith’s book *Psychosemiotics*, Peirce defined the representamen as “something that stands for somebody or something in some respect or capacity” (60). This is quite clearly the physical part of Aristotle’s semiotic triad, the material (vocal, gestural, visual, etc) representation of a real-world item or idea. The object in Peirce’s model is the referent of Aristotle’s. It is the item or idea about which the representamen has been constructed.

The third part of Peirce’s semiotic triad, the interpretant, differs slightly but importantly from Aristotle’s third element, meaning. Peirce defined the interpretant as that which “addresses somebody, that is creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign” (Smith 60). Peirce’s interpretant is similar to Aristotle’s meaning in that
it is the deeper implication one gets from a sign. For example, the word *cat*, the representamen, invokes in the hearer of the word the furriness, aloof nature, claws, etc. that the hearer associates with the object, the cat itself. These implied attributes – furriness, aloofness, claws as well as the affection the hearer had for their first cat – are all part of the interpretant. However, Peirce takes this idea of meaning one step further with the interpretant by defining the sign as something in constant flux.

The intent of Peirce’s formulation is one of continuous change and development. In an abstract depiction of the sign (see Figure [1]), the representamen is determined by the object and in turn determines the interpretant… The interpretant now represents the object and, as a more developed sign, also serves as the representamen on the next appropriate occasion. (Smith 61-62)

This continuous development indicates that people observing and interpreting signs are also constantly learning from them.

Figure 2, shown below, illustrates one such example of the development of a sign.

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**Figure 2: Application of Peirce’s Sign Triad (Smith 63)**
A person observing the altocumulus castellanus clouds recognizes that they are a sign of a coming cold front that will probably be accompanied by thunderstorms. In this instance, the clouds are the representamen and the cold front and thunderstorms are the object. Having previously experienced thunderstorms after seeing these clouds, the observer associates these clouds with the idea of the thunderstorm. These clouds may provoke fear, if the observer dislikes thunder and lightening, or excitement if the observer likes storms. They may provoke disappointment if the prospect of rain means the cancellation of an anticipated event, or they may merely recommend the taking of an umbrella on a shopping trip. The clouds may even recall a documentary watched on TV, a book read, a fact learned, or a picture seen. The reaction to the clouds, the interpretant, is a matter of the meaning established by personal past experience, but a reaction is present in each case because in each case there has been past experiences with storms. Moreover, the events occurring during this thunderstorm will color subsequent experiences and associations (Smith 62).

**Semiotics in Radio and Theatre**

The implications for this theory of semiotics on radio and theatre are important. Both are genres in which a director, actors, and designers attempt to communicate the meaning of a playwright or dramatist to a larger audience. This communication occurs, as do all forms of communication, through signs. The voices of the actors create sounds that the audience interprets as words in a language (or gibberish when appropriate) and from which the audience derives meaning. Similarly, the audience derives meaning from the atmospheric sound effects that both media employ, hearing the sound, identifying its
source, and attributing meaning. Additionally, theatre audiences perform this interpretation with lighting moods, set pieces, hand props, costumes, etc. This is little different from the real world in which the signs given by clothes (income, social group, etc.), building décor (old-fashioned office building or new-age art gallery), and any other manner of observable objects are translated with the ease of the literate. However, unlike the real world, in which the body of signs needed to understand a given situation is limited to the signs directly involved, in the theatre and on the radio, every sign is significant and must be carefully controlled for meaning by the director.

In his book *Contemporary Stage Directing*, George Black builds on an idea of Peter Brook’s, stating: “Before you is an empty space. Then the dim glow of the lights overhead fades to darkness for a moment, and a bare-bulb worklight begins to glow… You have seen an act of theatre. Someone has taken an empty space and called it a stage. And you have understood” (29). Black is not only describing an act of theatre, he is describing a sign of theatre. The dimming of the lights over the audience and the raising of lights onstage is a familiar representamen indicating the beginning of the play. There is a tacit cultural understanding between the director and the audience that when the house lights dim, the audience will quiet and prepare for the opening of the show, and the raising of the onstage lights indicates the beginning of the play itself. A director choosing to violate this sign, for example by beginning the play in the dark, is taking the risk that the audience will not be able to interpret the new sign created – the audience lights dimming and the play beginning before the onstage lights have risen. The potential for this literacy failure on the part of the audience is largely dependent on the kind of audience. For a theatre-savvy audience well versed in alternative theatre as well as more
traditional fare, this kind of a subversion of sign will most likely be more familiar and they will more easily and quickly be able to comprehend a new sign. However, for an audience exposed to little besides traditionally staged theatre, (i.e. proscenium stage, the opening of a curtain before each act) a sign for which they have no context will merely hinder their comprehension of the play. Therefore, when choosing which signs to employ and which to subvert, directors must always be mindful and considerate of their audience. To effectively communicate ideas to an audience, the director must choose signs in which they are literate. While it is perfectly acceptable and even desirable to challenge an audience by forcing them to interpret and internalize new signs or new ideas connected with old signs, it is important to also offer a context or explanation though which the audience can divine this new sign.

In many ways, the role of semiotics in radio similar to that in theatre, but on the radio the only means of conveying signs is through the voice and sound effects. However, these means can be very effective. The sound of a cuckoo in an interior setting asserts the idea of “cuckoo clock” and calls to mind, perhaps, a cuckoo clock the listener possessed as a child, or a certain fondness for that kind of clock. It may even tell the listener something about the character to which it belongs, if they have any kind of preconceptions about cuckoo clocks and their owners. Similarly, a gruff but kindly voice may call to mind an image of a grandfatherly man, which may result in the listener applying to the character all the attributes socially attributed to the idea of ‘grandfather,’ as well, perhaps, as some traits particular to the listener’s own grandfather and the emotions experienced during their last visit. A radio audience applies these layers of meaning instinctively to any sound. However, just as with theatre, it is important that the
director have at least a basic understanding of what meanings a sound is likely to conjure for the audience. If it is a sound that is likely to be unfamiliar, it must be given context in the dialogue, or it will have no meaning for the audience.

Understanding the basics of semiotics is important for any director, either of radio or theatre. Once it is understood what a sign can mean and that a sign will invariably have differing meanings for different people, directors can choose the signs they wish to employ, directing the audience towards a new understanding of the production.
Chapter 6: Radio Drama, Theatre, and Semiotics in Production

*Artist Descending a Staircase* opens with the playing of the recording accidentally made of Donner’s death. I staged this scene by fading out the preshow lighting look to black, bringing up a very dim light while Craig, who played Donner, took his place on stage, and then raising the light into a pool around Donner as the recording played, linking his obvious position at the foot of the stairs to the sounds occurring on the tape. The lights then fade again to near black and Austin and Craig enter and begin their scene. The lights fade up very slowly until, a few pages into the scene, they are finally at full. This choice stems from my desire to reinforce the notion of the radio play.

As mentioned in the chapter on radio drama, imagination plays a vital role in the audience’s experience of the play. Because they cannot see the action, they must envision it based on the dialogue and sounds they hear. I attempted to frame this production of *Artist Descending a Staircase* as though it were taking place in the imagination of the audience. It begins with only a vague notion of characters. You can tell that their bodies are there, but their faces are in darkness, their clothes are indistinct, their location is difficult to make out. As the play progresses and the dialogue tells us more and more about the characters and their location, and the audience begins to infer more and more about their characters based on vocal traits and inflections, the setting, characters, and clothes become brighter and more distinct until they are clearly set for the audience.
Because of this idea, I almost never faded the lights completely out; instead the scene changes occurred in half-light and were carried out by the actors. This also helped to reinforce the idea first established by the interaction between character and sound operator, that the characters are, to an extent, controlling the flashbacks and the story as it unfolds. However, so as not to completely destroy the illusion of the characters, I did not allow Tya, who played Sophie, a blind character, to help in the scene changes. Instead she was led on and off stage by one of the other actors.

I felt it was important to not destroy this illusion completely for several reasons. While there are many modern plays in which the characters make it clear they realize that they are, in fact, characters in a play, *Artist Descending a Staircase* is not one of these. I wanted to create for the audience the illusion that these were real people, or at least characters in a story, rather than actors playing characters. Allowing the blind character to get up and walk away, clearly sighted, at the end of a scene would ruin this illusion. In addition, it is much easier to maintain the illusion of blindness in a sighted actress if the illusion is never broken, even for scene changes. I also wanted to impress upon the audience that, although they may be controlling the flashbacks, resetting and reliving their lives as they deem appropriate, the characters do not know anyone is watching.

With the scene changes in half-light, the only true blackout occurred at the end of the scene in which Sophie falls from a window. I would have preferred to not black out the lights even then, but I felt that it was more important to preserve the emotional impact of the scene by having the crash of glass occur in darkness instead of while Sophie was still standing quietly on stage.
There is an old truism in the theatre world regarding lighting. Directors have been known to say, when watching run-throughs in which the lights are not bright enough, ‘It’s too dark. I can’t hear the actors.’ This seems, at first, a ridiculous and nonsensical statement, until one reflects on the signs that theatre lighting gives. A blackout means that something is about to happen or has just ended. If the light is dark, an audience does not expect to need to listen to what is going on onstage. They may even block out noises that they do hear, deeming them unimportant. Therefore, while I would have preferred to begin the play in a true blackout, rather than in very dim light, and also to end the play in the same way (I ended it with the same dim light, rather than a black out), it seemed like too risky a gamble. I was concerned that, given the normal signs a blackout conveys, it would take the audience several seconds to realize that they should be listening to the dialogue onstage, and those several seconds would mean important pieces of exposition were missed.

Because, as was discussed in the chapter on radio drama, radio is a medium that communicates entirely through sound, I felt it was very important to play up the sound aspect of this production. I decided early on, after reading the script and beginning my research into radio drama, that I wanted all of the sound effects to be done live, as they would have been in a radio studio. This meant that, while a few of the more difficult sounds, such as gunfire or a stampede of cavalry would be done with recordings – as was typical for such effects in a live studio – many of the other effects, including a tea service, footsteps, and the shutting and strapping of a suitcase, would all be done with hand props by two sound operators. Furthermore, in order to really emphasize the importance of these effects to the audience, I decided to place the sound operators at a
table in the center of the back wall in full view of the audience at all times. The audience would watch them setting up the sound effects for the next scene during scene changes, and would watch as they performed every one of the sound effects.

In order to further enhance the sound effects and to minimize the potential for extraneous, accidental sounds from the stage itself, I decided that the play would be done almost completely without props. That is, I allowed furniture and props representing the major art pieces discussed in the play. There was no suitcase or tea set, or any of the other props mentioned and heard in the play. This concept is illustrated in the image below in which an actor, Austin, is seen brandishing a ‘rolled up newspaper’ and Nicki, one of the two sound operators, prepares her own paper to create the sound effect of newspaper hitting a table.

Figure 3: Beauchamp Prepares to Strike. From L to R: Nicki, Austin, Liz. Photo by Don Workman
Nicki’s strike would be timed to coincide with Austin’s movement, so that the sound would be heard at the precise moment Austin’s ‘newspaper’ should hit the table. Watching from the audience, I found this method of combining motion with sound effects convincing and effective. In the chapter on radio drama I discussed how, if a sound effect was a good one, the audience was able to ignore their knowledge that what they heard was not actually what they thought they heard (i.e. the whistle of a train was being produced by a sound effects person and was not, in fact a real train whistle). The same principle, I think, held true in this production. Although the audience was well aware of the actual origin of the sound (they could see it being done, after all), if the effect was well timed and the sound was right, it was easy to forget that the ‘newspaper’ with which Austin stuck could not possibly have produced the noise heard.

The added visual element to the sound effects helped to retain the balance between sound effect and voice that is found in radio drama. On the radio, neither the actors nor the sound effects can be seen, and so they are heard with equal attention. In staging the play, however, the actors and their motions are fully visible, adding a visual element to the dialogue and gaining priority of attention over strictly aural information. Adding a visual element to the sound effects, that is, having them performed live on stage, helped maintain the radio-esque balance between sound effect and dialogue, ensuring that the sounds would not be forgotten or only half-heard as the audience got caught up in the action. However, this did present a difficulty that would be unknown to the radio world. Because the audience was able to see the tool being used to create a sound effect, I took pains to ensure that the tool being used closely resembled what it was supposed to be on stage. On the radio, it does not matter what your sound device looks like, so as long as it
creates the right sound, but I was concerned that the audience might have a difficult time believing or understanding a sound effect if they could see that it was clearly not what the actors were claiming it should be. For this reason, the sounds of the tea service were created with real tea cups, a tea kettle, and water (see Figure 4), just as the sound of falling artificial pearls was created by dropping small beads into a container. These visual cues to the audience helped make the transition from purely auditory to visible sound effects much smoother.

![Figure 4: Sophie Pours Tea. From L to R: Craig, Tya, Chris, Nicki, Liz, Austin. Photo by Don Workman](image)

During the play, I allowed the actors to interact, to an extent, with the sound operators. By this I mean that a few lines were directed towards them rather than towards one of the other characters or the audience. I did this for several reasons. One was to
again reinforce in the minds of the audience the presence of the sound effects and the integral relationship between the characters and the sounds of the play. Also, I very much wanted the sound operators to be considered a part of the cast, rather than technical crew people as would normally be the case in a theatre production. I cast actors in the two parts, and they were an undeniable presence on stage at all times. To pretend that they were not there would seem false. Furthermore, the play is told largely through flashbacks, so it seemed appropriate to give the characters some interaction and control over the telling of their past. The end result of this interaction was that the characters never seemed completely unaware that they were telling a story to an audience. This interaction between character and sound operator also allowed me to stage the single radiophonic joke in the play.

The flashbacks of the play have taken the audience to France in 1914 where the three male characters, Beauchamp, Martello, and Donner, are on the heretofore much discussed ‘walking tour.’ Beauchamp, it seems, has acquired a horse and is riding it about with great abandon, much to the consternation of his friends. Throughout the beginning of the scene, the sound of hoof beats is heard. However, there are throughout the scene indicators that the horse does not really exist. Beauchamp at one point declares “This horse only believes in me” (Stoppard 69), a humorous twisting of the truth, as only he believes in the horse. Donner states that he had eaten to half a coconut earlier that day, and it is well known that coconuts are generally used to simulate the sound of horses hooves. However, these pieces of information are revealed with nothing to connect them until Donner cries, in exasperation, “For God’s sake, Beauchamp, will you get rid of that coconut!” (Stoppard 70). Suddenly it is clear to the audience that there never was a
horse. Beauchamp has been roaming the French countryside banging together the two halves of a coconut to produce the sound of hoof beats!

This is a joke that, quite clearly, is difficult to stage. After all, the humor in it lies in betraying the audience’s expectations that the hoof beats they heard were being produced by a sound effects person in the radio studio with the intention of sounding like real hoof beats, when in fact they were produced with the intention of sounding like the simulated hoof beats created by a character with a coconut. However, if, on stage, Beauchamp is running about with two halves of a coconut, it is quite clear from the beginning that there is no horse, and the joke is lost. As it was one of my favorite jokes in the play, I was loathe to cut it, but for awhile that seemed the only option. Finally, however, I realized that this might be the perfect moment to make use of the interaction I had encouraged between character and sound operator. I asked Austin, who was playing Beauchamp, to enter during the scene change, before the lights were up to indicate the beginning of the next scene. In the semi-darkness he approached Liz and handed her two halves of a coconut, as illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Beauchamp’s Tenth Horse. From L to R: Liz, Austin. Photo by Don Workman
Miming, he then quickly instructed her on how to produce the sounds he wanted, and took his position on top of the platforms for the start of the scene. At this point Craig and Chris, playing Donner and Martello, entered, took their places, and the scene began. With every one of Austin’s movements Liz used the coconuts accordingly, simulating hoof beats. Because the handing of the coconuts had happened during a scene change, because they were being used by one of the sound people, and because Austin was on a higher level than the other actors, the existence of the horse became ambiguous. The audience was not completely fooled, as would have happened with the radio drama, but doubt was introduced, and so Craig’s command to “get rid of that coconut” (Stoppard 70), followed by Austin’s gesture to Liz telling her to cease making the sounds, still created a humorous moment as the audience was let fully into the joke that there never was, in fact, a horse.

The alterations and compromises needed in order for this staging of the radiophonic joke to be possible, however, point to one radio element of the play that could not translate or adapt to the live stage. The ambiguity of action that is a staple of radio drama and appears in several of the scenes in *Artist Descending a Staircase* is extremely difficult, if not impossible to express on stage. The scene of Sophie’s death, for example, is extremely ambiguous in the script. It is not made clear whether she falls or jumps from the window, and it is not made clear until the following scene that, though she thought Donner was present, she was actually alone in the room.

These ambiguities, which are quite simple to create in a radio studio, become quite difficult to convey on stage with a live audience. Because the scene is a monologue, I opted to place Sophie on the platform with a light focused dimly on her while the rest of
the stage was in darkness. This lighting effect, so different from that of the other scenes, was used because, for this scene alone, the story is told from Sophie’s point of view. She herself is the isolated spot of full awareness in her world, with the rest fading off into darkness and uncertainty. I also asked Donner to help Sophie to her place during the scene change and then exit again, suggesting his presence, at least briefly, in the coming scene.

Because I chose to portray this scene from Sophie’s point of view, it became unnecessary for Donner’s presence, or lack thereof, to be an issue. Sophie exists in a world of sound and touch and, because she receives neither from Donner, he cannot be present for her. However, this solution is, like that of the radiophonic joke, a compromise. The ambiguity is not complete so much as it is suggested.

As mentioned above, the end of this scene is the only time during the play that the stage goes to full darkness. This was indeed, as stated, to minimize the discordance between the visual of Tya standing motionless on stage and the sound of Sophie falling to her death. However, it was also done because, in the radio play, it is never made clear whether Sophie’s death is an accident or suicide. Were I too have staged Sophie’s plunge, I would have had to make a choice between the two; by placing the stage in a blackout for the sound of Sophie’s fall, I was able to leave the circumstances ambiguous.

I simply choose to ignore the smaller, within-scene moments of ambiguity in the script. In the scene when Sophie first visits the flat, for example, the sound of a ping-pong game is heard and Sophie assumes that Donner and Beauchamp are playing ping-pong. In fact, the ping-pong game is a recording, a fact that was immediately evident to the audience of my production as they could see Beauchamp and Donner on stage, quite
clearly not playing ping-pong. It is unfortunate that I was unable to preserve the ambiguity of this moment and similar others. However, the steps needed to preserve the ambiguity – lighting effects, elaborate set-ups, et cetera – would have created unnecessary difficulty and disrupted the flow of the show. One the whole, I feel it was better to ignore the ambiguity of these small moments than to go to excessive lengths to maintain them.

The importance of imagination in radio heavily influenced my costume and set choices. I tried, with these, to suggest, rather than tell, creating a kind of neutral form that could be expanded upon by the audience. The costumes, therefore, as seen in Figures 6-9, are pieces, a suit jacket or a tie, for example, that suggests the time period and the style of dress but leave the rest to the imagination of the audience. The costume pieces are signs, offering insight into what the remainder of the costume might be like, as well as bits of information about character. In Figure 6, for example, the vest Craig is wearing suggests the remainder of the costume would most likely be a button up shirt and trousers. A jacket is unlikely, however, as the unbuttoned vest is informal. The caps which Craig and Chris wear, as well as Chris’ knickers suggest the time period is the early twentieth century, and also that they are quite young men. The beret Austin is wearing has implications for his character. It suggests a kind of arrogance and lack of in depth scrutiny of the world, as it appears he arrived in France and immediately purchased and wore the stereotypical French item of clothing.
As can also be seen in these figures, the set is a neutral space. It has several levels that have multiple uses and is painted a dark blue to match the surrounding walls. The characteristics of the setting of any scene, then, must be suggested by the furniture and completed by the audience. The lack of props also encourages audience imagination, requiring them to correlate the onstage action to the sound effect being created in order to ‘see’ what is happening, much as a radio audience would have had to imagine the props based on sound effects and descriptive dialogue.
Figure 7: “Left, Right, Right Again...” From L to R: Chris, Austin, Craig. Photo by Don Workman

Figure 8: Beauchamp’s Departure. From L to R: Tya, Austin. Photo by Don Workman
I felt it was very important, when I read this script, to stay faithful to its roots as a radio drama. Removing a play from its context destroys, I believe, some of its inherent meaning. I therefore created for this production a style of direction and design that would allow me to explore the ideas of radio drama and to integrate those ideas into a theatre context.
Conclusion

When Tom Stoppard wrote his radio drama *Artist Descending a Staircase*, he tried to write a play that was “unstageable” (Delaney 34). Stoppard did this as a challenge to himself and his creativity. The medium of radio intrigued him, and he sought to write a play in a style that would preclude it from standard theatrical staging. As I read the script, however, I felt that, while quite challenging, staging the radio play was far from impossible. Looking back on the production now, I recognize elements of the play that were particularly difficult to translate, such as the radiophonic jokes, but on the whole, I believe the production was proof that *Artist Descending a Staircase* can be successfully staged from the original radio script. However, the question is not merely whether or not the radio play *can* be staged, but also whether or not it *should* be staged.

When theatrically staging a play written for another medium, it is important for the director to do several things. First and foremost, he or she must thoroughly research the original medium of the play in order to understand the text and its context. Second, the director should attempt to incorporate the most relevant elements of the original medium into the theatrical production. In some cases, without the inclusion of these outside elements, theatrical staging is unable to address the issues of the play.

In several instances, theatrical staging methods alone were unsuccessful. By fusing elements of radio and theatre, however a solution could be reached. The radiophonic joke about Beauchamp’s horse, for example, could not be theatrically staged because, as soon as Beauchamp made his entrance, it would be apparent that he was clicking coconut halves together, and only pretending to ride a horse. The presence of the sound operators
in the production, however, allowed me to hand off the noise making responsibility and
allow Beauchamp the benefit of the doubt.

Unfortunately, the blending of radio and theatre could not always solve the
problems of staging a radio play. On the radio, scenes flow into one another with no
need to stop for a chance of scenery or costume. In the theatre, however, that is not the
case, and as a result, throughout my staging process, I found the scene changes to be
some of the most difficult moments. Because of the requirements for costume and set
transitions, even with the relative simplicity of my sets and costumes, the scene changes
could be excessively long. Unfortunately this broke up the flow of the production, so
fluid and natural on the radio and was a major weakness of the production. However,
while the length of the scene changes was unfortunate, they were not impossible to stage.

On the whole, the results of my production were clear: *Artist Descending a
Staircase* can be staged in its original version, but it requires the fusion of the theatrical
and radio media. Without the incorporation of elements of radio drama, theatrical staging
cannot encompass the nuances of ambiguity, sound, and imagination inherent in the radio
play.

Not only can *Artist Descending a Staircase* be staged, it absolutely should be. A
director must strive to find a creative and innovative approach that provides new insights
and perspectives into the chosen play, or else theatre will stagnate. Theatrically staging a
radio play allows a director to gain new perspective and understanding of both media,
and to exercise creativity and flexibility working to mesh the two. A unique production
is created, one that is not quite radio and not entirely theatre. It also enables the director
to bring the play to an entirely new audience and to expose that audience to at least a taste of a medium (radio) whose popularity is waning.

I think that incorporating elements of radio drama into my production of *Artist Descending a Staircase* was the right choice. I felt, by playing upon the importance of sound effects with live operators and by emphasizing the role of the audience imagination in visualizing the production, I was able to remain basically true to the history of the play and Stoppard as a playwright, while still staging his radio play. Moreover, by bringing out the radio elements of the play, I hope that I was able to educate the audience at least a little bit about the styles, conventions, and general atmosphere of radio drama.

Overall, I am very pleased with the success of my production. I feel that the fusion of radio and theatre was relatively seamless and certainly not clunky or awkward. Furthermore, I thoroughly enjoyed being able to stretch my creativity in finding ways to bring radio drama to life on stage. I feel that I was able to create a production that evoked the feel of a radio play, drawing in the audience imaginatively and allowing them to imagine settings, props, and full costumes to lay over the framework my production provided. Someday, I think, I would like to stage this play again, or another radio play. I feel there are still more depths to be explored in the connections between radio and theatre, more similarities to be noted and differences to be investigated. I would like another chance to explore the genre of radio drama and the changes and opportunities that arise when the aural medium is given visual dimension.
Bibliography


Appendix A: *Artist Descending a Staircase*
We hear, on a continuous loop of tape, a sequence of sounds which is to be interpreted by MARTELLO and BEAUCHAMP thus:

(a) DONNER dosing: an irregular droning noise.
(b) Careful footsteps approach. The effect is stealthy. A board creaks.

(c) This wakes DONNER, i.e. the droning stops in mid-beat.
(d) The footsteps freeze.

(e) DONNER's voice, unalarmed: 'Ah! There you are . . .'
(f) Two more quick steps, and then Thump!

(g) DONNER cries out.
(h) Wood cracks as he falls through a balustrade.
(i) He falls heavily down the stairs, with a final sickening thump when he hits the bottom. Silence.

After a pause, this entire sequence begins again . . . Droning . . .

Footsteps . . . (as before).

MARTELLO: I think this is where I came in.

(TAPE: 'Ah! There you are . . .')

BEAUCHAMP: And this is where you hit him.

(TAPE: Thump!)

MARTELLO: I mean, it's going round again. The tape is going round in a loop.

BEAUCHAMP: Well, of course. I record in loops, lassoing my material—no, like trawling—no, like—no matter.

(TAPE: DONNER reaches the bottom of the stairs.)

MARTELLO: Poor Donner.

(MARTELLO and BEAUCHAMP are old men, as was DONNER.)
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

(The tape starts off again as before.)

BEAUCHAMP (over tape): Round and round, recording layer upon layer of silence while Donner dozed after a heavy lunch, the spools quietly folding silence upon itself; yes like packing linen into trunks... Fold, fold until the footsteps broke it... and woke him--

(tape: "Ah! There you are..."

How peaceful it was, in the afternoon in the great houses before the Great War, to doze after luncheon with only a fly buzzing in the stuffy room and a sense of the maids somewhere quietly folding the linen into pine chests...

(tape: Donner reaches the bottom of the stairs.)

Donner knew the post-prandial nap. His people were excellently connected. With mine, in fact.

(tape: re-continues under.)

I suppose we should let someone know, though not necessarily the entire circumstances. I'm not one to tell tales if no good can come of it.

MARTELLO: I will stand by you, Beauchamp. We have been together a long time.

BEAUCHAMP: You may rely on me, Martello. I shall not cast the first stone.

MARTELLO: You have cast it, Beauchamp, but I do not preclude you.

BEAUCHAMP: My feelings precisely, but there seems to be some confusion in your mind--

MARTELLO: My very thought. Turn off your machine, it seems to be disturbing your concentration--

(tape: 'Ah!---and is switched off.)

BEAUCHAMP: There you are.

MARTELLO: On the contrary, Beauchamp, there you are. Unless we can agree on that, I can't even begin to help you clear up this mess.

BEAUCHAMP: Don't touch him, Martello.

MARTELLO: I don't mean clear up Donner!--honestly, Beauchamp, you buffoon!

BEAUCHAMP: Cynic!

MARTELLO: Geriatric!

BEAUCHAMP: Murderer!

(Pause.)

MARTELLO: As I was saying, I shall help you so far as I can to get through the difficult days ahead, whether in duplicity or in the police courts, depending on how you intend to face the situation; but I shall do so only on the condition that we drop this farce of accusation and counter-accusation. You had only two friends in the world, and having killed one you can't afford to irritate the other.

BEAUCHAMP: Very well!—I gave you my chance, and now I'm going to get the police.

MARTELLO: A very sensible decision. You are too feeble to run, and too forgetful to tell lies consistent with each other. Furthermore, you are too old to make the gain worth the trouble. Be absolutely frank with them, but do not plead-insanity. That would reflect undeserved credit on three generations of art critics.

BEAUCHAMP: I must say, Martello, I have to admire your gall.

MARTELLO: Stress all mitigating factors, such as Donner's refusal to clean the bath after use, and his infuriating mannerisms any of which might have got him murdered years ago. Remember how John used to say, 'If Donner whistles the opening of Beethoven's Fifth in six/eight time once more I'll kill him'?

BEAUCHAMP: John who?

MARTELLO: Augustus John.

BEAUCHAMP: No, no, it was Edith Sitwell.

MARTELLO: Rubbish!—you're getting old, Beauchamp.

BEAUCHAMP: I am two years younger than you, Martello.

MARTELLO: Anybody who is two years younger than me is senile. It is only by a great effort of will that my body has not decomposed. Which reminds me, you can't leave Donner lying there at the bottom of the stairs for very long in this weather, and that is only the practical argument; how long can you ethically leave him?

BEAUCHAMP: It is nothing to do with me.
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

MARTELL: Beauchamp, I am shocked. You were at school together. You signed his first manifesto, as he signed yours. You have conjured with his name and travelled on his ticket; shared his roof, his prejudices, his occasional grant; eaten his bread and drunk his health (God forgive my brain—it is so attuned to the ironic tone it has become ironical in repose; I have to whip sincerity out of it as one whips responses from a mule)—to put it plain, you have been friends for over sixty years.

BEAUCHAMP: Well, the same goes for you.

MARTELL: Yes, but you killed him.

BEAUCHAMP: I did no such thing! And you have good reason to know it! I am thoroughly disillusioned in you, Martello. I was willing to bend over backwards to see your side of it, but I can't stand a chap who won't come clean when he's found out.

MARTELL: I, on the other hand, admire your hopeless persistence. But the tape recorder speaks for itself. That is, of course, the point about tape recorders. In this case it is eloquent, grandiloquent, not to say Grundigloquent—Oh God, if only I could turn it off!—no wonder I have achieved nothing with my life!—my brain is on a flying trapeze that outstrips all the possibilities of action. Mental acrobatics, Beauchamp—I have achieved nothing but mental acrobatics—nothing!—whereas you, however wrongly and for whatever reason, came to grips with life at least this once, and killed Donner.

BEAUCHAMP: It's not true, Martello!

MARTELL: Yes, yes, I tell you, nothing!—Niente! Nadal! Nichts!—Oh, a few pieces here and there, a few scandals—Zurich—Paris—Buenos Aires—but, all in all, nothing, not even among the nihilists! (Pause.) I tell you, Beauchamp, it's no secret between us that I never saw much point in your tonal art. I remember saying to Sophie, in the early days when you were still using gramophone discs, Beauchamp is wasting his time, I said, there'll be no revelations coming out of that; no truth. And the critics

BEAUCHAMP: You are clearly deranged. It is probably the first time a murderer has tried to justify himself on artistic grounds. As it happens, you are also misguided. Far from creating a tour de force, you ruined what would have been a strand in my masterwork of accumulated silence, and left in its place a melodramatic fragment whose point will not be lost on a jury.

(He presses TAPE switch: '—There you are—' etc.)

There indeed he is, ladies and gentlemen, caught by the fortuitous presence of a recording machine that had been left running in the room where Mr. Donner was quietly working on a portrait from memory, a portrait fated to be unfinished.

MARTELL: Poor Donner, he never had much luck with Sophie.

BEAUCHAMP: For the existence of this recording we have to thank Mr. Beauchamp, a fact which argues his innocence, were it ever in doubt. Mr. Beauchamp, an artist who may be familiar to some of you—

MARTELL: If you are extremely old and collect trivia—

BEAUCHAMP: —and his friends, Mr. Donner and the man Martello, lived and worked together in a single large attic studio approached by a staircase, which led upwards from the landing, and was guarded at the top by an insubstantial rail, through which, as you will hear, Mr. Donner fell.

MARTELL: An accident, really.

BEAUCHAMP: If you say so.

MARTELL: You didn't mean to kill him. It was manslaughter.

BEAUCHAMP: You will hear how Mr. Donner, while working, dozed off in his chair . . .

(TAPE: Droning.)

Footsteps approach.

(TAPE: Footsteps.)

Someone has entered quietly. Who? No visitors came to
this place. Martello and Mr. Beauchamp met their acquaintance outside, formerly at the Savage, latterly in public houses. And Mr. Donner, who was somewhat reclusive, not to say misanthropic, had no friends at all—except the other two, a fact whose importance speaks for itself—

(TAPE: 'Ah! There you are... —and is switched off.)

Not, 'Who the devil are you?', or 'Good Lord, what are you doing here, I haven't seen you for donkey's years!'—no.

'Ah! There you are.' The footsteps can only have belonged to the man Martello.

**MARTELLO:** Or, of course, the man Beauchamp. I don't see where this is getting us—we already know perfectly well that it was one of us, and it is absurd that you should prevaricate in this way when there is no third party to impress. I came home to find Donner dead, and you at the top of the stairs, fiddling with your tape-recorder. It is quite clear that I arrived just in time to stop you wiping out the evidence.

**BEAUCHAMP:** But it was I who came home and found Donner dead—with your footsteps on the machine. My first thought was to preserve any evidence it had picked up, so I very quietly ascended—

**MARTELLO:** Beauchamp, why are you bothering to lie to me?

You are like a man on a desert island refusing to admit to his only companion that he ate the last coconut.

**BEAUCHAMP:** For the very good reason that while my back was turned you shinned up the tree and guzzled it. And incidentally—I see that you have discovered where I keep my special marmalade. That's stealing, Martello, common theft. That marmalade does not come out of the housekeeping—

**MARTELLO:** It must have been Donner.

**BEAUCHAMP:** It was not Donner. Donner never cleaned the tub and he always helped himself to cheese in such a way as to leave all the rind, but he never stole my marmalade because he didn't like marmalade. He did steal my honey, I know

that for a fact. And he had the nerve to accuse me of taking the top off the milk.

**MARTELLO:** Well, you do.

**BEAUCHAMP** (furiously): Because I have paid the milkman four weeks running! It's my milk!

**MARTELLO:** I suppose we should leave a note for him. Two pints a day will be enough now.

**BEAUCHAMP:** Since you will be in jail, one pint will be ample. Poor Donner. He was not so easy to get on with in recent years, but I shall always regret that my last conversation with him was not more friendly.

**MARTELLO:** Were you rowing about the housekeeping again?

**BEAUCHAMP:** No, no. He was rather unfeeling about my work in progress, as a matter of fact.

**MARTELLO:** He was rude about mine the other day. He attacked it.

**BEAUCHAMP:** He said mine was rubbish.

**MARTELLO:** Did he attack you? Was that it?

**BEAUCHAMP:** Why did he resent me? He seemed embittered, lately... .

**MARTELLO:** He'd been brooding about Sophie.

**BEAUCHAMP:** And that ridiculous painting. What was the matter with the man?

**MARTELLO:** I think I was rather at fault... .

**BEAUCHAMP:** I paid him the compliment of letting him hear how my master-tape was progressing...

**Flashback**

(BEAUCHAMP's 'master-tape' is a bubbling cauldron of squeaks, gurgles, crackles, and other unharmonious noises. He allows it to play for longer than one would reasonably hope.)

**BEAUCHAMP:** Well, what do you think of it, Donner? Take your time, choose your words carefully.

**DONNER:** I think it's rubbish.

**BEAUCHAMP:** Oh. You mean, a sort of tonal debris, as it were?

**DONNER:** No, rubbish, general rubbish. In the sense of being
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

worthless, without value; rot, nonsense. Rubbish, in fact.

BEAUCHAMP: Ah. The detritus of audible existence, a sort of
refuse heap of sound . . .

DONNER: I mean, rubbish. I'm sorry, Beauchamp, but you must
come to terms with the fact that our paths have diverged. I
very much enjoyed my years in that child's garden of easy
victories known as the avant garde, but I am now engaged
in the infinitely more difficult task of painting what the eye
sees.

BEAUCHAMP: Well, I've never seen a naked woman sitting
about a garden with a unicorn eating the roses.

DONNER: Don't split hairs with me, Beauchamp. You don't
know what art is. Those tape recordings of yours are the
mechanical expression of a small intellectual idea, the kind
of notion that might occur to a man in his bath and be
forgotten in the business of drying between his toes. You
can call it art if you like, but it is the commonplace of any
ironic imagination, and there are thousands of clerks and
shop assistants who would be astonished to be called artists
on their bath night.

BEAUCHAMP: Wait a minute, Donner——

DONNER: And they, incidentally, would call your tapes——

BEAUCHAMP: Quiet!——

DONNER: ——rubbish.

(Smack!)

BEAUCHAMP: Missed him! I don't want that fly buzzing around
the microphone—I'm starting up a new loop.

DONNER: I see I'm wasting my breath.

BEAUCHAMP: I heard you. Clerks—bath-night—rubbish, and so
on. But my tapes are not for clerks. They are for initiates,
as is all art.

DONNER: My kind is for Everyman.

BEAUCHAMP: Only because every man is an initiate of that
particular mystery. But your painting is not for dogs,
parrots, bicycles . . . You select your public. It is the same
with me, but my tapes have greater mystery—they elude
dogs, parrots, clerks and the greater part of mankind. If

you played my tape on the radio, it would seem a
meaningless noise, because it fulfills no expectations: people
have been taught to expect certain kinds of insight but not
others. The first duty of the artist is to capture the radio
station.

DONNER: It was Lewis who said that.

BEAUCHAMP: Lewis who?

DONNER: Wyndham Lewis.

BEAUCHAMP: It was Edith Sitwell, as a matter of fact.

DONNER: Rubbish.

BEAUCHAMP: She came out with it while we were dancing.

DONNER: You never danced with Edith Sitwell.

BEAUCHAMP: Oh yes I did.

DONNER: You're thinking of that American woman who sang
negro spirituals at Nancy Cunard's coming-out ball.

BEAUCHAMP: It was Queen Mary's wedding, as a matter of fact.

DONNER: You're mad.

BEAUCHAMP: I don't mean wedding, I mean launching.

DONNER: I can understand your confusion but it was Nancy
Cunard's coming-out.

BEAUCHAMP: Down at the docks?

DONNER: British boats are not launched to the sound of
minstrel favours.

BEAUCHAMP: I don't mean launching, I mean maiden voyage.

DONNER: I refuse to discuss it. Horrible noise, anyway.

BEAUCHAMP: Only because people have not been taught what
to listen for, or how to listen.

DONNER: What are you talking about?

BEAUCHAMP: Really, Donner, your mind keeps wandering
about in a senile chaos! My tape. If I had one good man
placed high up in the BBC my tape would become art for
millions, in time.

DONNER: It would not become art. It would become a mildly
interesting noise instead of a totally meaningless noise. An
artist is someone who is gifted in some way which enables
him to do something more or less well which can only be
done badly or not at all by someone who is not thus gifted.
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To speak of an art which requires no gift is a contradiction employed by people like yourself who have an artistic bent but no particular skill.

(Smack!)

BEAUCHAMP: Missed!
DONNER: An artistic imagination coupled with skill is talent.
BEAUCHAMP: Where is he?—Ah—

(Smack!)

Damn!
DONNER: Skill without imagination is craftsmanship and gives us many useful objects such as wickerwork picnic baskets. Imagination without skill gives us modern art.
BEAUCHAMP: A perfectly reasonable summary.

(Thump! fist on desk.)
DONNER: Beauchamp!
BEAUCHAMP: Did you get him?
DONNER: I am trying to open your eyes to the nakedness of your emperor.
BEAUCHAMP: But Donner, ever since I've known you you've been running around asking for the name of his tailor—symbolism, surrealism, imagism, vorticism, fauvism, cubism—dada, drip-action, hard-edge, pop, found objects and post-object—it's only a matter of days since you spent the entire housekeeping on sugar to make an edible Venus de Milo, and now you've discovered the fashions of your childhood. What happened to you?
DONNER: I have returned to traditional values, that is where the true history of art continues to lie, not in your small jokes. I make no apology for the past, but precocity at our age is faintly ludicrous, don't you think?
BEAUCHAMP: At our age, anything we do is faintly ludicrous.

Our best hope as artists is to transcend our limitations and become utterly ludicrous. Which you are proceeding to do with your portrait of Sophie, for surely you can see that a post-Pop pre-Raphaelite is pure dada brought up to date—

(Smack!)

DONNER: Shut up, damn you!—how dare you talk of her?—how dare you—

(And weeps—)

—and would you stop cleaning the bath with my face flannel!!!(Pause.) I'm sorry—please accept my apology—
BEAUCHAMP: I'm sorry, Donner . . . I had no idea you felt so strongly about it.
DONNER: (Sniffle.) Well, I have to wash my face with it.
BEAUCHAMP: No, no, I mean about your new . . . Donner, what has happened?—What happened between you and Martello? You have not been yourself . . . since you smashed your Venus and began your portrait . . . You have . . . shunned me—
DONNER: I did not intend to.
BEAUCHAMP: Have I offended you? Is it about the milk?
DONNER: No. I have just been—sad.
BEAUCHAMP: Do you blame me for Sophie?
DONNER: I don't know. It was a long time ago now. It is becoming a good likeness, isn't it?
BEAUCHAMP: Oh yes. She would have liked it. I mean if she could have seen it. A real Academy picture . . .
DONNER: Yes.
BEAUCHAMP: I don't know, Donner . . . before the war, in Soho, you were always making plans to smuggle a live ostrich into the Royal Academy; and now look at you. In Zurich in 1915 you told Tarzan he was too conservative.
DONNER: Tarzan?
BEAUCHAMP: I don't mean Tarzan. Who do I mean? Similar name, conservative, 1915 . . .
DONNER: Tsar Nicholas?
BEAUCHAMP: No, no, Zurich.
DONNER: I remember Zurich . . . after our walking tour. God, what a walk! You were crazy, Beauchamp, you and your horse.
BEAUCHAMP: I'll never forget it. That really was a walk. When we got to Zurich; my boots were worn to paper. Sat in the Café Rousseau and put my feet up, ordered a lemon squash.
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donner: The Café Rousseau was Monte Carlo later.
beauchamp: Monte Carlo was the Café Russe.
donner: Was it?
beauchamp: Put my feet up and ordered a citron pressé in the Café Rousseau.
donner: Still doesn't sound right.
beauchamp: Couldn't have it—no lemons. The waiter was very apologetic. No lemons because of the war, he said. Good God, I said, is Switzerland at war?—things have come to a pretty pass, is it the St. Bernard?—Not a smile. Man at the next table laughed out loud and offered me a glass of squash made from lemon powder, remarking, 'If lemons don't exist, it is necessary to invent them.' It seemed wittier at the time, I don't know why.
donner: Voltaire!—of course, the Café Voltaire!
beauchamp: That was a rum bird.
donner: Voltaire?
beauchamp: No, Lenin.
beauchamp: Very liberal with his lemon powder but a rum bird nevertheless. Edith saw through him right away. She said to him, 'I don't know what you're waiting for but it's not going to happen in Switzerland.' Of course, she was absolutely right.
donner: Edith was never in Switzerland. Your memory is playing you up again.
beauchamp: Oh yes she was.
donner: Not that time. That time was Hugo Ball and Hans Arp, Max, Kurt, André—Picabia—Tristan Tzara—
beauchamp: That was him!
donner: What was?
beauchamp: Conservative. But he had audacity. Wrote his name in the snow, and said, 'There! . . . I think I'll call it The Alps.'
donner: That was Marcel. He used to beat Lenin at chess. I think he had talent under all those jokes. He said to me, 'There are two ways of becoming an artist. The first way is
to do things by which is meant art. The second way is to make art mean the things you do.' What a stroke of genius! It made anything possible and everything safe!—safe from criticism, since our art admitted no standards outside itself; safe from comparison, since it had no history; safe from evaluation, since it referred to no system of values beyond the currency it had invented. We were no longer accountable. We were artists by mutual agreement.
beauchamp: So was everyone from Praxiteles to Rodin. There's nothing divine about classical standards; it's just a bigger club.
donner: It seems there is something divine about modern art nonetheless, for it is only sustained by faith. That is why artist have become as complacent as priests. They do not have to demonstrate their truths. Like priests they demand our faith that something is more than it appears to be—bread, wine, a tin of soup, a twisted girder, a mauve square, a meaningless collection of sounds on a loop of tape . . .

(This is said so bitterly that—)
beauchamp: Donner . . . what happened?—what did Martello say to you?
donner: It really doesn't matter. And how do I know he wasn't lying, just getting his own back?—you see, I damaged his figure, slightly . . . He was working on it—I didn't know what it was—And I brought him a cup of tea—

Flashback

(Martello is scraping and chipping, and clicking his tongue, and scraping again. He sighs.)
donner: That's it—help yourself to sugar.
martello: I'm not getting any. She's set too hard.
donner: Knock off one of her nipples.
martello: I'd need a chisel.
donner: Wait a minute. I'll tilt her over. Get the breast into your cup, and I'll stir her around a bit.
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

MARTELLO: What a ridiculous business. How am I going to sprinkle her on my cornflakes?

DONNER: Starving peasants don't have cornflakes. Good God, Martello, if they had any corn do you think they'd turn it into a sunshine breakfast for figure-conscious typists?

MARTELLO: What the hell are you talking about? What starving peasants? Honestly, Donner, you go from one extreme to the other. On the whole I preferred your ceramic sugar lumps.

DONNER: No, I got the whole thing back to front with my ceramic food. Of course, ceramic bread and steak and strawberries with plaster-of-paris cream defined the problem very neatly, but I was still avoiding the answer. The question remained: how can one justify a work of art to a man with an empty belly? The answer, like all great insights, was simple: make it edible.

MARTELLO: Brilliant.

DONNER: It came to me in my—incidentally, is it you who keeps using my face-cloth to clean the tub?

MARTELLO: No. It must be Beauchamp.

DONNER: That man has absolutely no respect for property.

MARTELLO: I know. And he's taken to hiding the marmalade.

DONNER: Do you happen to know where it is?

MARTELLO: In the pickle jar.

DONNER: Cunning devil! Thank you.

MARTELLO: The olive oil is really honey.

DONNER: Incredible. It probably came to him in his bath, while he was using your flannel.

DONNER: Where is he?

MARTELLO: He went out to get some more sugar, out of his own money. I wonder where he'll hide it.

DONNER: Let him. Sugar art is only the beginning.

MARTELLO: It will give cubism a new lease of life.

DONNER: Think of Le Penseur sculpted in...

MARTELLO: Cold rice pudding.

DONNER: Salt. Think of poor villages getting a month's supply of salt in the form of classical sculpture!

MARTELLO: And not just classical!—your own pieces, reproduced indelibly yet edible——

DONNER: Think of pizza pies raised to the level of Van Gogh sunflowers!—think of a whole new range of pigments, from salt to liqueur!

MARTELLO: Your signed loaves of bread reproduced in sculpted dough, baked... your ceramic steaks carved from meat! It will give opinion back to the intellectuals and put taste where it belongs. From now on the artist's palate——

DONNER: Are you laughing at me, Martello?

MARTELLO: Certainly not, Donner. Let them eat art.

DONNER: Imagine my next exhibition, thrown open to the hungry... You know, Martello, for the first time I feel free of that small sense of shame which every artist lives with. I think, in a way, edible art is what we've all been looking for.

MARTELLO: Who?

DONNER: All of us!—Breton!—Ernst!—Marcel—Max—you me—Remember how Pablo used to shout that the war had made art irrelevant?—well——

MARTELLO: Which Pablo?

DONNER: What do you mean, which Pablo?—Pablo!

MARTELLO: What, that one-armed waiter at the Café Suisse?

DONNER: Yes—the Café Russe—the proprietor, lost a leg at Verdun——

MARTELLO: God, he was slow, that Pablo. But it's amazing how you remember all the people who gave you credit... DONNER: He gave you credit because you had been at Verdun.

MARTELLO: That's true.

DONNER: It was a lie.

MARTELLO: Wasn't it? It must have been pretty close to Verdun, our route was right through that bit of country, remember it well.

DONNER: God yes, what a walk. You were crazy, Martello.

MARTELLO: I must have been, I suppose.

DONNER: Beauchamp was crazy too.

MARTELLO: Him and his horse.
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

DONNER: That was about the last really good time we had...
MARTELLO: You hated it.
DONNER: No.
MARTELLO: More than the war.
DONNER: That's what killed it for me. After that, being an artist made no sense. I should have stopped then. Art made no sense.
MARTELLO: Except for nonsense art. Pablo never understood the difference. He used to get so angry about his missing arm—
DONNER: (leg . . .)
MARTELLO: I can see him now—a tray in each hand, swearing . . . wait a minute—
DONNER: Leg.
MARTELLO: A tray in each leg—Are you deliberately trying to confuse me?
DONNER: He was right. He understood exactly. There wasn't any difference. We tried to make a distinction between the art that celebrated reason and history and logic and all assumptions, and our own dislocated anti-art of lost faith—but it was all the same insult to a one-legged soldier and the one-legged, one-armed, one-eyed regiment of the maimed. And here we are still at it, looking for another twist. Finally the only thing I can say in defence of my figure is that you can eat it.
MARTELLO: And of mine that you can smile at it. How do you like her?
DONNER: It looks like a scarecrow trying to be a tailor's dummy. Is it symbolic?
MARTELLO: Metaphorical.
DONNER: Why has she got straw on her head?
MARTELLO: Not straw—ripe corn. It's her hair. It was either ripe corn or spun gold, and I wouldn't know how to do that, it was bad enough getting the pearls for her teeth.
DONNER: They look like false teeth.
MARTELLO: Well of course they're artificial pearls. So are the rubies, of course. I know you'll appreciate her breasts.

ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

DONNER: Oh yes. Are they edible?
MARTELLO: Well, you're not supposed to eat them—I'm only using real fruit for the moment, and real feathers for her swan-like neck. I don't know how to do her eyes: stars seem somehow inappropriate... Would you have described them as dark pools, perhaps?
DONNER: Who?
MARTELLO: Well, Sophie of course.
DONNER: Are you telling me that that thing is supposed to be Sophie?
MARTELLO: Metaphorically.
DONNER: You cad, Martello!
MARTELLO: I beg your pardon?
DONNER: You unspeakable rotter! Is nothing sacred to you?
MARTELLO: Hold on, Donner, no offence intended.
DONNER: What right have you to sneer at her memory?—I won't allow it, damn you! My God, she had a sad enough life without having her beauty mocked in death by your contemptible artistic presumptions—(Thump! A pearl bounces . . .)
MARTELLO: Now steady on, Donner, you've knocked out one of her teeth.
DONNER (by now nearly weeping): Oh Sophie... I cannot think of beauty without remembering your innocent grace, your hair like . . .
MARTELLO: Ripe corn—
DONNER: Gold. Your tragic gaze—eyes like—
MARTELLO: Stars—
DONNER: Bottomless pools, and when you laughed—
MARTELLO: Teeth like pearls—
DONNER: It was like a silver bell whose sound parted your pale ruby lips—
MARTELLO: A silver bell!—yes!—behind her breasts—
DONNER: —were like—
MARTELLO: —ripe pears—
DONNER: Firm young apples—
MARTELLO: Pears—For heaven's sake control yourself, Donner,
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

those are real artificial pearls—
(Pearls bouncing—DONNER thumping, gasping . . .)

DONNER: Oh Sophie . . . I try to shut out the memory but it
needs only . . . a ribbon . . . a flower . . . a phrase of music
. . . a river flowing beneath ancient bridges . . . the scent of
summertime . . .
(Cliché Paris music, accordion . . .)

Flashback

(Keep music in. Fade.)

SOPHIE: I must say I won't be entirely sorry to leave Lambeth
—the river smells like a dead cat, and the accordionist
downstairs is driving me insane . . .
(SOPHIE is 22 and not at all bitter. Background is sound of
leather suitcase being snapped shut and strapped up by YOUNG
BEAUCHAMP who is in his mid-20s.)

If only someone would give him a job, elsewhere, even for a
few minutes. Or perhaps we could employ him to take
down our suitcases. He'd have to put his accordion down
for that. But then he'd probably whistle through his teeth.
I'm sorry to be so useless, darling . . . Are the others
downstairs? . . . Yes . . . that's them: it isn't awful to know
voices, instantly and certainly, by their shouts to the
waggoner five floors down . . . I wish that yours was the
only voice I knew that well. I like them well enough—they
are both kind, and your oldest friends, which is enough to
endear them . . . But I think now—forgive me—but I think
now—before it is too late . . . I think we ought not to go
with them, I think we ought to remain, just you and I . . .
Darling—please—Please don't do up the strap—say what
you think—it's not too late—Please say quickly, I heard
Banjo's feet across the hall, he'll be up in a moment . . .
(The strap-noise, surreptitious now, starts again.)
Please don't do it up! . . . not even slowly . . .
(Wan, affectionate, ironic.) I can hear the clothes you put on
in the morning . . . Your serge today, hear it and smell
it—with a cornflower out of the vase: I caught that the

ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

minute you put it in your buttonhole—do you sometimes
wonder whether I'm a witch . . .? I'm only your good
fairy, if you let me, and I want to stay here with you. I'll be
all right, after all this time, I'm confident now, I won't be
frightened, ever, even when you leave me here—and of
course you will be going out—often—to visit Mouse and
Banjo in their new studio—Please say.

BEAUCHAMP: Sophie . . . How can I say . . .?
(Door. YOUNG MARTELLO.)

MARTELLO: Hello . . . So—what news?

BEAUCHAMP: None.
(Violently pulls strap tight.)
I'll take this down. How's the waggon?

MARTELLO: All right, but I fear for the horse—bow-backed and
spindle-shanked.

BEAUCHAMP: I'll . . . come back.
(Door.)

SOPHIE: I'm sorry not to be helping. I have to sit by the
window and be look-out.

MARTELLO: (laughs openly): Oh, that's frightfully good. Always
making such good fun of yourself, Sophie . . .
(Accordion.)

SOPHIE: Perhaps there will be another accordionist waiting for
us across the river. And no doubt the smell will be much
the same on the left bank. But I shall like the Chelsea side
much better.

MARTELLO: It's a better class of people, of course. Even the
artists are desperately middle-class.

SOPHIE: I was thinking of the sunshine—we'll be facing south
on that bank, and we'll get the sun through our front
windows. I shall sit at my new post, with the sun on my
face, and imagine the view as Turner painted it. It probably
has not changed so very much, apart from the colours.
Don't you wish you could paint like Turner?—no, I'm
sorry, of course you don't, how stupid of me . . . Well, I
don't suppose Turner would have wished to paint like you.
He could have done, of course.
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

MARTELLO: Of course.
SOPHIE: But he would not have wished to.
MARTELLO: It would not have occurred to him to do so; I think that's really the point.
SOPHIE: Yes, I think it really is. What are you doing now?
MARTELLO: I'm not painting now. I'm making a figure.
SOPHIE: I really meant now—at this moment—what are you doing here?
MARTELLO: Oh. Well, I'm not actually doing anything now, just talking to you.
SOPHIE: Can you see a hamper anywhere?
MARTELLO: A hamper?—no.
SOPHIE: There ought to be one; for my shoes and handbags.
MARTELLO: Well, wait till Biscuit comes up—I think I can hear him on the stairs.
SOPHIE: No, that's Mouse. What silly schoolboy names. When will you stop using them?
MARTELLO: I suppose they are silly when you hear them—but we never hear them because they are merely our names...
I expect we shall stop using them when we are very old and painting like Landseer.
SOPHIE: Not without lessons. I didn't mean to sound scornful, about your names. I'm nervous about moving.
MARTELLO: Yes. Of course.
SOPHIE: Nicknames are really very touching. Did you ever play the banjo?
MARTELLO: No. I was thought to be similarly shaped when young. Biscuit kept saying, 'Well, that takes the biscuit.'
SOPHIE: Yes, I know. And 'Mouse' because he enters quietly.
DONNER: Hello, Sophie.
(Pause.)
SOPHIE: What is going on? (Pause.) He told me about your figure.
MARTELLO: Did he?
SOPHIE: Only that you were doing one. What is it?
MARTELLO: Well, actually it's called 'The Cripple'. It's going to be a wooden man with a real leg.

ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

SOPHIE: A sort of joke.
MARTELLO: Yes.
SOPHIE: And will you actually use a real leg?
MARTELLO: Well, no, of course not. I shall have to make it.
SOPHIE: What will you make it of?
MARTELLO: Well, wood... of course.
(Pause.)
SOPHIE: How about a black-patch-man with a real eye——
MARTELLO: Sophie——
SOPHIE (breaks—bursts out): He doesn't know what to do with me, does he?—Well, what's going to happen?—you're all going, aren't you?
MARTELLO (quietly): Mouse is going to stay. Excuse me...
(Leaves, closes door.)
(Pause.)
SOPHIE (recovered): You're staying?
DONNER: Yes.
SOPHIE: Why?
DONNER: Either way it's what I want to do.
SOPHIE: Either way?
DONNER: If you're going with them, I don't want to live so close to you any more.
SOPHIE: If I'm going...
DONNER: Sophie, you know I love you... how long I've loved you...
SOPHIE: He wants me to stay? With you?
DONNER (cries out): Why do you want to go? (quietly) He's stopped caring for you. He only hurts you now, and I can't bear it. When he made you happy I couldn't bear it, and now that he hurts you I... just can't bear it——
SOPHIE: Does he love someone else?
DONNER: He hasn't got anyone else.
SOPHIE: That isn't what I asked. Does he love that poet—that educated Bohemian with the private income?—He read me her poems, and then he stopped reading me her poems. I thought he must be seeing her.
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

DONNER: Only in company. I'm sure she doesn't think twice
about him——

SOPHIE: Is she going with him——?

DONNER: No—of course not! . . . It's not even a suitable place
to share like that—it's just one large attic room, the beds all
together and just cooking gear in the corner——

SOPHIE: He never intended that I should go.

DONNER: It really is most unsuitable. The bathroom is on the
landing below, with steep unprotected stairs—you could
fall—SOPHIE, you must stay here, you know it here—and I'll
abide by any terms——

SOPHIE: When was he going to tell me?

DONNER: Every day.

SOPHIE: Perhaps he was going to leave a note on the
mantelpiece. As a sort of joke.

DONNER: SOPHIE . . . I love you. I'll look after you.

SOPHIE: Yes, I know you would. But I can't love you back,
Mouse. I'm sorry, but I can't. I have lost the capability of
falling in love. The last image that I have of love is him
larking about in that gallery where you had your first
exhibition. 'Frontiers in Art'—what a lark you were, you
three, with your paintings of barbed wire fences and
signboards saying 'You are now entering Patagonia'—you
were such cards, weren't you? All of you merry, not at all
like artists but like three strapping schoolboy cricketers
growing your first pale moustaches. I liked you all very
much. I liked the way you roared with laughter at all your
friends. I never heard anything any of you said, and you
didn't take any notice of me at the back in my stiff frock
and ribbons and my awful thick glasses, but I liked you all
anyway, and bit by bit I couldn't stop looking at him, and
thinking, which one is he?—Martello? Beauchamp?
Donner? . . . It was quick: one moment the sick
apprehension of something irrevocable which I had not
chosen, and then he was the secret in the deep centre of my
life. I wouldn't have called it love myself, but it seems to be
the word that people use for it.

Flashback

(MARTELLO and SOPHIE are climbing stairs. Above them,
behind closed doors, the sound of a ping-pong game in progress.)

MARTHELLO: Quite a climb, I'm afraid . . . Five more steps up
now, and then turn left and that will be the top floor . . .

SOPHIE: It must be a lovely big room . . .

MARTHELLO: We each have our own room, actually, but we share
the drawing room—Left—jolly good show.

SOPHIE: I hear that ping-pong is quite the fad.

MARTHELLO: Is it really?—please allow me . . .

(Door. Ping-pong loud. The rally ends with a winning shot—
denoted by the hiatus where one has been led to expect, from the
rhythm, contact with the 'other' bat.)

SOPHIE: Good shot!

MARTHELLO: Gentlemen, I have the honour to present to you
Miss Farthingale.

(The ping-pong resumes.)

SOPHIE (disappointed): Oh.

MARTHELLO: My friends, as you know, are called Mr. Donner
and Mr. Beauchamp. Mr. Beauchamp is to your right, Mr.
Donner to your left.

(The ball hits the net: familiar sound of small diminishing
bounces on the table.)

SOPHIE: Bad luck.

MARTHELLO: They are not in fact playing ping-pong.

SOPHIE: Oh!

MARTHELLO: That is why they are momentarily taken aback.

Turn it off, Beauchamp.

(Cut ping-pong.)

SOPHIE: I'm sorry.

DONNER (hurriedly): How do you do?
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

BEAUCHAMP: How do you do?

MARTELLO: There's no point in sticking out your hands like that. Miss Farthingale is blind.

BEAUCHAMP: Really, Martello, you exceed the worst possible taste —

SOPHIE: But I am — blind as a bat, I'm afraid.

BEAUCHAMP: Oh. I'm sorry.

SOPHIE: Please don't mention it.

BEAUCHAMP: I will not, of course.

SOPHIE: Oh, mention it as much as you like. And please don't worry about saying 'you see' all the time. People do, and I don't mind a bit.

MARTELLO: Would you like to sit down, Miss Farthingale . . .

Please allow me . . .

SOPHIE: Oh, thank you . . . thank you so much. That is most comfortable. I hope no one will remain standing for me.

MARTELLO: Will you take tea?

SOPHIE: I should love some tea.

DONNER: We were just waiting for the kettle to boil.

MARTELLO: Indian or Singalese?

SOPHIE: I don't think I'd know the difference.

MARTELLO: Nobody does. That's why we only keep the one.

SOPHIE: And which one is that?

MARTELLO: I haven't the slightest idea.

DONNER: It's best Assam.

(Kettle whistles.)

SOPHIE: Is that the gramophone again?

DONNER: Excuse me.

(Kettle subsides.)

BEAUCHAMP: I have been making gramophone records of various games and pastimes.

SOPHIE: Is it for the blind?

BEAUCHAMP: Heavens, no. At least . . . the idea is you listen to the sounds with your eyes closed.

SOPHIE: It's very effective. I could have kept the score just by listening.

BEAUCHAMP: Yes! — you see — sorry! — I'm trying to liberalise the visual image from the limitations of visual art. The idea is to create images — pictures — which are purely mental . . . I think I'm the first artist to work in this field.

SOPHIE: I should think you are, Mr. Beauchamp.

BEAUCHAMP: The one you heard was my latest — Lloyd George versus Clara Bow.

SOPHIE: Goodness! However did you persuade them?

BEAUCHAMP: No, you see —

SOPHIE: Oh — of course! Of course I see. What a very good joke, Mr. Beauchamp.

BEAUCHAMP: Yes . . . Thank you. May I play you another? — it's very quiet.

SOPHIE: Please do.

(DONNER with tea tray.)

DONNER: There we are. How would you like your tea, Miss Farthingale?

MARTELLO: Perhaps you will do us the honour, Miss Farthingale?

DONNER: Banjo!

SOPHIE: Yes . . . Yes . . . I think so.

(Small sounds of her hands mapping the tea tray.)

Now.

(Tea in first. One cup. Two. Three. Four.)

You will all take milk?

('Yes please' etc. One. Two. Three. Four.)

Mr. Donner, how many lumps?

DONNER: Two please, Miss Farthingale . . .

(One. Two.)

DONNER: Thank you.

SOPHIE: Mr. Beauchamp?

BEAUCHAMP: None for me, thank you.

SOPHIE: Mr. Martello?

MARTELLO: And just one for me.

(One.)

SOPHIE: There we are.

(The men's tension breaks. They applaud and laugh.)

DONNER: I say, Miss Farthingale, you're an absolutely ripping girl.
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

SOPHIE: How very kind of you, Mr. Donner. Please do not think me 'fast' but I was no less struck by you and your friends. I thought you all very pleasant-looking and good humoured, and there was nothing I wished more than that I should find myself having tea with you all one day.

MARTELLO: I have not in fact explained to my friends . . .

SOPHIE: Oh, forgive me. I must have puzzled you. My late uncle, who was rather progressive in such things, took me to your opening day at the Russell Gallery last year.

(Pause.)

BEAUCHAMP: Forgive my asking . . . but do you often visit the art galleries?

SOPHIE: Not now, of course, Mr. Beauchamp, but I had not yet lost all of my sight in those days. Oh dear, I’m telling everything back to front.

MARTELLO: Miss Farthingale lives at the Blind School in Prince of Wales Drive. She happened to be sitting on a bench in the public garden next to the School when I walked by. She accosted me in a most shameless manner.

SOPHIE: Absolutely untrue!

MARTELLO: I have been twice to tea at the School since then. She always pours.

SOPHIE: I was in the park with my teacher, but she had left me for a few moments while she went down to the water to feed the ducks. When she looked back she saw a gentleman with a fixed grin and a raised hat staring at me in a most perplexed and embarrassed manner. By the time she returned to rescue me, it was too late.

DONNER: Too late?

SOPHIE: I heard this voice say, 'Forgive me, but haven’t we met before? My name is Martello.' Of course he’d never seen me before in his life.

MARTELLO: And she replied, 'Not the artist, by any chance?'

SOPHIE: 'I believe so,' he said, flattered I think.

MARTELLO: 'Frontiers in Art?' she asked. I was astonished. And invited to tea; with great firmness and without preamble. Now there you were shameless, admit it.

SOPHIE: Well, I lead such an uneventful life . . . I was naturally excited.

MARTELLO: I thought she was going to faint with excitement. The chaperone disapproved, even protested, but Miss Farthingale was possessed!

SOPHIE: Please, Mr. Martello . . .

BEAUCHAMP: Well, of course, the chaperone could see what you look like.

DONNER: You must have been very impressed by the exhibition, Miss Farthingale.

MARTELLO: Not by the exhibition at all! (A bit of a faux pas, perhaps.) I mean . . . it was Miss Farthingale’s opinion that the pictures were all frivolous and not very difficult to do.

BEAUCHAMP: She was absolutely right.

MARTELLO: As I was quick to explain to her. Why should art be something difficult to do? Why shouldn’t it be something very easy?

SOPHIE: But surely it is a fact about art—regardless of the artist’s subject or his intentions—that it celebrates a world which includes itself—I mean, part of what there is to celebrate is the capability of the artist.

MARTELLO: How very confusing.

SOPHIE: I think every artist willy-nilly is celebrating the impulse to paint in general, the imagination to paint something in particular, and the ability to make the painting in question.

MARTELLO: Goodness!

SOPHIE: The more difficult it is to make the painting, the more there is to wonder at. It is not the only thing, but it is one of the things. And since I do not hope to impress you by tying up my own shoelace, why should you hope to have impressed me by painting a row of black stripes on a white background? Was that one of yours?

MARTELLO: I don’t recall it—you asked me about it when we met.

SOPHIE: So I did. Perhaps one of your friends remembers it—black railings on a field of snow?
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

MARTELLO: Let me answer for them nonetheless. You seem to forget, or perhaps you do not know, that what may seem very difficult to you may be very easy for the artist. He may paint a perfect apple as easily as you tie your shoelace, and as quickly. Furthermore, anybody could do it—yes, I insist: painting nature, one way or another, is a technique and can be learned, like playing the piano. But how can you teach someone to think in a certain way—to paint an utterly simple shape in order to ambush the mind with something quite unexpected about that shape by hanging it in a frame and forcing you to see it, as it were, for the first time—

DONNER: Banjo ...

MARTELLO: And what, after all, is the point of excellence in naturalistic art—? How does one account for, and justify, the very notion of emulating nature? The greater the success, the more false the result. It is only when the imagination is dragged away from what the eye sees that a picture becomes interesting.

SOPHIE: I think it is chiefly interesting to the artist, and to those who respond to a sense of the history of art rather than to pictures. I don’t think I should much miss what is to come, from what I know, and I am glad that I saw much of the pre-Raphaelites before my sight went completely. Perhaps you know Ruskin’s essay, the one on—

BEAUCHAMP: I say, Miss Farthingale—are you wearing blue stockings?

SOPHIE: I don’t know, Mr. Beauchamp. Am I? Whatever happened to the game you were going to play me?

BEAUCHAMP: Oh, it’s been on. I’ll turn the record over for the continuation.

DONNER: You know ... I think I do remember you.

BEAUCHAMP: Now, now, Mouse.

DONNER: A girl—with spectacles, and a long pig-tail I think.

SOPHIE: Yes!

DONNER: I believe we exchanged a look!

ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

SOPHIE: Perhaps we did. Tell me, Mr. Donner—which one were you?

DONNER: Which one?

SOPHIE: Yes. I have a picture in my mind of the three of you but I never found out, and was too shy at the time to ask, which was Donner, and which Beauchamp, and which Martello. I asked my uncle afterwards, but although he knew which of you was which, I was unable to describe you with enough individuality ...

DONNER: Shame, Miss Farthingale!

SOPHIE: Well, you were all fair, and well built. None of you had a beard or jug ears—and if you remember you were all wearing your army uniforms, all identical ...

MARTELLO: Yes, it was a sort of joke. We had not been long back from France.

BEAUCHAMP: Late going, late returning.

SOPHIE: A few months later my blindness descended on me, and the result is that I do not know which of your voices goes with the face that has stayed in my mind—that is, all three faces, of course.

(Pause.)

BEAUCHAMP: Is it that you remember one of our faces particularly, Miss Farthingale?

SOPHIE: Well, yes, Mr. Beauchamp.

BEAUCHAMP: Oh.

SOPHIE: I mean, I thought you were all engaging.

BEAUCHAMP: But one of us more engaging than the others.

MARTELLO: Ah. Well, we shall never know!

DONNER: Oh!, but it was my eye you caught.

SOPHIE: As a matter of fact, there is a way of ... satisfying my curiosity. There was a photographer there, for one of the illustrated magazines ...

DONNER: The Tatler.

SOPHIE: No, there was no photograph in the Tatler, I happened to see ... but this man posed each of you against a picture you had painted.

MARTELLO: I see. And you want to know which of us was the
one who posed against the painting you have described.
SOPHIE: Well, yes. It would satisfy my curiosity. It was a
background of snow, I think.
DONNER: Yes, there was a snow scene. Only one.
SOPHIE: A field of snow, occupying the whole canvas—
MARTELLO: Not the whole canvas—
SOPHIE: No—there was a railing—
BEAUCHAMP: Yes, that’s it—a border fence in the snow!
SOPHIE: Yes! (Pause.) Well, which of you . . . ?
DONNER: It was Beauchamp you had in mind.
SOPHIE: Mr. Beauchamp!
BEAUCHAMP: Yes, Miss Farthingale . . . It seems it was me.
(Pause.)
SOPHIE (brightly): Well, is anybody ready for some more tea?
MARTELLO: I will replenish the pot.
(Pause.)
(GRAMOPHONE: ‘Check.’)
SOPHIE: Oh!—is it chess, Mr. Beauchamp?
BEAUCHAMP: It is. Lenin versus Jack Dempsey.
SOPHIE: Oh, that’s very good. But do you no longer paint?
BEAUCHAMP: No. Nobody will be painting in fifty years.
Except Donner, of course.
SOPHIE: Well, I hope you will paint beauty, Mr. Donner, and
the subtlest beauty is in nature.
BEAUCHAMP: Oh, please don’t think that I am against beauty,
or nature, Miss Farthingale. Indeed, I especially enjoy the
garden where you met Martello, a most delightful prospect
across the river, isn’t it?—I mean—
SOPHIE: You are quite right, Mr. Beauchamp. It is a delightful
prospect, for me too. It is only my sight I have lost. I enjoy
the view just as much as anyone who sits there with eyes
closed in the sun; more, I think, because I can improve on
reality, like a painter, but without fear of contradiction.
Indeed, if I hear hoofbeats, I can put a unicorn in the
garden and no one can open my eyes against it and say it
isn’t true.
MARTELLO (returning): To the Incas, who had never seen a
horse, unicorns had the same reality as horses, which is a
very high degree of reality.—Listen! Miss Farthingale, is
that a hansom or a landau?
(Carriage in the street below.)
SOPHIE: Eight hooves, Mr. Martello, but it’s not a landau for all
that. Those are shire horses, probably a brewer’s dray.
MARTELLO (at window): A brewer’s dray as I live!—More
games!
BEAUCHAMP: I say—that has suddenly brought to mind—do
you remember—?
MARTELLO: Yes—I was just thinking the same thing—
BEAUCHAMP: Beauchamp’s Tenth Horse!
Flashback

(Clip-clop . . . BEAUCHAMP’s Horse. Flies buzzing in the
heat. Feet walking.)
BEAUCHAMP (declaiming): Art consists of constant surprise. Art
should never conform. Art should break its promises. Art is
nothing to do with expertise: doing something well is no
excuse for doing the expected. My God, this is fun. All my
life I have wanted to ride through the French countryside in
summer, with my two best friends, and make indefensible
statements about art. I am most obliged to you, Martello. I
am delighted to know you, Donner. How do you like my
horse?
MARTELLO: Beautiful, your Majesty.
DONNER: Very nice. Why don’t you give it a rest?
BEAUCHAMP: Mouse is a bit mousey today. You should have
invested in a horse. It makes an enormous difference. In fact
I have never felt so carefree. When we are old and doddery
and famous and life is given over to retrospection and
retrospectives, this is as far back as I want memory to go—
(Smack!)
I’ve never been so hot . . . and the flies . . .
(Smack!)
Are we nearly there?
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

MARTELLO: Nearly where?
DONNER: How do I know?
BEAUCHAMP: Secondly!—how can the artist justify himself in the community? What is his role? What is his reason?—Donner, why are you trying to be an artist?
DONNER: I heard there were opportunities to meet naked women.
BEAUCHAMP: Donner is feeling cynical.
DONNER: I had never seen a naked woman, and the way things were going I was never likely to. My family owned land.
BEAUCHAMP: Interesting line of thought; don’t pretend to follow it myself. I repeat—how can the artist justify himself? The answer is that he cannot, and should stop boring people with his egocentric need to try. The artist is a lucky dog. That is all there is to say about him. In any community of a thousand souls there will be nine hundred doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good, and one lucky dog painting or writing about the other nine hundred and ninety-nine. Whoa, boy, whoa . . .
DONNER: Oh, shut up.
BEAUCHAMP: I don’t know what to call him.
MARTELLO: I’ve had the most marvellous idea.
DONNER: So have I.
MARTELLO: A portrait . . . an idealization of female beauty, based on the Song of Solomon.
BEAUCHAMP: I don’t get it.
DONNER: My idea is that next year we should go on a motoring tour, and if we can’t afford a car we should stay at home.
MARTELLO: You were dead keen about a walking tour, Mouse.
DONNER: Well, I like some parts more than others. The part I liked best was the first part when we planned our route, sitting by the fire at home with a cup of cocoa and a map of France. If you remember, we decided to make the journey in easy stages, between one charming village and the next . . . setting off each morning after a simple breakfast on a terrace overhung with vines, striking out cross-country along picturesque footpaths, occasionally forcing a laughing brook, resting at midday in the shade, a picnic, perhaps a nap, and then another little walk to a convenient inn . . . a hot bath, a good dinner, a pipe in the tap-room with the honest locals, and so to bed with a candle and a good book, to sleep dreamlessly—
(Smack!)
take that you little devil!
BEAUCHAMP (hooves skittering): Whoa—whoa—Try not to startle my mount, Donner.
DONNER: Oh, shut up, Biscuit. I’m bitten all day by French flies and at night the mosquitoes take over. I nearly drowned trying to cross a laughing torrent, the honest locals have stolen most of our money so that we have had to sleep rough for three days, I’ve had nothing to eat today except for half a coconut, and as for the picturesque footpaths—oh God, here they bloody come again!
(Improbably, a convoy of rattletrap lorries roars past. Between their approach and their decline, nothing else is audible. At the end of it, BEAUCHAMP’S horse is skittering about.)
BEAUCHAMP: Steady, steady . . . good boy . . .
MARTELLO: Tell you what—give Mouse a go on the horse.
BEAUCHAMP: No. This horse only believes in me. What an animal!—I’ve had nine horses at various times counting my first pony, but none has been remotely like this one . . .
Absolutely no trouble, and he gives me a magical feeling of confidence. My spirits lift, the road slips by . . . What shall I call him?
DONNER: Where are we, Banjo? Do you know?
MARTELLO: More or less.
DONNER: Well?
MARTELLO: There’s a discrepancy between the map and the last signpost.
DONNER: There hasn’t been a signpost since this morning. Perhaps they’re uprooting them.
(More lorries.)
BEAUCHAMP: Steady, steady . . .
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

DONNER: For God's sake, Beauchamp, will you get rid of that coconut!

BEAUCHAMP: Coconut—not a bad name. And yet it lacks a certain something. Would Napoleon have called his horse Coconut? . . . Napoleon . . . not a bad name.

DONNER: Apart from anything else, it's becoming increasingly clear that we should have stayed at home because of the international situation.

MARTELLO: What international situation?

DONNER: The war.

MARTELLO: What war? You don't believe any of that rot. Why should there be a war? Those Middle Europeans are always assassinating each other.

DONNER: That's the fourth lot of troop lorries we've met today, and we haven't seen a newspaper all week.

MARTELLO: The French are an excitable people.

DONNER: But they weren't French, they were German.

MARTELLO: Rubbish.

DONNER: Yes they were.

MARTELLO: Where's that bloody map? Biscuit, were those lorries French or German?

BEAUCHAMP: I don't know, Banjo. One lorry is much like another.

MARTELLO: I mean the soldiers. Donner says they were German.

BEAUCHAMP: How does one tell?

MARTELLO: Well, Donner?

DONNER: The uniforms.

MARTELLO: The uniforms. Well, don't worry. They're going in the opposite direction. By the time they get to Paris we'll be in Switzerland.

DONNER: Do you seriously expect me to walk to Switzerland? You're crazy, Martello.

(Muffled distant explosion; field gun.)

MARTELLO: Quarrying.

BEAUCHAMP: All right, Napoleon, easy, boy . . .

DONNER: Beauchamp's crazy too.

(Explosion, repeat.)

ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

BEAUCHAMP: I know!—I'll call him Beauchamp's Tenth Horse!—He will be the phantom cavalry that turns the war—now you see him, now you don't—he strikes, and is gone, his neigh lost on the wind, he leaves no hoofprints; there is only the sound of his hooves on the empty road—He's not physical—he's not metaphysical—he's pataphysical—apocalyptic, clifhaptic, Beauchamp's Tenth!—Here it comes—!!!

(A squadron of Cavalry gallops in quickly to occupy the foreground with a thunder of hooves; and recedes, leaving the men stunned and sobered.)

MARTELLO: Good Christ.

DONNER: Now do you believe me? They were German cavalry.

BEAUCHAMP: He's right.

MARTELLO: We must have got too far east. Don't worry—good God, if a man can't go for a walk on the Continent nowadays, what is the world coming to? Come on; I see there's a fork in the road—judging by the sun the right fork is the Swiss one.

(Explosion.)

Take no notice.

DONNER: Look, what's that?

MARTELLO: What?—Ah. Men digging a ditch.

BEAUCHAMP: Soldiers.

MARTELLO: It is not unusual for soldiers to do such work in France. Or Germany. The main thing is to ignore them.

BEAUCHAMP: That's quite a ditch.

MARTELLO: Isn't it? Laying pipes, I shouldn't wonder.

BEAUCHAMP: Would you call that a trench?

MARTELLO: Take no notice.

DONNER: We'll probably be interned. I hope they'll do it with some kind of transport.

MARTELLO: Beautiful bit of country, this. The road is climbing. That's a good sign. Come on, Biscuit. What happened to your Tenth Horse?

BEAUCHAMP: My feet are swelling visibly—Good lord!

(A shock.)
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

MARTELLA (talking up and out): Good morning!
BEAUCHAMP (ditto): Bonjour!
DONNER: Gut'n tag...
(Pause.)
BEAUCHAMP (whisper): That was a field gun!
MARTELLA: My dear chap, it's nothing to do with us. These
Continentalists are always squabbling over their frontiers.
DONNER: How are we going to get back?
BEAUCHAMP: By train. I shall telegraph for money.
DONNER: There won't be any trains!
BEAUCHAMP: Then I shall wait at the station until there are.
DONNER: They might think we're spies... and kill us. That
would be ridiculous. I don't want to die ridiculously.
BEAUCHAMP: All deaths in war are ridiculous.
MARTELLA: Now look here, you two, you're talking like
tenderfeet. I am older than you; I have a little more
experience. I have studied the European situation minutely,
and I can assure you that there will be no war, at least not
this year. You forget I have an Uncle Rupert in the War
Office. I said to my uncle, when they shot that absurd
Archduke Ferdinand of Ruritania, Uncle!, I said, does this
mean war?—must I postpone the walking tour which I and
my friends have been looking forward to since the winter?!
My boy, he said—go! go with my personal assurance.
There will be no war for the very good reason that His
Majesty's Government is not ready to go to war, and it will
be six months at least before we are strong enough to beat
the French.
DONNER: The French?
MARTELLA: Go and walk your socks off, my uncle said, and
then take the waters-waters at Baden-Baden, to which my
auntie added, perhaps that will cure you of all that artistic
nonsense with which you waste your time and an expensive
education. You live in a sane and beautiful world, my
auntie said, and the least you can do, if you must be a
painter, is to paint appropriately sane and beautiful
pictures. Which reminds me—I've stopped being auntie
now, by the way—I was going to tell you about my next work,
a beautiful woman, as described in the Song of Solomon...
(Explosions build.)
I shall paint her navel as a round goblet which wanteth not
liquor, her belly like a field of wheat set about with lilies,
Nee, her two breasts will be like two young roes that are
twins, her neck as a tower of ivory, and her eyes will be like
the fishponds in Hebden by the gate of Bath-rabbim, her
nose like the tower of Lebanon which looketh towards
Damascus... Behold she will be fair! My love will have
her hair as a flock of goats that appear from Mount Gilead,
her teeth like a flock of sheep that are even shorn... I
shall paint her lips like a thread of scarlet!, and her temples
will be like a piece of pomegranate within her locks...!
(Explosions.)

End of Flashback

(The three young men are chanting out directions, sometimes in
unison, sometimes just one or two voices.)

ALL THREE: Left!... left... right... left... right...
right... turn... right a bit... left a bit... turn...
left... turn... stop!

DONNER: Well?
SOPHIE: I am exactly where I started, standing with my back to
my chair.
DONNER: Are you quite sure of that, Miss Farthingale?
SOPHIE (sighs): There!
(Gasps; laughs.)
BEAUCHAMP: You win—but we might have moved the chair.
SOPHIE: I assumed that you would move it back if necessary, or
at least catch me in your arms.
BEAUCHAMP: Yes, you may be sure of that.
DONNER: Indeed, yes. In fact, why don't we do it again?
SOPHIE: Not this time, Mr. Donner. I've stayed much longer
than I intended, and I don't want them to worry about me
at the school.
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

BEAUCHAMP: Then we'll walk back with you.

SOPHIE: Thank you. But there is really no need to trouble you all.

BEAUCHAMP: I should like to.

SOPHIE: Well, if you would like to, Mr. Beauchamp.

DONNER: We would all like to.

SOPHIE: Goodness, I will raise their eyebrows—oh! (She has knocked over the tea-table.)

BEAUCHAMP: Martello!—you moved the tea things!

SOPHIE: I'm so sorry—how clumsy—

BEAUCHAMP: It wasn't your fault one bit—please get up—really—There!—oh—

SOPHIE: What is it?

BEAUCHAMP: Only that you are wearing blue stockings!

(SOPHIE and BEAUCHAMP laugh.)

MARTELLO: You seem to be in very good hands, Miss Farthingale. I'm sure you don't want to be accompanied by a whole gang of people, so permit me to say good-bye, and I hope that you will come again.

SOPHIE: Oh, Mr. Martello—of course. Thank you so much again. And good-bye to you both.

DONNER: Oh . . . Good-bye, Miss Farthingale.

MARTELLO: I hope Mr. Beauchamp will not leave you without inviting you to dinner.

BEAUCHAMP: Wouldn't dream of it.

SOPHIE: I should love to come to dinner. Oh—and there will be no need to dress . . . Come then, Mr. Beauchamp . . . may I hold your hand on the stairs?

BEAUCHAMP: If we are going to hold hands, I think I ought to know your name.

SOPHIE: It's Sophie.

DONNER: Don't fall . . .

BEAUCHAMP: I won't!

(Their laughter receding down the stairs.)

DONNER (close, quiet): Don't fall.

(Door closes on the laughter.)

ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

End of Flashback

(Faint accordion as before. Feet descending the stairs, starting outside the closed door of the room, and getting fainter with each succeeding floor. They are still faintly audible at the very bottom, and the last sound, just audible, is the front door slamming. This whole business probably takes half a minute. After the slam, SOPHIE speaks close up.)

SOPHIE: I feel blind again. I feel more blind than I did the first day, when I came to tea. I shall blunder about, knocking over the occasional table.

(Cries out.) It's not possible!—What is he thinking of?—What are you thinking of, Mouse? . . . We can't live here like brother and sister. I know you won't make demands of me, so how can I make demands of you? Am I to weave you endless tablemats and antimacassars in return for life? . . . And is the servant girl to be kept on? I cannot pay her and I cannot allow you to pay her in return for the privilege of reading to me in the evenings. And yet I will not want to be alone, I cannot live alone, I am afraid of the dark; not my dark, the real dark, and I need to know that it's morning when I wake or I will fear the worst and never believe in the dawn breaking—who will do that for me? . . . And who will light the fire; and choose my clothes so the colours don't clash; and find my other shoe; and do up my dress at the back? You haven't thought about it. And if you have then you must think that I will be your lover. But I will not. I cannot. And I cannot live with you knowing that you want me—Do you see that? . . . Mouse? Are you here? Say something. Now, don't do that, Mouse, it's not fair—please, you are here . . . Did you go out? Now please don't . . . How can I do anything if I can't trust you—I beg you, if you're here, tell me. What do you want? Are you just going to watch me?—standing quietly in the room—sitting on the bed—on the edge of the tub—Watch me move about the room, grieving, talking to myself, sleeping, washing, dressing, undressing, crying?—Oh no, there is no way now—I won't—I won't—I won't—no, I won't . . . !
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

(Glass panes and wood smash violently. Silence. In the silence, hoofbeats in the street, then her body hitting, a horse neighing.)

End of Flashback

MARTELLO: She would have killed you, Donner. I mean if she’d fallen a yard to the right. Brained you or broken your back, as you waved us good-bye. I remember I heard the glass go and looked up, but my mind seized and I shouted 'Look out' after she hit. I wouldn’t have saved you. Beauchamp said she fell, an accident, otherwise why didn’t she open the window, he said. I don’t know, though. Why should she have behaved rationally to fulfil an irrational impulse? 'This tragic defenestration,' the coroner said. I remember that. Pompous fool, I thought. But I suppose he looked on it as a rare chance to use the word. It's an odd word to exist, defenestration, isn't it? I mean when you consider the comparatively few people who have jumped or been thrown from windows to account for it. By the way, I'm still missing one of her teeth, can you see it anywhere?—a pearl, it could have rolled under the cupboard... Yes, why isn't there a word, in that case, for people being pushed downstairs or stuffed up chimneys...? De-escalate is a word, I believe, but they don't use it for that. And, of course, influence. He was bodily in-fluenced. That's a good idea; let's cheer ourselves up by inventing verbs for various kinds of fatality—

DONNER: Martello, will you please stop it.

(Pause.)

MARTELLO: Oh, there it is.

DONNER: Her teeth were broken too, smashed, scattered...

MARTELLO: Donner! If there is anything to be said it's not that. Fifty years ago we knew a nice girl who was due for a sad life, and she jumped out of a window, which was a great shock and certainly tragic, and here we are, having seen much pain and many deaths, none of them happy, and no doubt due for our own one way or another, and then we will have caught up on Sophie's fall, all much of a

muchness after a brief delay between the fall of one body and another—

DONNER: No, no, each one is vital and every moment counts—what other reason is there for trying to work well and live well and choose well? I think it was a good life lost—she would have been happy with me.

MARTELLO: Well, Beauchamp thought the same, but they were only happy for a year or two. How can you tell? A blind mistress is a difficult proposition.

DONNER: I would have married her without question.

MARTELLO: Well, yes, perhaps one made the wrong choice.

DONNER: There was no choice. She fell in love with him at first sight. As I did with her, I think. After that, even when life was at its best there was a small part missing and I knew that I was going to die without ever feeling that my life was complete.

MARTELLO: Is it still important, Donner? Would it comfort you if you thought, even now, that Sophie loved you?

DONNER: I can never think that, but I wish I could be sure that she had some similar feeling for me.

MARTELLO: Did you ever wonder whether it was she you loved?

DONNER: No, of course not. It was Beauchamp.

MARTELLO: To us it was Beauchamp, but which of us did she see in her mind's eye...?

DONNER: But it was Beauchamp—she remembered his painting, the snow scene.

MARTELLO: Yes. She asked me whether I had painted it within five minutes of meeting me in the garden that day; she described it briefly, and I had an image of black vertical railings, like park railings, right across the canvas, as though one were looking at a field of snow through the bars of a cage; not like Beauchamp's snow scene at all.

DONNER: But it was the only snow scene.

MARTELLO: Yes, it was, but—I promise you, Donner, it was a long time afterwards when this occurred to me, when she was already living with Beauchamp—

DONNER: What occurred to you, Martello?
ARTIST DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

MARTELO: Well, your painting of the white fence—
DONNER: White fence?
MARTELO: Thick white posts, top to bottom across the whole canvas, an inch or two apart, black in the gaps—
DONNER: Yes, I remember it. Oh God.
MARTELO: Like looking at the dark through the gaps in a white fence.
DONNER: Oh my God.
MARTELO: Well, one might be wrong, but her sight was not good even then.
DONNER: Oh my God.
MARTELO: When one thinks of the brief happiness she enjoyed... well, we thought she was enjoying it with Beauchamp but she was really enjoying it with you. As it were.
DONNER: Oh my God.
MARTELO: Of course, it was impossible to say so, after she got off on the right foot with Beauchamp—I mean, one couldn’t—
DONNER: Oh my God!
MARTELO: Now, steady on, Donner, or I’ll be sorry I mentioned it—
DONNER: Oh my God...

End of flashback

(Smack!)
BEAUCHAMP: Missed him again! (Pause.) All right, don’t tell me then.

(BEAUCHAMP’s TAPE: snap crackle pop...)
Fascinating, isn’t it? Layer upon layer of what passes for silence, trapped from an empty room—no, trowled—no, like—no matter! I know that in this loop of tape there is some truth about how we live, Donner. These unheard sounds which are our silence stand as a metaphor—a correspondence between the limits of hearing and the limits of all knowledge: and whose silence is our hubbub?
DONNER: Are you going out, Beauchamp? I’d like to get on.

BEAUCHAMP: I have nothing to go out for.
DONNER: Get some fly-killer.
BEAUCHAMP: All right, if you’ll let me record a clean loop while I’m out. I don’t want you whistling and throwing things about when you can’t get the likeness right.
DONNER: I am getting it right.
BEAUCHAMP: Yes, she’s very good. May I make a small suggestion?
DONNER: No.
BEAUCHAMP: Her nipples were in fact—
DONNER: Get out!
BEAUCHAMP: Courtesy costs nothing. All right, I’ll see if Martello is in the pub, and I’ll be back in an hour or so.

(Changing tapes.)
There. Will you press the switch when I’m out of the door?
DONNER: Yes.
BEAUCHAMP: Promise?
DONNER: I promise, Beauchamp.
BEAUCHAMP: Poor Sophie. I think you’ve got her, Donner.

(BEAUCHAMP’s feet down the stairs. Open and close door. The fly starts to buzz. It comes close to the microphone and the sound is distorted slightly into a droning rhythm.)

End of Flashback

(The beginning of the DONNER TAPE. It is the same sound as made by the fly.)
MARTELO: I don’t want to hear it again.

(Cut TAPE.)
BEAUCHAMP: Now then. Let’s try looking at it backwards.
Coolly. Fact number one: Donner is lying at the bottom of the stairs, dead, with what looks to my untrained eye like a broken neck. Inference: he fell down the stairs. Fact number two: the balustrade up here is broken. Inference: Donner fell through it, as a result of, er, staggering and possibly slipping on what is undeniably a slippery floor, as a result of... Well, fact number three: the sounds which
correspond to these inferences were preceded by Donner crying out, preceded by a sort of thump, preceded by two quick footsteps, preceded by Donner remarking, unalarmed—I can't believe it of you, Martello!

(Pause.)

MARTELLO: Nor I of you, Beauchamp. (Pause.) Well, let's get him upstairs.

BEAUCHAMP: Hang on . . .

(Fly.)

That fly has been driving me mad. Where is he?

MARTELLO: Somewhere over there . . .

BEAUCHAMP: Right.

The original loop of tape is hereby reproduced:

(a) Fly droning.
(b) Careful footsteps approach. A board creaks.
(c) The fly settles.
(d) BEAUCHAMP halts.
(e) BEAUCHAMP: 'Ah! There you are.'
(f) Two more quick steps and then: Thump!

BEAUCHAMP: Got him!

(Laughs shortly.)

'As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods: they kill us for their sport.'

Now then.