INFORMATION TO USERS

This was produced from a copy of a document sent to us for microfilming. While the most advanced technological means to photograph and reproduce this document have been used, the quality is heavily dependent upon the quality of the material submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help you understand markings or notations which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or “target” for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is “Missing Page(s)”. If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting through an image and duplicating adjacent pages to assure you of complete continuity.

2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a round black mark it is an indication that the film inspector noticed either blurred copy because of movement during exposure, or duplicate copy. Unless we meant to delete copyrighted materials that should not have been filmed, you will find a good image of the page in the adjacent frame.

3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., is part of the material being photographed the photographer has followed a definite method in “sectioning” the material. It is customary to begin filming at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. If necessary, sectioning is continued again—beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.

4. For any illustrations that cannot be reproduced satisfactorily by xerography, photographic prints can be purchased at additional cost and tipped into your xerographic copy. Requests can be made to our Dissertations Customer Services Department.

5. Some pages in any document may have indistinct print. In all cases we have filmed the best available copy.
THE PLAYS OF TOM STOOPARD: RECOGNITION, EXPLORATION, AND RETREAT

The Ohio State University

Ph.D. 1980

University Microfilms International 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106

Copyright 1980 by Greiner, Patricia Ann

All Rights Reserved
PLEASE NOTE:

In all cases this material has been filmed in the best possible way from the available copy. Problems encountered with this document have been identified here with a check mark \( \checkmark \).

1. Glossy photographs 
2. Colored illustrations 
3. Photographs with dark background 
4. Illustrations are poor copy 
5. Print shows through as there is text on both sides of page 
6. Indistinct, broken or small print on several pages 
7. Tightly bound copy with print lost in spine 
8. Computer printout pages with indistinct print 
9. Page(s) \( \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \) lacking when material received, and not available from school or author
10. Page(s) \( 155 \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \) seem to be missing in numbering only as text follows
11. Poor carbon copy 
12. Not original copy, several pages with blurred type 
13. Appendix pages are poor copy 
14. Original copy with light type 
15. Curling and wrinkled pages 
16. Other

University Microfilms International
300 N. ZEEB RD., ANN ARBOR, MI 48106 (313) 761-4700
THE PLAYS OF TOM STOPPARD:
RECOGNITION, EXPLORATION, AND RETREAT

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

Patricia A. Greiner, B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University

1980

Reading Committee: Approved By
Mark S. Auburn
Katherine H. Burkman
Ernest Lockridge

Mark S. Auburn
Adviser
Department of English
I wish to acknowledge the encouragement and guidance I have received throughout my graduate studies from my adviser, Mark S. Auburn. I would also like to thank Grove Press for permission to quote from the works of Tom Stoppard, and Keith Miller, Coordinator of the University of Wyoming-Casper program, for his assistance in securing release time in which I completed this work. Finally, my gratitude and affection are due to my spouse, William C. Howard, Jr., who knew, most importantly, when to nudge and when not to.
VITA

November 26, 1953 ............... Born - Lancaster, Pennsylvania

1975 ........................ B.A. with High Honors and with Distinction in English, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware

1976 ........................ M.A., The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1976 - 1978 ................. Teaching Associate, Department of English, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1979 - present ............ Instructor, Department of English, University of Wyoming Academic Programs in Casper, Wyoming

PUBLICATION


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English

Studies in Drama. Professor Mark S. Auburn

Studies in Nineteenth-Century American Literature. Professor Thomas Cooley

Studies in Modern Literature. Professor John Muste

Studies in Applied English Linguistics. Professor Dudley Hascall
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. FIRST PLAY, MEDIA PLAYS, AND DETECTIVE FARCES</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD AND JUMPERS</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumpers</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. TRAVESTIES, DIRTY LINEN, EVERY GOOD BOY DESERVES</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAVOR, PROFESSIONAL FOUL, AND NIGHT AND DAY</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. STOPPARD'S ACHIEVEMENT</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Tom Stoppard's work easily fits some of the tenents laid down by Martin Esslin in his definitive work, The Theatre of the Absurd. In other ways, however, his plays are not strictly absurdist. Since a great portion of this critical analysis will concern the changing relationship between Stoppard's works and the body of work known as absurdist drama, I will begin by reviewing briefly the hallmarks of that form of drama and noting the points at which Stoppard converges with and diverges from the norm.

The greatest characteristic of absurdism is the rejection of traditional values, beliefs, and philosophies as illusory. The absurdist deny that man can understand any ultimate plan or meaning for life (if indeed such a plan should exist at all, an idea which they cast into doubt). Absurdist theatre thus tries to represent that such ideas as God, divinely inspired standards of behavior, later rewards for present good acts, and the assignment of human beings to a "proper role" are deceptions which man has foisted upon himself in an effort to create comfortable, reassuring, although fictional, living conditions.

Accompanying this fundamental recognition of absurdity, the lack of real meaning in human life, is a change in the way in which this perception is transmitted to others. Absurdists reject rationl,
logical argument as a tool, consigning rationality to the dustheap of illusions along with God and morality. Rather than constructing a step-by-step proof that the world is irrational, they attempt to convey that irrationality in poetic images, reaching the audience on an emotional rather than an intellectual level. This method of work forms the chief separation between the absurdists and such authors as Camus and Sartre, who held basically the same philosophical view of the world but tried to communicate it through logical means. When argument is rejected, language is devalued. The absurdists deny the traditional power of language to encompass the world, and they show it as inadequate to facilitate communication between people. Words become ritualistic, or nonsensical, or are used deviously, to confuse rather than enlighten.

Although rejection of tradition and of rationality are the prime requisites of absurdist theatre, Esslin has also listed its other frequent attributes. He asserts that absurdists are concerned with "the ultimate realities of the human condition, the relatively few fundamental problems of life and death, isolation and communication." Esslin further notes the lack of conventional linear plots, in which some problem is resolved or an awaited event actually takes place, and their replacement by a single moment expanded in time.

Characters in theatre of the absurd are not created with full grounds of motivations and drives; such a practice would imply that

---

human beings' acts can be understood in light of psychological factors, a direct contradiction of the first great rule of absurdity. This use or rather shallow characters adds to the feeling of inexplicable nonsense, as one wonders why the character acts as he or she does. It further aids in frustrating any tendency for the audience to identify with the characters. The alienation of audience from characters helps to keep a comic tone in the plays; if audiences were to see themselves too clearly in the characters on stage, a gloomy sense of purposelessness would be likely to result, rather than the black humor of observing characters with whom one does not identify undergoing such frustrations.

Tom Stoppard, in his published work through 1979, clearly accepts some of these provisions for absurdist theatre, rejects others, and adopts a shifting stance on yet others. The first and most important idea of absurdity, the rejection of traditional values and beliefs, is present in Stoppard's works. As Victor Cahn has shown, Stoppard's approach to this idea ranges from offering demonstrations if it to assuming it as a principle in the more complex worlds he creates. His characters are frequently in search of the meaning of life, but they never succeed in their quests.

On the second major trait of absurdism, Stoppard has shifted his stance over the years. His early plays seem to reject logic in favor of the potent image—Glad imprisoned at her microphone in If You're Glad I'll Be Frank, Albert in self-exile atop the bridge in Albert's Bridge, or Ros and Guil endlessly waiting for the explanation that never comes in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. When his early charac-
ters try to apply logic, they are caught up in its strands and hopelessly entangled (one thinks of Guil's growing confusion as he tries to determine the direction of the wind). Beginning with *Jumpers*, however, Stoppard shows an increasing reliance on argument to advance his points. In his most recent plays, rationality becomes the safe substitute for lost beliefs. Cahn has noted that when Stoppard presents characters seeking new coping strategies for an absurd world, reason is one of their chief comforts.² Jill Levenson made this same judgment on Stoppard's works when she compared his themes and ideas to those of Camus, as efforts to make the universe seem "reasonable and human" within the framework of absurdity.³

Stoppard's characters seem warm and sympathetic to some critics, while others agree that he practices the alienation of audience from character typical of absurdism. Gabriele S. Robinson locates the source of this alienation not so much in the characters as in the author's treatment of them. She observes that they struggle to order their world, but that the effort is treated farcically. This treatment, Robinson concludes, alienates the audience from the characters and precludes any sentimental reaction on the characters' eventual defeat.⁴ C. J. Giankaris, on the other hand, finds Stoppard's characters identifiable.

³Jill Levenson, "Views From a Revolving Door: Tom Stoppard's Canon to Date," *Queen's Quarterly*, 78 (Autumn 1971), p. 431.
Speaking of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, he notes that the title figures are presented sympathetically, and he finds in such characters a mixture of absurdism and humanism.5

Finally, Stoppard's plots have moved toward the more conventional as his concerns have shifted from Esslin's "ultimate realities" to more mundane problems. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was his last play to present the audience with more image than plot. *Jumpers* promises a conventional plot with its murder-mystery format, but the who-done-it question is never answered. With *Travesties* and its neat ending of marriages made and identities resolved comes the conventional plot, and the three latest plays by Stoppard certainly have linear structures. The concerns of the plays have also shifted from such things as death and morality to questions of political rights and the meaning of art. This shift in themes will be explored in greater depth throughout this analysis.

Perhaps the greatest indication that Stoppard is shifting away from the usual ideas and forms associated with theatre of the absurd is the fact that in his most recent plays, characters succeed in doing things. They do not discover the meaning of life, but they find that even in an absurd world where traditions have been revealed to be deceptions they must go on living. These last plays—*Every Good Boy Deserves Favor*, *Professional Foul*, and *Night and Day*—all focus on characters who attempt to find some guide for behavior in the absurd world. They turn to rationality and to emotional bonds with other people, and their triumphs are

small and perhaps fleeting. Nevertheless, they do survive and function, and that in itself is the major turning point in Stoppard's works, and perhaps in the absurdist movement in theatre.

Victor Cahn believes that Stoppard's universe of reduced-scale but solvable problems marks the future of absurdist theatre. Cahn uses Arnold P. Hinchliffe's directive to summarize the new development in absurdism he finds in Stoppard's works: "The theatre of Nothing, if it is to develop at all, will have to move to Something--whether the conventions and subjects are artistic, political, social or religious."^6

Cahn goes on to point out the progress of the absurd in Stoppard's works. Three steps can be seen in this progression. The first is the most closely related to the "classical" absurdist theatre. In such plays as Albert's Bridge, If You're Glad I'll Be Frank, and A Separate Peace, characters come to an awareness of at least some aspects of absurdity. These aspects include the lack of any order or plan in the world, a realization Albert makes and then attempts to take refuge from atop the railroad bridge which he endlessly paints. In If You're Glad I'll Be Frank, an equation between people and machines appears, as Glad is helplessly entombed alive as the voice of the speaking clock, despite all rescue attempts by her husband, Frank. John Brown, of A Separate Peace, abandons the traditional values of hard work, family ties, and responsibility for a life spent pursuing his own private vision of earthly perfection--ease, quiet and absolutely no responsibility, a life as a healthy hospital patient. In all of these plays, and several others

^6 Arnold P. Hinchliffe, quoted in Cahn, p. 22.
of Stoppard's shorter works, absurdism is recognized, either implicitly or explicity, as the characters find that the assumptions that they were brought up on fail to work for them. The dignity and sanctity of individual human beings, the concept of order and purpose in the world, ideas about morality, duty, and responsibility are all part of the enormous background of assumptions and traditions which the absurdist philosophy decries as illusions and deception. The world in these short plays is not presented as a completely absurdist vision—life still continues, people hold jobs, raise families, converse with others. Stoppard is not working in the featureless, soulless landscape of Beckett. When absurdity is recognized as a factor in life, rather than as the sole and unrelieved condition of life itself.

The second step in Stoppard's exploration of the absurd is just that—exploration. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers, recognition of absurdity is no longer the major action of the play. Rather, absurdity is a given. These plays remind one of the more "classical" absurdism, particularly Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. The worlds created in these plays are quite different from those which one knows. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead takes place in a featureless void, whose resemblance to the setting of Waiting for Godot has not gone unnoticed by many critics. Jumpers presents a bizarre future world in which the conventions or politics and military exploration, among others, have taken strange new turns. Both settings are sufficiently changed from what one knows and expects as to call into question all the familiar values. These are altered worlds; one cannot automatically make any assumptions based on the familiar world and expect them to hold. The characters join
the audience early on in this recognition of being set adrift. Having recognized their absurd state, they set about exploring it, determining what the properties of these strange new worlds are. The important difference between Ros and Guil and Didi and Gogo is that when the former set runs up against a wall, they do not continue to ram into that same wall until they knock themselves senseless. Instead, they turn and try another direction. They don't succeed, but that isn't what is important. Their action is one of sounding, testing limits, exploring. The same is true of George Moore and Sir Archie as they test their relative philosophies on the events around them.

This second step carries theatre of the absurd into an important new era. After all, no explorer ever grew famous and admired for saying, "Look, there's a cave over there." The person one admires is the one who takes compass and lantern and sets out to find and document where the cave goes, and what is inside. This is precisely what Stoppard, through his protagonists, does in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*. The findings may not be definite. Indeed, the questions which these two plays explore—how does one understand and deal with death or morality in a world stripped of traditional values—are never resolutely answered, but the act of exploration is a significant and courageous one, whether physical or intellectual.

The spelunking metaphor continues to be useful in describing the third step or Stoppard's absurdist progression. Picture the explorers' reporting back that the cave is enormous, mysterious, and perhaps dangerous. One is only likely to get lost wandering around in its depths. Nonetheless, there is a rather pleasant and dry room near the entrance
which could be outfitted as a comfortable bivouac. At least this part of the cave can be explored and more or less tamed. One can make one's peace with that portion. And so, although much of the cave remains unknown, the explorers find a way to exist in it safely and comfortably, although it means limiting their treks to a relatively small "safe area."

Stoppard achieves this sort of limited safety in relation to absurdity. When the depths of the great ambiguities prove to be unresolvable within his world, he turns instead to small, more limited, safer questions. How does one understand art or politics? What guidelines can a person use in making a certain, specified decision? Given that the old bases for such things are devalued, illusionary, what will people use as a new bases? For, as Hinchliffe said, one can only assume nothingness for so long. Coping strategies are what Stoppard's third phase is all about. Henry Carr in Travesties wrestles with the meaning of art and politics. Maddie Gotobed in Dirty Linen helps the Select Committee establish its new rules governing sexual behavior. In Every Good Boy Deserves Favor and Professional Foul, Alexander Ivanov and Anderson both make decisions about what allegiance they owe to the state and to their own individual ideals. The absurdity in these plays is not even a prominent given, as it was in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers. It is only a tacit assumption, manifested in the fact that these characters do not have recourse to any automatic assumptions or rules to dictate their behavior. They are forced to find their way through their problems for themselves.

In the last two groups of plays, Stoppard drifts away from the second great tenet of absurdist theatre as set forth by Esslin. His
plays do not use only absurd images to communicate absurdity. He follows more in the vein of Sartre and Camus, who retained elements of rationality in their approaches to the absurd. Stoppard's plays are nothing if not relentlessly rational explorations of the limits and meaning of absurdity. Particularly in Jumpers and the third phase plays, characters who recognize that old rules have been pulled out from under them place their faith largely in logic and reasoning as the new guidelines to follow in the absurd world. In this acceptance and dependence on rationality lies the greatest split between Stoppard's later works and the pure absurdist theatre.

Cahn finds Stoppard's drift toward the problem-solving play to be a sign of progression, a new development in modern theatre that signals a willingness to face difficulties and betokens a reborn faith in man himself. I do not deny that the new, or at least altered, direction of Stoppard's work marks a more "socially useful" aspect of absurdist theatre. (Ironically, Stoppard himself denied having any such motives behind his work in a 1974 interview with Ronald Hayman, and his 1974 Travesties also ridicules the notion or art as primarily a tool for social change/criticism. Shortly thereafter, his plays took on their quite definite political and moral overtones.) However, I contend that the advance in "social usefulness" has not necessarily been accompanied by a corresponding advance in artistic merit or intellectual richness.

7 Cahn, p. 155.

8 Cahn, p. 156

To demonstrate that Stoppard's high point of dramatic achievement came in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers* and that the later plays exhibit a lessening in scope and importance, I will focus on the themes explored in the plays and the methods used to develop them. These methods include the use of multiple viewpoints—the numbers of them and the weight given to various characters' views—and the seriousness with which issues are taken.

The electronic media plays, the detective farces, and the first full length stage play, as already noted, go only so far as to recognize absurdity. Some of them contain the germs of deep and thought-provoking issues. *If You're Glad I'll Be Frank* is based in the mechanization of the human soul; *Albert's Bridge* takes up the alienation of a person from the perceived chaos of society. Even such a farce as *After Magritte* deals with the ways in which people (mis)understand the actions of others and of themselves. Through all of these plays, however, these large themes are no more than shadowy background figures, looming indistinctly on the horizon. The plays do not explore these issues, but simply give passing indications of their presence. Just as they point out the absurdity of the world pausing to examine just what the idea entails, so their more specific themes are but superficially treated.

Why does Albert feel no affection for anything but his bridge? What will George Riley's realization of his failures do to him? How does Inspector Foot, plagued by incorrect assumptions, deal with the world? The plays under consideration are not intended to answer such questions. While they touch on large issues, they have no interest in resolving them. Their two-fold aim is, instead, to recognize the existence of the issues and to
play them for laughs rather than for ideas. For this reason, the short plays do have connections to important ideas without ever becoming truly important intellectual pieces themselves. Their shortcoming (if that can be considered an accurate label, as the plays were not intended to be intellectual exercises so much as clever jokes) is in the methods chosen to develop the ideas.

The early plays make little use of multiple viewpoints. Each has a central character, or at most two, to provide a clear indication of that play's main ideas. In the later plays, the use of multiple viewpoints clearly becomes a vehicle for exploration of ideas, allowing several characters to bandy notions about and express variations on the central theme. The use of only one or two views is more conducive to having one line of thinking pointed out than to exploring a larger realm.

Stoppard also seems willing, in these plays, to sacrifice the idea for the joke. His works show a steady decline in the sheer number of jokes as he becomes more concerned with increasing the social utility of his plays. These early works, to which his statement denying any meaning or usefulness certainly can be applied, make the audience laugh almost continuously, but it is not always the sort of laughter that provokes thought as well. One cannot deny that Stoppard is successful in writing funny plays, but in the early works the jokes tend to get in the way of the ideas. One is distracted from rather led to think about the serious ideas behind the plays' situations. The overall effect of all this joking is to trivialize such ideas as alienation, mechanization, and the failure of reason.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*, Stoppard moves
to more important, far-reaching themes and to a new and more thought-provoking treatment of those themes. I have already mentioned that absurdity becomes a given and not an end in these two plays. That single factor plays the most important part in making Stoppard's ideas in these plays fresh and appealing. After all, plays about death, morality, and religion are not new in and of themselves. However, plays that set out to explore what those areas are like under the conditions of absurdity are new. Stoppard takes familiar questions and asks them in new phrases. Subjects that most readers and viewers have probably thought of frequently for themselves can thus still seem new and exciting to them.

Stoppard also moves beyond the boundaries of strictly defined absurdity in these plays. The short plays, those which concentrated on recognizing absurdity, has as their serious background ideas which are directly connected with defining the absurd. Alienation, mechanization, breakdown of reasoning or of assumptions and traditions are all ideas that relate directly to delineating the absurd world. But death, reality vs. illusion, reason vs. faith are all ideas that have a place in the traditional world as well as the absurd one. They are not limited to or by the notion of absurdism.

While the ideas concomitant with absurdism are not unimportant, these great questions or ambiguities behind Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers are truly universal ideas, ones that transcend philosophical and artistic categories. The plays have ceased to be about absurdism; rather, they function under absurdism. In essence, these plays say, "Suspending all preconceived notions, what does one really know about
a subject?" The answer is that one knows disconcertingly little. Stoppard uses the absurdist ideas to strip his characters and plays of dependence on tradition and illusion. But he takes on questions which reach beyond the concerns of the absurdist alone. Absurdity becomes a condition under which to examine those larger ambiguities. It is being used, not merely pointed out, as it so often was in the early absurdist works.

The use of multiple viewpoints makes its first well-developed appearance among Stoppard's works in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. A major split between characters who believe in and accept illusion and those who attempt to determine a reality lines up the Player against Ros and Guil. A lesser split occurs between Ros and Guil over the methods to be used in searching for reality, Guil favoring logic and Ros depending more on intuition. The exploration of reality/illusion and death is accomplished primarily by means of discussions and disagreements among these three characters. Although characterization and circumstances combine to sway the audience's sympathy more toward the courtiers than toward the Player, neither side in proved definitively right or wrong. Clive James has commented on the Einsteinian nature of Stoppard's universe, noting that the playwright has abandoned fixed viewpoints in order to be accurate over a wide range of situations and characters. When traditional values no longer dictate a choice of one alternative over others, all alternatives become defensible. All possible choices become worthy of at least a glance. Absurdity thus works to open up the

---

subjects considered within its framework. Exploring multiple possibilities is more intellectually stimulating than propagandizing in favor of one.

Trivialization poses no problem to the development of the issues in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Although the play is definitely comic, the jokes are not made at the expense of the ideas. Stoppard has chosen a suitably grim question—what is death?—and a situation in which one knows in advance (either from the title or from familiarity with *Hamlet*) that the protagonists must die to forestall too much lightness. The jokes that are made flow naturally from the serious topics under consideration. Stoppard cannot be accused of dropping his central idea to run off and make a joke, then returning to ideas when he has gotten his share of laughs, a charge that can easily be made against such earlier work as *Enter a Free Man*.

*Jumpers*, whose central action is an argument among philosophies (and philosophers), presents one with a world stripped of many of the familiar traditions, but not of the efficacy of reason and logic. Reason is certainly the chief value of Sir Archie's version of logical positivism. While *Jumpers* remains in the same category as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, plays that explore rather than dictate, its acceptance of reason signals in advance the coming shift toward problem solving, and especially toward logical action as the guiding light through the dark of absurdity.

*Jumpers* focuses on the contest between two sets of beliefs. One side espouses belief in God, in unchanging standards of good and evil, and in the feasibility and necessity of making moral judgments. The other side foregoes belief in a God, and assigns to man the job of de-
termining what is good or evil, with the proviso that such determinations can be revised whenever the need is felt. The conflicting sides are represented by, respectively, Sir Archie Jumper and George Moore. Additional points of view are brought in by Inspector Bones, a devotee of law and order and of romantic notions about the theatre and the law, and by Dotty, who finds herself caught between the two philosophical forces. Again, Stoppard has created a situation ideally designed to expose conflicting and confusing viewpoints. There is some promise of resolution in this play, but it is a promise that goes unfulfilled. As in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, audience sympathy is directed toward one side, here George's, but that sympathy does not constitute a victory in the argument.

In other respects, Jumper shares many of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead strengths. It, too, uses humor to punch up its points, not to tistrate from them. Its issues extend beyond the concerns of the absurdists to matters of importance to all thinking people. The central question is left open at the end, a technique which would seem to encourage more thinking by viewers and readers after they have experienced the play. This last point may or may not be perceived as a valid measure of the worth of a piece of drama. I believe it is important to note, however, that Stoppard has written two plays which seem to make people think without making them think in any one particular way. This objective, I find, appeals to the highest intellectual impulses; it indicates a desire to have the world conducted more intelligently and thoughtfully above all. Whether or not that intelligent and thoughtful conduct agrees with one's own personal beliefs is of secondary importance. Because Rosencrantz
and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers* deal with significant, universal questions in a manner which preserves their importance while allowing one to see the humor in them, and because these two plays encourage thinking without the burden of didacticism, I consider them to be the height of Stoppard's artistic achievement.

Of course, Stoppard has continued to write prolifically and to high praise since the appearance of *Jumpers* in 1972. *Travesties* and *Night and Day* in particular have won critical approval and large audiences. Both these plays, along with *Dirty Linen*, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor*, and *Professional Foul*, fall into the third phase of Stoppard's work. They are marked by a lessening of the multiple viewpoint technique in favor of central characters who dictate clearly approved lines of thought or action. Their central issues are not the looming ambiguities of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*. Neither are they trivialized as were the issues of the short plays. Stoppard has taken a middle line by dealing with questions of a much more specific and practical nature. They are not unimportant questions; they concern the characters' physical freedom, sexual choices, and career choices. But they are not universals which can be identified with and shared in by all. Everyone may have to make some choice about how he/she will relate to the government of his/her country, but few people must make the specific choice forced on Alexander Ivanov. The arguments and ideas in the play will relate to audience's lives only in remote ways, whereas those in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* or *Jumpers* may well have come close to repeating or anticipating ideas the audience has.

*Travesties* is concerned with the roles of politics and, especially,
of art in life. While these are large questions, they are not so looming or so widely asked as those of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*. The importance of art as compared to such events as World War I and the Russian Revolution forms the central question of the play.\(^*^\)

Multiple views on art abound, as the play is peopled with two artists, Tzara and Joyce, and a political revolutionary, Lenin, as well as Henry Carr, minor diplomat. Tzara provides an absurdist-oriented view, rejecting the past traditions and roles of art in favor of an aimless, destructive force. Joyce presents the opposite line, describing art as the only activity capable of giving meaning to all of life. Lenin stresses the need for socially useful art. Henry Carr prevents these multiple views from functioning in the same way the open-ended debates of the other plays have. He is not just another character, but a controlling consciousness. The other characters (with the exception of Old Cecily) appear only through Carr's memory, and so they can be given importance or mocked as he decides. Yet Carr himself does not dictate any one clear line for art to follow. His ego urges him to disagree with all three of the other main characters, and his stance must constantly shift in order to allow him to do that. Victor Cahn points out that in *Travesties* one sees a man manipulating the forces of memory so as to develop a view of his own past that makes sense to him.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^*^\)Cahn, pp. 142-143.

rejects the notion of art's purpose as social reform and criticism; he remains confused about any more positive statement of art's meaning. Coppelia Kahn has added the point that when a piece of art makes a statement about art, the form of that piece is part of its statement. She observes that Travesties itself confirms the concept of theatre as play—"uninhibited, speculative, purposeless"\(^{13}\)—a view which falls on middle ground among the others, granting art less force and importance than Joyce and Lenin attribute to it, but more than Tzara admits.

Travesties is the first of Stoppard's plays to demonstrate the direction of his most recent writing. Its question is a step back from the grandly scaled ambiguities to the knowable; focus has moved from events that operate on man from the outside to man-made concepts. While multiple views are presented, one character emerges as the dominant figure, controlling the direction of arguments within the play. Along with Dirty Linen, Travesties also represents an apparent step backward in treating the plays' issues with seriousness. The constant emphasis on mocking the characters and their thoughts results in many jokes which seem contrived and distracting. The scene in which Gwen and Cecily take tea and exchange insults in verse exemplifies this weak, uninspired sort of humor. Travesties also suffers from a general lack of cohesiveness which I will discuss later. Although it is often listed as being among Stoppard's best three works, I feel it runs a very poor third to Rosen­crantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers.

\(^{13}\)Kahn, p. 197
Stoppard's increasing predilection for topical issues necessitates consideration of didacticism. The dividing line between the didactic and the mimetic often blurs. As Eric Bentley has noted, "Art in general may be held to teach something."¹⁴ When is art truly didactic, then? When a play shows its lesson overtly, when elements such as character, plot, and dialogue seem obviously manipulated toward an end—the inculcation of the author's message—then that work can accurately be labelled a didactic one. Such a definition, however, leaves considerable leeway for individual interpretation of a play. What appears overt or artificially manipulated to one viewer may not to another. The didactic and mimetic modes of drama cannot be neatly sorted out into two mutually exclusive piles. Instead, a continuum ranging from the solely entertaining to the resolutely instructive exists. Most works of art fall at some point along the line rather than at either end. Didacticism has acquired a bad name through confusion with one extreme form, propaganda. Art which attempts to "push somebody from one view to another and thence into immediate and possibly violent action"¹⁵ is propaganda, and it belongs at the furthest end of the didactic continuum.

Stoppard's works can be found all along the continuum. Most of his one act plays, for instance, fall into the entertainment portion of


¹⁵Bentley, p. 111.
the scale. His best works, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*, strike the dividing line where entertainment and instruction blur. The ideological content of these plays is obvious, but one cannot say that the urge to teach predominates over the urge to entertain. In his recent works, Stoppard has grown more and more didactic. *Night and Day* and *Travesties* have obvious lessons, preaching the value of a free press and the superiority of capitalism over socialism and of art over all. The elements of character and dialogue, as I shall show, are clearly subjugated to the purpose of defending Western values. In his two plays dealing with life in communist countries, Stoppard hovers on the edge of propaganda. Especially in *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor*, the primary motivation for the play's existence is exposure and criticism of the plight of political dissidents in Russia. While his plays may not provoke violent action, they clearly advocate a line of "correct thinking."

Didactic art is not necessarily bad art, although most propagandistic art deserves that dishonorable distinction. Stoppard's recent plays are not inferior to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers* simply because they advocate one idea or another. Whether one enjoys and approves of didactic art is a matter of individual taste. I would argue, however, that in turning toward the didactic, Stoppard has lost several of the best aspects of his earlier works, notably the careful balance among characters which made for a pleasing ambiguity and the light tone which allowed him to display his verbal virtuosity to its best advantage. Stoppard's recent work is not inferior because all didactic work is inferior but because his natural affinity for questioning and
joking does not rest easily with heavily instructional purposes.

Dirty Linen was the first of Stoppard's plays to fall solidly into the problem-solving genre. As though nervous about taking too precipitous a plunge, Stoppard chose a hackneyed subject, the sexual behavior of government figures. Predictably, his question, "What should standards be for sexual conduct of public figures?" is answered "Whatever they choose, as long as it neither harms anyone else nor interferes with their work." If such issues and answers were the best one could do in moving beyond absurdity to ways of dealing with an absurd world, the effort would certainly not be rewarded adequately by the results.

Dirty Linen is, fortunately, an aberration in Stoppard's canon, a one-idea play that runs on double entendres and locker-room snickering. Its interest comes from the indications it gives of the future direction of Stoppard's work. Multiple viewpoints are abandoned for the direction provided by Maddie Gotobed, a secretary who was the original cause of concern over sexual morality. The remaining characters begin in various stages of pompous propriety and are gradually won over to Maddie's independent attitude. It is hard to say that such a trite issue can be trivialized, but the humor certainly does not encourage one to see the issue in new or enlightening ways. Finally, this is the first of Stoppard's plays to end with a firm resolution. The committee has been swayed to Maddie's way of thinking, and all ends on the note that her ideas are the right ideas.

The plays of 1978 and 1979 are the pure problem-solving plays of more merit. In 1978 came the production of two pieces, Every Good Boy Deserves Favor and Professional Foul, both concerned with the interaction
between a citizen and an oppressive government. In each play, a decision must be made; a coping strategy must be found. If there is to be any exploration at all, it must be exploration that yields practical results. Several noticable changes have taken place in Stoppard's manner of developing these more realistic, more pragmatic issues.

Central figures, protagonists, are clearly in evidence for these two plays. Alexander and Anderson are both men who must make decisions. The plays focus on the process of their choices. Although the general settings for both plays are realistic (Russia and Czechoslovakia in the present), absurdity forms a subtle part of the psychological background for the plays. Both protagonists learn that certain assumptions are in fact illusions; in both cases, these assumptions have been ones about what defines "proper behavior." These characters engage in the defining of new guidelines or rules to replace those which have been proved wanting. Once the traditional notion of "right is right because it's right" is abandoned, they are free to examine what rationality, emotional ties, and self-interest have to offer as new rules.

The issues themselves are undeniably important; however, their importance may be magnified by the current instability and hostility that characterize international relations, particularly between capitalist nations, where Stoppard's works are primarily performed, and communist nations, where these two are set. These two are very topical plays, and they reflect the popular interest in Soviet dissidents and horror stories leaking out from the "Gulag Archipelago." I question whether these themes will stand the test of time so well as the more general material of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers.
Along with the reduction or elimination of multiple viewpoints and the institution of the definite answer comes a shift in the use of humor. The rapid-fire joking of the earlier plays has almost entirely vanished. Instead, Stoppard has refined his humor to function through some central image. In *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor*, this image is an orchestra, which works on three different levels. In *Professional Foul*, it is the confusion between a soccer team and a group of philosophers at a convention. Especially in *Professional Foul*, the volume of humor is markedly reduced, and scenes of comic value alternate with scenes that are entirely serious. As Stoppard restricts his issues to more realistic, pressing questions, he seems less and less willing to risk any trivialization of them. Part of this fear may be explained by his concern for a Czech author, Vaclav Havel, who has suffered harassment and repression by his government since 1969. Stoppard sees Havel as an image of what might have happened to him had he not escaped Czechoslovakia before World War II.  

At any rate, this new politically oriented work is undeniably more serious and somber than his earlier plays.

Stoppard's most recently published play is *Night and Day*. It is literally packed with allusions to topical matters. Race relations, imperialism, interference by superpowers in the affairs of third world countries, and sexual morality all play a part in the discussions that go on. The major issue, however, is one that meshes with all these included points. What is the role of journalism in life? What is  

---

"responsible journalism" and what is cheap, voyeuristic reporting? How great a risk should a reporter take in covering a story, and when should such risks be taken? Is a "free press" really possible, and is it the guardian of other freedoms that traditional notions say it is? The sides are drawn between a covey of newspapermen defending and practicing their craft, and Ruth, a wealthy woman who resents journalism for doing a "hatchet job" on her reputation during an unpleasant divorce, and who has conceived an infatuation for one reporter and feels she has been used sexually by another. These four find themselves sharing quarters in a mythical African country on the eve of a revolution.

Superficially, Stoppard returns to his earlier technique of debating issues among his characters, here pitting Ruth and President Mageeba against the journalists, Guthrie, Wagner, and Milne. The reporters work out of some idealistic dedication to spreading information; Ruth makes her objections from emotional reactions to a bad experience in what was admittedly a cheap paper. Mageeba illustrates the ways in which a controlled press can be misused. The last note sounded in the debate is Guthrie's "information is light. Information, in itself, about anything, is light. That's all you can say, really."17 Ronald Hayman confirms the fact that Night and Day is a polemical play, one with a definite moral in sight, but he notes that within the inherent limitations of such plays, it

---

achieves interesting characteristics and intelligent arguments. As in the two political dissidence plays, Stoppard has a personal interest in the issue here. He began his writing career as a journalist, and so he might well be expected to stand up for the old school of which he is a graduate.

Night and Day is, in addition, a very naturalistic play, departing from that idiom only in including a brief dream sequence and allowing one character to voice her unspoken thoughts. The humor is that of any group of well-educated, witty adults; it neither distracts from nor adds to the depth or power of the issue-oriented portions of the play. Points tend to be argued in the more serious moments of the play—just after news comes of a character's death, or in the tense atmosphere surrounding President Magebba's visit, with its promise of violence. At any rate, Stoppard seems to have abandoned joking as a way of making a point which he wants the audience to take note of.

Despite all his protestations to the contrary, Stoppard has in recent years backed away from exploration of deep ambiguities and moved toward examination of more limited, pragmatic sorts of issues. This trend is currently winning him approval from such critics as Cahn who extol the usefulness of the later plays. The ideas within the plays are the cause of such praise; Stoppard is seen as the living refutation of the notion that absurdist theatre leads to a dead end of nothingness. Lying behind this praise is an implicit assumption that Lenin and Cecily were right.

\(^{18}\) Hayman, p. 147 and p. 157.
about art in *Travesties*. Art must have some purpose, some clear value to society. The idea that art makes conventional progress, that having made a statement that absurdity exists the artists are obligated to continue on and show the world how to deal with it, places a heavy burden on the drama. The current appreciation for Stoppard's later plays also reflects the topical nature of these works. The conflict between capitalist and communist systems and the many issues raised in *Night and Day* are subjects which people worry about; plays that reflect those concerns naturally are popular and, when they affirm opinions that most Western play-goers are likely to agree with (oppression in wrong, a free press is desirable), they meet with approval for their content.

Whether these plays represent Stoppard's best work as an artist rather than a social critic remains doubtful. Two of the criteria that I believe are important contributory factors in determining artistic value are originality and long-term appeal. Martin Esslin also lists originality, along with depth, as "touchstones of judgment" for the drama.\(^\text{19}\) I have already mentioned that Stoppard's plays have grown increasingly realistic since 1972. While naturalism in itself is not devoid of originality, in Stoppard's case it seems a retreat from the more unpredictable (and perhaps more difficult to create) worlds of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and especially *Jumpers*. His first play, *Enter a Free Man*, was another realistic play, and one that he admits was only a copy of things he saw.

\(^{19}\) Esslin, p. 369.
and liked in other dramatists' work.  In his short plays and the two best ones, he developed a style less and less linked to reality. The Stoppardian world, characterized by bizarre situations, literate and rapid-fire dialogue reminiscent of music-hall comedians interspersed with long monologues of similarly witty nature, thick with allusions to past and present works of art, and the use of multiple points of view firing at some central subject from all sides, became a recognizable world. Stoppard had gone beyond imitating others and established a dramatic medium that was clearly his. In the later plays, the literate quality remains, but most of the other distinctly Stoppardian hallmarks have faded. His work is still good, but it is beginning to look more and more like that of other young, literate British playwrights, such as Christopher Hampton.

The test of time is one criterion that cannot be evaluated in the present but can only be guessed at. The extremely topical focus of Stoppard's latest plays leads me to believe that they will not be so appealing to future audiences as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*. Inevitably, the issues and burning controversies or one age are but fuzzily remembered by succeeding generations. In order for a play that is directly concerned with such topical matters to outline the matters themselves, it must have either some outstanding artistic merit in addition to its topical content (here one thinks if Ibsen's social dramas, which have far outlived their controversy), or it must approach the specific

---

question in such a way as to open up not only the small issue but whatever
larger philosophical matters may lie behind it. I do not believe that this
is the case with Stoppard's recent works.

_Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead_ and _Jumpers_, on the other hand,
demonstrate both artistic originality and the generalized focus that is
likely to promote their continued popularity. While fourteen years is
hardly a conclusive period of time on which to judge a play's long-term
merit, it is the longest stretch of time one has to supply a context for
Stoppard's well-known works. Fourteen years ago _Rosencrantz and Guilden-
stern Are Dead_ was first produced. In the ensuing time, critical interest
in the play has grown. Scholarly bibliographies show that an increasing
number of articles on Stoppard are being published each year. More of
these articles focus on _Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead_ than on any
other single Stoppard work. This critical work indicates that the play
was no mere flash in the pan. (Of Stoppard's other works, _Jumpers_ and _Trave-
esties_ have received the next largest amounts of scholarly study.)

It seems a safe assumption that, in a hundred years' time, people
may or may not be concerned about Soviet misuse of mental treatment as
punishment or the ways in which reporters cover political revolutions,
but they will almost certainly still be wondering what death really is,
or whether there is a God, or how to determine an action is good or bad.
Because Stoppard took on those ideas that cut across time and place, and
did so in an original, entertaining, and thought-provoking manner, I
believe that he will be best remembered for _Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
Are Dead_ and _Jumpers_, two of the more important plays of the contemporary
British comic theatre.
FIRST PLAY, MEDIA PLAYS, AND DETECTIVE FARCES

The first decade of Stoppard's writing career saw the production of numerous short plays, the majority of them written for electronic media. In addition, during this period from 1963 to 1972, he wrote several full length plays, a novel, three short stories, and several shorter stage plays. This chapter will focus on the published plays of this period, with the exception of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers, which will be dealt with separately.

If You're Glad I'll Be Frank, Albert's Bridge, Artist Descending a Staircase, and Where Are They Now? are all one act radio plays; A Separate Peace is a one act television play. Enter a Free Man, The Real Inspector Hound, and After Magritte are stage plays, the former in two acts and the latter two in one act each. These plays cover a range from realistic to fanciful, from very slight to admirable clever. The relation they bear to absurdism and the quality of the ideas they contain also vary widely.

Especially in this naturalistic works, Stoppard is neither deep nor overtly absurd. Enter a Free Man exhibits some of the shortcomings of Stoppard's early work. He has disparaged it as merely imitative of others' plays, particularly Bolt's Flowering Cherry and Miller's Death of a Salesman. "But to me the whole thing is a bit phoney, because they're (the characters) only real because I've seen them in other
people's plays." The realism of the setting and characters—a working class family caught in financial and emotional binds because of the father's full-time fantasy of being an inventor—reduces overt absurdism in the play. The thematic material of this homey domestic piece is largely confined to the platitudinous. Family ties stretch and creak but remain unbroken; father and daughter both see a little way out of their fantasies and into reality.

George Riley, protagonist of Enter a Free Man, moves in a limited world, consisting of this home and the pub around the corner. The other characters seem even more restricted, confined to one of those places or the other (although Linda Riley speaks of going out to work, and Able the sailor has apparently been out on voyages). Victor Cahn siezes on this small, safe territory of the play as in indication of absurdity. He postulates that the characters see the world outside their familiar corner as "a mysterious entity, beyond the comprehension of the individual man." This perception is echoed by Julian Gitzen, who has remarked on the characters' inability to control their own lives. Nevertheless, the mysteriousness of the world at large seems a slim bit of absurdity.

The play itself contains no overt references to absurdity at all. The characters, especially George, evince feelings of loneliness, uncertainty, and incomprehensibility. Persephone, George's wife, makes a fetish of cleaning because there is as much sense in doing that as


there is in doing anything else. George ways at one point that he feels cut off from the rest of the world, isolated in his little domestic unit. These feelings can be reconciled with absurdist ideas, as Cahn has done. But to do so too easily is a mistake. Characters have expressed loneliness and alienation in countless plays before absurdity was ever defined or recognized. To say that Enter a Free Man is in any way, even implicitly, an absurdist play is to bend the rules of interpretation past the breaking point.

The same difficulty with trying to see absurdism in each of Stoppard's works can be found with Where Are They Now? This radio play is the only other solidly naturalistic piece among Stoppard's early work. Alternating between a present-day reunion dinner and flashbacks to the schooldays of the participants, the play emphasizes the difference between events and one's memory of them. Cahn interprets the changes in memory as representative of self-delusion. He asserts that Stoppard shows memory as another illusion people use to cushion themselves from the recognition of absurdity.

While I would not deny that these bits and pieces, particularly when taken out of context, seem to reflect absurdism, I cannot accept the notion that such naturalistic plays are intentionally absurdist, but it doesn't bloom instantly. In these two plays, loneliness and self-delusion are personal problems rather than universal conditions. That seems to be

---


4 Cahn, p. 110.
the important dividing line between a genuine absurdist play and one which only contains snippets of emotions or ideas which coincide with portions of absurdism. Much of Stoppard's work is undeniably absurdist, but trying to align all of his productions within that category results in forced interpretations which emphasize a few details or lines out of proportion to the rest of the play.

In fact, neither of these two realistic plays is important on its own. Just as absurdism is not present other than embryonically, no important ideas appear. I have already mentioned the trite handling of the theme behind Enter a Free Man. The concept of the family beset by problems and yet able to maintain close ties is not a new one. It has been used with great success in such plays as I Remember Mama and Wesker's trilogy. Stoppard's treatment of it demonstrates that means are as important as matter in constructing a good play. The strength of family ties is trivialized by this play. Although the Rileys stay together at the play's end, one does not come away inspired, instructed, or more than mildly entertained by their example.

Characters are insufficiently developed to explain the source of the familial affection. Persephone is the perpetual drudge and devoted mother, but how or why she came to be that was remains unknown. Tensions such as daughter Linda's resenting her role as breadwinner are built up but then resolved too quickly and smoothly to be significant. Although the play was written for the stage, it was first produced on television, and that fact is ironically appropriate. The solutions to the problems that are raised remind one of the cliche' about television programs, "Of course they'll get out of this fix; there are only five
minutes left of the show." Rather than delving into his theme here, Stoppard prefers the neat and pleasant ending that leaves the audience smiling but untouched.

Where Are They Now? suffers from the same problems of trite theme and easy ending. Certainly Stoppard was not the first author to make the observation that people often remember events differently from the way they actually happened. In the play, one character recalls bad times as pleasant ones, but that does not constitute absurdity, as Cahn claims it does. Another character who had what appeared to be a successful school career remembers it as miserable, and a third retains a neutral stance all through his life. Two definite statements can be extracted from the play. They are that memory can change one's perceptions of the past and that childhood ought to be a happy and carefree period of one's life. Once again, these themes are neither new nor startling, and again Stoppard settles for an easy, comical ending rather than developing any serious consideration of the themes. By having old Jenkins suddenly realize that he has been attending the wrong reunion, Stoppard distracts the audience's attention from the serious matter to a final joke. Neither the characters nor the playwright consider their situations absurd.

Both of Stoppard's earlier naturalistic works fall short of the standards set by his well-known pieces such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. By comparison they seem unoriginal and unchallenging. They raise issues which have that potential to be interesting and worthwhile, but they never develop that potential. The relation to absurdism that Cahn finds here is slight, nothing more than the promise that absurdism might pass through the authors' mind. Stoppard has said that when he
writes he tries to build an interest into each line rather than depending on sustained interest from the overall situation to hold the audience's attention. These two plays demonstrate what happens when such an interest comes from the jokes, puns, and slapstick rather than from the exploration and permutation of important ideas.

Stoppard has written several other short plays which do not begin from absurd premises and yet recognize or imply absurdity in much more solid ways than did the first two plays I've looked at. These include the two detective farces, *The Real Inspector Hound* and *After Magritte*, and the radio play *Artist Descending a Staircase*.

The detective farces are clever, intricately structured pieces. They fit ideally into the description John Russell Taylor gave of Stoppard's plots as puzzles in which each piece must fit a "clear pattern with a 'clunk' at the end." These two plays have been attracting an increased amount of critical attention in the past few years, not the least of which has been devoted to the ways in which they imply absurdity.

Both *The Real Inspector Hound* and *After Magritte* present images of chaotic worlds. The detective story typically brings order from confusion or mystery, and Brian Crossley points out that these two plays lampoon

---


that notion of the genre as order-bringing. Both plays also contain characters who attempt to sort our the confusions into a semblance of order but fail to understand the world around them.

The Real Inspector Hound is the more complex and rich of the two plays. In addition to the theme of bringing chaos from order, this play touches on the relationship between illusion and reality and on the practice of criticism. While the plot is far too complex to sum up briefly, the basic action is this. Two critics, reviewing a new murder mystery, find themselves drawn into the action onstage. The roles they assume have essential parallels with their off-stage roles, and as a result of their being lured onstage, they are shot and killed as part of the play under review.

Stoppard himself has denied that the play was intended to criticize critics, although its lampoons of critical jargon are hilarious. Moon, the over-zealous would-be intellectual who tries to read deep meanings into every line of an obviously shallow thriller, and Birdboot, the self-serving philanderer who uses his column to flatter actresses he wishes to seduce, certainly are parodies of the worst in critical method. But the critical satire is not main motivation behind this play. Stoppard himself has said that Moon and Birdboot's situation represents the dangers of wish fulfillment, although he has not chosen to elaborate on that statement.

At least three critics have observed that the crucial fact about

---


Moon and Birdboot is the similarity between their lives as reviewers and as characters in the inner play. Victor Cahn sees that their real lives' essential meaninglessness is demonstrated by the lack of contrast with the shallow play into which they are drawn. Andrew Kennedy interprets this same phenomenon as indicative that neither world is very real, while Gillian Farish contends that both art and life are confirmed as equally real. Whether one calls both worlds real or false is not so important as the consistent recognition that both seem to be the same. The inner play is a shallow, artificial construction whose characters are little more than life-size cardboard cut-outs. To equate the real world with that world is to imply subtly an equally shallow, pointless existence for Moon and Birdboot. In that way, The Real Inspector Hound can be said to present an absurdist conception of the world.

Both The Real Inspector Hound and After Magritte deal with the unraveling of complicated situations. This motif is particularly pronounced in After Magritte, whose main action consists of explaining two such situations and creating a third. At first glance, the action of bringing order and rationality out of confusion would seem to be an anti-absurdist one, as Leodard Goldstein believes it to be. However, such an approach seems to take for granted that the explanations work to resolve the chaos. As Gitzen points out, "Stoppard's plays customarily

9 Cahn, p. 100.


end in even greater confusion than they begin." 13 Although the two chaotic scenes have been explained, chaos has not been defeated. There have also been any number of wild conjectures and totally unsubstantiated accusations made by Inspector Foot as he tries to clarify for himself just what the Harrises are doing and whether a minstrel robbed a theatre and made his getaway with them.

It is Foot's fantastic theories, along with that offered by Inspector Hound for the corpse on the living room floor, that make one doubt the triumph of reason in these plays. Hound's wild story of a madman slighted as a boy on the streets of Canada and returning after many years to seek his revenge is never questioned or examined for flaws, and in accepting it Moon makes a fatal mistake when he is drafted into the Hound role. Similarly, Foot's robbery theory is compounded of misinformation and pure speculation. It, too, is totally false, but it remains unscathed at the play's end. Even though the audience has been given the information it needs to know that the suspect was Foot himself trying to avoid a parking ticket, the characters in the play remain unaware of Foot's actual role in the supposed crime. Reason is not always infallible as an approach to the world. It produces as many blind alleys as it does roads to truth, and there is the suggestion that reason itself is not so orderly an action as one might think.


13 Gitzen, p. 151.
While the lack of order and the dubious quality of the assistance offered by reason are suggesting absurdity to the alert audience member, are there any more overt themes of importance presented in these plays? The answer must be no, that if anything the detective farces have less thought-provoking content than did the realistic plays. The Real Inspector Hound makes no pretension to such content; it is unashamedly comic, without serious relief. Although it has been suggested that After Magritte contains deeper material on the relation of objects to their verbal labels and on the relativity of point of view, Leonard Goldstein exposes just how shallow those ideas are in the play:

The allusions to Magritte's paintings are purely coincidental. If the audience expects to draw a profound meaning of the images and situations, it is disappointed, for there are in fact no images: they are momentary situations which only resemble a Magritte image. It is not that the joke is on the audience as it is a send-up of Magritte whose "meanings" are often merely pretentious, implying a philosophical depth which is simply not there. . . . This knowledge does not bring us any further in our understanding of reality. 14

Although there seems to be deep meaning in After Magritte, close examination foils that hope. The detective farces are clever comedies, but little more. Their hint of absurdity does not carry them on to the level of intellectually important plays; it merely signals the possibility of something to come, hints of the concept of the absurd lurking somewhere in the playwright's mind. These two plays illustrate the truth of Kenneth Tynan's pronouncement on Stoppard's early work:

14 Goldstein, p. 20.
"Simplicity of thought . . . quite often underlies complexity of style."15

Artist Descending a Staircase, another radio play, is the latest of Stoppard's published short plays. Like the previous two farces, it includes examples of reason's failure to deal with the world, but it also adds a separate and potentially meaningful theme dealing with the nature of art. It, too, is a mystery of sorts, as two of the characters question how a third died. As usual, reason leads them to the wrong answer.

The sounds made at the time of Donner's death are caught on a tape recorder. This evidence leads both Beauchamp and Martello to believe that the other is the murderer. As in After Magritte, the audience receives information that the characters remain oblivious to, information that tells them clearly that Donner died in an accidental fall while trying to swat a fly. This is reason debunked once again.

But is is perception that is really at the heart of this play. The lives of the three artists, seen in a series of retreating and then advancing flashbacks, reveal a history of misperceptions and failures of reason. The attempt of Sophie, a blind woman, to identify one of the artists from a memory of one of her last sights is a reasonable effort. She describes with as much detail as she can remember the painting he stood before, and the three reason that she saw Beauchamp. In fact the man she loved was Donner, and the combination of misperception and faulty reason blocks that potentially happy relationship and guides her into an unhappy affair resulting in her suicide.

**Artist Descending a Staircase** dismisses two ways of knowing the world—reason and sense perception—as fallible. In this dismissal, Stoppard implies once again the existence of absurdity, but he does not bring it forward into the spotlight. The overt theme of the play is the position or meaning of art in the world. Here Stoppard makes his most direct approach to a serious subject among all the short, earlier works I have chosen to examine. He also brings to bear one technique that helps make *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers* the strong plays they are—the use of the multiple viewpoints.

Much of *Artist Descending a Staircase* is given over to discussions among the three artists about why and how art functions. The three all began as iconoclastic types, dabbling in Dada and "that child's garden of easy victories known as the avant garde." Donner had gone on to try almost every school of art, settling in the end for classical, pre-Raphaelite painting. Beauchamp remained loyal to the avant garde approach, and Martello, who says less about his work than the other do, has apparently stayed closer to Beauchamp's style than to Donner's.

Donner was disturbed by the social usefulness, or lack thereof, in art. His concern turned especially toward what art has to offer those with larger problems: "The question remained: How can one justify a work of art to a man with an empty belly?" (p. 87). The productions resulting from Donner's attacks of conscience range from ceramic food to a venus sculpted from sugar, but all come to nothing. For all his

16 Tom Stoppard, *Artist Descending a Staircase* in *Albert's Bridge and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1977), p. 81. (All further quotations will be taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.)
seeming concern for the starving, Donner was essentially selfish in his worries; his sympathy for the unfortunate was abstract and distant. He never went out, and is described by Beauchamp as "somewhat reclusive, not too way misanthropic" (pg 79). He often quarreled violently with the other two, even destroying some of their work. By constantly worrying about the social utility of his work, Donner could simultaneously reject and lead the comfortable, independent life of the artist.

Beauchamp suffers no such guilt at the artist's happy lot. In a speech later transplanted into Travesties, he explains:

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.

(p. 105)

Stoppard seems to side with Beauchamp on the point of art's social usefulness. In a 1974 interview, he has expressed the belief that art is not an efficacious way of encouraging political change, but that it may be important in establishing a long-term "moral matrix." Even Donner's philanthropic (but impractical) urges are defeated, a fact that also supports the artists' exemption from social reform.

A second side to the art issue is the definition of art. In this area, too, Donner takes a different tack from two of his friends'. He insists on the essential ingredient of talent in anything to be called art, while Beauchamp and Martello admit a wider range of productions.

Beauchamp sums up his idea that art should be an equal opportunity experience: "Why should art be something difficult to do? Why shouldn't it be something very easy?" (p. 100). The description of Beauchamp's "art" illustrate the problem with art's being too easy. His works consist of tape recordings of random noises or of ping pong games.

Donner is roundly mocked by Beauchamp for venturing through all the fashionable schools of art—"symbolism, surrealism, imagism, vorticism, fauvism, cubism—dada, drip action, hard edge, pop-, found objects and post-object" (p. 84)—in search of the proper approach. But he is the only one of the three with clear standards about art:

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. . . .Skill without imagination is craftsmanship and gives us many useful objects such as wickerwork picnic baskets. Imagination without skill gives us modern art. (p. 83)

He further repudiates the notion that modern art is difficult: "I am now engaged in the infinitely more difficult task of painting what the eye sees" (p. 81).

Implicit support for Donner's belief in artistic standards comes from the works of art produced by each of the three men. Beauchamp's tapes have already been mentioned. His colleague Martello tries to construct a metaphorical statue, built up of all the objects to which women's bodies are clichéishly compared. Donner is painting a portrait of Sophie, feeding roses to a unicorn. Though the traditional approach is mocked by the others, Beauchamp makes a crucial concession to Donner: "Yes, she's very good. . . .Poor Sophie. I think you've got her, Donner" (p. 115). Donner's beliefs in standards and talent are
thus vindicated.

*Artist Descending a Staircase* contains implicit hints of absurdity and a discussion of ideas about the nature of art. Why is it not to be considered on the same level as other plays like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*? One reason is that, although the appearance of open debate is facilitated by the use of three artists' presenting different views, the deck is stacked in favor of Stoppard's opinions. The characters who function as mouthpieces for the author are given the cleverest and most eloquent lines in which to express their points. Beauchamp's definition of the artist as lucky dog was so striking that it was used again in a later play. Donner's line about picnic baskets and modern art is equally memorable. The opposition to these positions is also made laughable not worthy of much consideration (Donner's edible art, Beauchamp's tapes). *Artist Descending a Staircase* ultimately presents more thesis and less debate.

One cannot say that the issues of art are here trivialized by too much concern for building a laugh into every line. However, another of Stoppard's trademarks, the intricately structured plot, does present a powerful distraction from the ideas. The time line of *Artist Descending a Staircase* follows a V shape, descending into the past and then rushing back to the present. Six scenes take one from the present back to 1914. Each scene ends at a suspenseful point, so that one accumulates six mini-mysteries by the time the bottom of the descent is reached. This backward movement in time takes up five sixths of the playing time of the piece. Then time moves forward with a rush, as one gets endings to each of the previous scenes one on top of the next. In the rush of enlightenment
(one learns what happened to Sophie, and what later revelations so dis­turbed Donner), it is easy to be overwhelmed by the cleverness of the structure and the need to piece information together in order to under­stand what has happened. The final piece of information revealed is the probable manner of Donner's death, which was also the first ques­tion to be posed. It is easy, then, to focus on the mystery aspects of the play and to dismiss the aesthetic theory as just so much filler.

The three short plays I have not yet discussed are all ones which recognize absurdity explicitly through at least one character. While they all deal with some form of the search for meaning in life, they present three radically different approaches to that quest. In the process, only one deals with an auxiliary theme in addition to absur­dity itself. Two of the three can be considered as the best of Stop­pard's works which recognize the absurd. The third, A Separate Peace, is a minor work which can be reviewed quickly.

A Separate Peace is the story of John Brown, who turns up at a small rural hospital one night asking for a room. Brown is a healthy man whose only oddity is his insistence on staying in a hospital rather than some more conventional living arrangement. The staff is confused by his preference, and they assume that he is either insane or in hiding. They conduct a surreptitious campaign to find out Brown's background, and, having succeeded in locating some of his family, hound him from his cozy room with the threat of a "normal" life.

Brown is candid about his reasons for preferring the hospital in his conversations with Maggie, a surse who becomes his confidante. He wished to withdraw from the world, to experience no demands and shoulder
no responsibilities.

I came for the quiet and the routine. I came for the white calm, meals on trays and quiet efficiency, time passing and bringing nothing. 

... I mean, a hospital can carry on set loose from the world... You need never know anything, it doesn't touch you. (p. 165)

I want to do nothing, and have nothing expected of me. That isn't possible out there. It worries them. They want to know what you're at--staying in your room all the time--they want to know what you're doing. But in a hospital it is understood that you're not doing anything, because everybody's in the same boat--it's the normal thing. (p. 154)

As Cahn has pointed out, John Brown's desires constitute a recognition of absurdity on one level, an exterior one, but not a personal level. 19

The world outside is spoken of in vaguely threatening terms, the mysterious "they" who want to know and control one's life. Brown feels at loose ends in the chaotic world of society, but he believes the chaos is escapable given the proper surroundings. His conception of absurdity does not extend to himself.

Brown's retreat to the hospital is a retreat from absurdity and an indictment of society, but it is a pathetic, passive gesture. 20 He cannot register the anguish of personal absurdity, remaining oblivious to his own membership in the world he rejects. As a recognition of absurdity, A Separate Peace functions on the most superficial level, with no concern for the effects of absurdity on the individual psyche. As an

18 Tom Stoppard, A Separate Peace in Albert's Bridge and Other Plays, p. 156. (All further quotations are taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.)

19 Cahn, p. 89.

20 Cahn, p. 88.
entertainment, the play is mildly comic, but predictable and conventional. It deviates from naturalism only in showing the hospital staff as more patient and tolerant of Brown's eccentricities than one might expect.

Where *A Separate Peace* is weak, *If You're Glad I'll Be Frank* and *Albert's Bridge* are stronger. These two plays have protagonists, Glad and Albert, who extend the recognition of absurdity from society inward to their own lives. The two differ in the uses they make of their perceptions, but both see that absurdity is something that affects them along with the rest of society.

Glad and Albert's recognitions center around two basic factors in daily life—time and work. Through these basic elements they come to understand the illusory nature of the average life and attempt to transcend those illusions. Neither of them succeeds, but the paths they choose are different in an important way. Glad wishes to escape, as Brown attempted to do, but she recognizes the impossibility of any escape. Albert attempts to control his life by concentrating his energies in a single work of pure form.  

Glad's full knowledge of absurdity grows through her job as the voice of the speaking clock. She began to feel the pressure of an absurd world before taking that job, though. Like John Brown, she wished to retreat to the ordered, peaceful life of a religious cloister, although she had no particularly religious leanings:

21 Cahn, pp. 91-92.
I was going to be a nun, but they wouldn't have me because I didn't believe, I didn't believe enough, that is; most of it I believed all right, or was willing to believe, but not enough for their purposes, not about him being the son of God, for instance, that's the part that put paid to my ambition, that's where we didn't see eye to eye. . . .

I asked her to let me stay inside without being a proper nun, it made no difference to me, it was the serenity I was after, that and the clean linen, but she wasn't having any of that.

From this basic realization of the disorder of the world, Glad moves to the knowledge that timekeeping, one of the basic ways of ordering the world, is an illusion generated in order to reassure people that they have some form of control over time:

Because they think that time is something they invented, for their convenience, and divided up into ticks and tocks and sixties and twelves and twenty-fours . . . so that they'd know when the Olympic record has been broken and when to stop serving dinner in second-class hotels, when the season opens and the betting closes, when to retire; when to leave the station, renew their applications when their subscriptions have expired; when time has run out. So that they've know how long they lasted, and pretend that it matters, and how long they've got,

22Tom Stoppard, If You're Glad I'll Be Frank in Albert's Bridge and Other Plays, pp. 61-62. (All further quotations will be taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.)
as if it mattered, 
so that they'd know that we 
know that they know. . . .
That we know, that is. 
That they know, of course. (pp. 49-50)

Glad understands that time is all together different from time-keeping, 
and that time itself is of such enormity as to dwarf all human accomplish­
ments and lifespans in comparison. The sheer magnitude of eternity makes Glad feel that her life is tiny and insignificant:

If it made a difference
I could refuse to play,
sabotage the whole illusion
a little every day if it made a
difference . . .
And if stopped altogether,
just stopped, gave up the pretence,
it would make no difference. (pp. 55-56)

An additional way in which absurdity is implied also has to do 
with Glad's job. The bery fact of using a human being to perform a 
mechanical job, one which most people assume is being done by a machine, 
relegates humanity to the status of objects, no more or less important 
than any coffee pot or toaster. Glad's life means no more to the peo­
ple who operate the TIM service than does a machine, a fact the First 
Lord demonstrates when he glibly deceives Frank about Glad's job: "My 
dear fellow--there's no Gladys--we wouldn't trust your wife with the 
time--it's a machine, I thought everyone knew that. . . ." (p. 68).

Glad's position shows the futility of John Brown's escape plan. 
Both of them began by recognizing absurdity in the society around them, 
although not in themselves. Both attempted and failed to gain a reli­
gious retreat, and both went on to what looked like a supremely ordered 
existence, Glad as the TIM voice and Brown in the hospital. Glad's ex­
perience shows that absurdity cannot be escaped by building a tight
little cocoon of order around oneself. Absurdity follows after, and it intrudes upon Glad with even more force after she becomes the speaking clock. A frightened retreat from absurdity accomplishes nothing, as Glad at last realizes when Frank's rescue attempts fail.

If You're Glad I'll Be Frank is one of the cleverest of Stoppard's short plays. One factor that makes it more interesting than others already examined is the notion of time vs. time-keeping. If You're Glad I'll Be Frank seems to have some serious ideas about time and how people spend it. Unfortunately, the serious ideas in this play are akin to those that appeared to be in After Magritte. The difference between time and time-keeping is an obvious one, and once pointed out, a simple concept in Stoppard's hands. The play makes no pretensions of telling one what to do with this recognized difference. Stop counting time units? Ponder the nature of infinity? Nothing is suggested. The play gives no answers nor suggests new directions for fruitful thought. It merely points out the existence of an interesting discrepancy in the way one thinks about the world.

Albert, in Albert's Bridge, sees the same chaotic society that drove Glad to search for shelter and order. His reaction is more self-sufficient than hers was, leading him not to avoid but to try to conquer absurdity in his own life. Albert's first inkling of absurdity was provided by the apparent chaos of the town in contrast to the ordered symmetry of the bridge above it. In the bridge he finds balance, control, and certainty. Recognizing that in most ways one has no control over the products of his labor or the forces that determine the conditions of life, Albert finds reassurance in the self-containment of
the bridge:

Simplicity—so . . . contained; neat; your bargain
with the world, your wages, your time, your energy,
your property, everything you took out and every­
thing you put in, the bargain that has carried you
this far—all contained there in ten layers of
paint, accounted for.

Given the chaos of the world below, Albert seeks to carve out a
personal niche on the bridge, doing an apparently thankless task never­
endingly. In painting the bridge he has found an equivalent to Sisy­
phus's task or rolling the rock uphill, a job to which he can devote
all of himself and which becomes his life. 24 Glad was threatened by
the chaos she saw around her and by the isolating effects of absurdity,
but Albert grows to love his job and the isolation which it imposes on
him. He has no desire to make contact with the rest of the world but
instead harbors a growing contempt for it. His own absurdity becomes
a form of egotism, as he identifies ever more closely with the bridge,
seeing both it and himself as the ordered ideals in a chaotic world:

In eight years I'll be pushing thirty, and the Cluf­
ton Bay Bridge will be a silver bridge--dip brush,
slick, slide, slap without end, I'm the bridge man,
web-spinning silverying spiderman
crawling between heaven and earth on a
cantilevered span,
cat's cradled in the sky . . .
look down at the toy ships
where the sea pounds under toy trains to
toy towns
under my hand.

23 Tom Stoppard, Albert's Bridge in Albert's Bridge and Other Plays,
p. 11. (All further quotations will be taken from this edition and
cited parenthetically in the text.)

24 Cahn, pp. 90-91.
Am I the spider or the fly?
I'm the bridge man. . . . (pp. 22-23)

Albert is not alone in his recognition of the chaos in town. Fraser, another bridge climber, paints a vivid picture of the society below which he believes is going out of control:

I came up because up was the only direction left. The rest has been filled up and is still filling. The city is a hold in which blind prisoners are packed wall to wall. Motor-cars nose each other down every street, and they are beginning to breed, spread, they press the people to the walls by their knees, pinning them by their knees, and there's no end to it, because it you stopped making them, thousands of people would be thrown out of work, and they'd have no money to spend, the shopkeepers would get caught up in it, and the farms and factories, and all the people dependent on them, with their children and all. There's too much of everything, but the space for it is constant. So the shell of human existence is filling out, expanding, and it's going to go bang.

(pp. 31-32)

But Fraser's view is in the long run less extreme than Albert's. He climbs the bridge intending to jump, but each time he is reassured by the fact that from a distance the chaos resolves itself into ordered patterns. His fears calmed, Fraser goes back down to try to cope with society.

Cahn compares Albert's increasing disdain for the world at large and his growing obsession with the bridge to Pirandello's notion that escape from the uncertainties of real life can be effected by moving into art, where all things remain fixed and dependable. Both he and Jill Levenson have noted that in attempt such an escape, Albert sacrifices his essential humanity, becoming unconcerned and eventually

\[Cahn, pp. 47-48, 90.\]
The belief that he can transcend his own absurdity causes him to see himself as an overwhelmingly important figure, rather than as a figure of no significance whatsoever. Fraser defines the difference between them: "You see yourself as the centre, whereas I know that I am not placed at all" (p. 39).

Albert's self-image is intricately bound up with the bridge. When he sees the army of 1,799 painters coming to finish his task in a single day, he can only shout at them from his bridge-top perch. He interprets any attempt by someone else to care for the bridge as a personal assault against him. His increasing self-absorption and determination to rise above the general absurdity eventually condemn him to fall with his bridge.

Kenneth Tynan has argued that the end of Albert's Bridge, in which Albert, Fraser, the bridge, and presumably most of the 1,799 painters all fall into the bay, is an easy ending which allows Stoppard the liberty of neither condoning nor condemning any single characters view. 27 This interpretation ignores the fact that the bridge has functioned as an important symbol of Albert's artificially imposed order throughout the play. When it collapses, ironically because of the ordered marching of the painters, all that Albert had thought to achieve goes with it. The precision, symmetry, and balance that were supposed to make the

26 Jill Levenson, "Views From a Revolving Door: Tom Stoppard's Canon to Date," Queen's Quarterly, 78 (Autumn 1971), p. 434.

27 Cahn, p. 94.
bridge more dependable and ordered than the rest of the world have proved to be false props. Albert's Bridge is in the end a recognition of both absurdity and the impossibility of escaping it through an egotistical withdrawal.

While Albert and Glad are the two characters who have the clearest perceptions of absurdity, and their respective plays are those in which absurdity come most clearly to the fore, the audience is more likely to be entertained than instructed or intellectually stimulated by these plays. The potential for exploration of ideas and issues lies within these two, but it is never developed. In giving Glad a comical unrealistic job and exaggerating Albert's devotion to the bridge to outlandish lengths, Stoppard undercuts the serious ideas within his plays and seeks the laughing response rather than the thoughtful one.

He further lessens their intellectual impact by developing only one character's line of thought in each play. This approach is understandable in If You're Glad I'll Be Frank, as her isolated job allows her no chance for connection with other people. But in Albert's Bridge, Stoppard has a perfect opportunity to explore two varying reactions to the recognition of absurdity in Albert and Fraser. Instead of any meaningful dialogue about their perceptions of the world below them, however, these two only exchange insults. When Fraser describes his fears about the town, Albert taunts him with everything from being an animal lover to having an irrational fear of traffic. The crucial

28 Cahn, p. 94.
distinction between the two, Fraser's seeing himself as an outsider while Albert assumes a demi-god stature, is only noted in one brief line and then dropped.

The pattern seen through these plays is consistent. Ideas are either absent, trivial, or raised only to be ignored. Of course, part of the reason for this lack of development lies in the length of the plays. With the exception of Enter a Free Man (and it should be borne in mind that this was Stoppard's earliest play and one he now acknowledges as a false start), these are all one act plays. The time element limits severely the ways in which ideas can be expanded and explored. When Stoppard combines his ideas with comedy, he makes his task more difficult. He settles too easily for the quick joke or pun at the expense of developing more thoughtful concepts. In some plays, notable Enter a Free Man, After Magritte, and The Real Inspector Hound, it is the predominance of comedy over ideas that prevents any deep significance from being brought out. After Magritte does have some superficially attractive thoughts, but, as I have shown, the ideas turn out to be inconsequential. The same is true of Where Are They Now?. Artist Descending a Staircase, with its focus on defining art and the artist, gives the closest approximation of dealing with interesting and worthwhile thoughts. Its shortcomings can best be seen in relation to the even better plays to be dealt with in the next chapter. Compared to such works as Enter a Free Man, After Magritte, and The Real Inspector Hound, it seems a relatively serious intellectual effort. The subject of art is not a trivial one, but it is not a literal matter of life and death, as is the subject of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Artist
Descending a Staircase prefigures the later works, especially Travesties, and thematically it is understood as part of that set of plays, those with ideas balanced between the trivial and the universal.

In the above plays, absurdity has been a fleeting background impression at most. In those three that hold absurdity to be a more central fact of existence, the promise of matter as well as comedy shows brighter, but it is still not brilliant. A Separate Peace is weak, perhaps because of the protagonist's weak perception of absurdity in society alone, not himself. Such a limited vision does not bring the real impact of the absurd home to either character or audience. Glad is a much more moving and sympathetic character in her fuller understanding of the absurd. Were it not for the fact that her time/time-keeping distinction is ultimately a useless one, she might be the most appealing of Stoppard's protagonists in this entire set of plays. As it is, she is condemned to ruminate alone about an idea which seems to have no immediate practical consequences. Cahn's observation that Glad's mind begins to disintegrate once she has recognized the absurdity around her is demonstrated in her reduction to giggling hysterically at the prospect of giving obscene time reports.29 By the play's end Glad receives more pity than respect or admiration.

Albert, although he becomes an isolated and egotistical figure, earns more audience respect because he is not cowed by absurdity as Brown and Glad are. The play gives one an initial feeling of hope as

29Cahn, p. 86.
Albert seems to have found a way of adding meaning to his own life. Despite the ridiculous lengths Albert goes to, such as spending nights on the bridge, this play could develop an important dialogue about reactions to absurdity between Fraser and Albert. Stoppard here had the chance to move beyond the recognition of absurdity to the exploration of it, but he chose not to take the opportunity. Albert's Bridge remains an admirable short play but does not aspire to anything new.

That final criticism can be applied to all these plays in terms of their ideas. None of them have very much that is significant to say. They are proving and testing grounds for techniques which are put to better use in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers. The beginnings of multiple viewpoint approaches are seen in Where Are They Now?, Artist Descending a Staircase, and Albert's Bridge. What is most lacking are simply ideas of a magnitude to justify exploring them. Such ideas appear in Stoppard's two best plays to date, which I will examine next.
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, which first appeared in 1966, brought Tom Stoppard to public notice and acclaim. In this play, Stoppard succeeded in bringing his strengths—an inquiring mind, verbal wit, and an affinity for parody—into a harmonious blend. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead both raises issues and entertains an audience. The jokes never predominate to such a degree that the questions about death and reality fade from one's mind, but neither does one go for more than a few lines without being amused. While this play abounds with thought-provoking lines and situations, it is certainly not constructed so as to proselytize for any one viewpoint. It is not, then, didactic in the usual sense of the word, but neither is it superficial. One might say that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is designed to produce a desired reaction in the audience, specifically to induce them to consider its questions for themselves. In this play one finds a didactic work which advocates no causes or beliefs except the need for people to consider options and explore opposing viewpoints.

The first important difference between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and the shorter plays already examined is the status of absurdity.
in the world of the play. The short plays that go the furthest in dealing with the absurd, Albert's Bridge and If You're Glad I'll Be Frank, only discover its existence. The action of those plays is to reveal that the world is on some level a disordered place devoid of divine meaning or purpose. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead takes the end point of such plays as its starting position, making absurdity a given rather than a concept to be established.

The opening scene of the play establishes the absurdity of the world without direct reference to it. One device toward this end is the familiar sight of two men sitting by the side of the road, passing time and apparently waiting for some person or piece of information to clarify their situation for them. The immediate and striking similarity to Waiting for Godot cannot be missed by anyone familiar with contemporary theatre. Indeed, so obvious is the connection between the two plays that criticism of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead can scarcely proceed without mention of Beckett's work.

The game which Ros and Guil play further confirms the absurdity of their world. Coins are tossed and come down heads ninety-two times in a row. This remarkable happening implies the suspension or non-existence of a natural law of probability. As Julian Gitzen points out, such "natural laws" represent a way in which people can exercise control over their lives by knowing what to expect next. The strange run of heads thus implies a world where order and control are illusions that have

stopped operating, leaving the absurdity exposed.

Numerous other factors throughout the play reinforce this original impression of absurdity. The company of Tragedians, and especially the Player, gives voice to the suspicious of Ros and Guil: "Oh yes. We have no control. Tonight we play to the court. Or the night after. Or to the tavern. Or not." They also embody the condition of absurd man. Nothing they do has any significance to them. They are beyond surprise or shock, and are willing to "stoop to anything if that's your bent" (p. 24). Morality and ethics mean nothing to them; only the condition of being observed matters. Morality and ethics mean nothing to them; only the condition of being observed matters.

The importance of acting, and of witnessing another's actions, is the greatest and most often repeated reminder of the absurdity of the world. The Player explains this to Ros and Guil on their second meeting. The first meeting, on the road to Elsinore, came to an abrupt end when the courtiers slipped away from a performance the Tragedians owed them, leaving the actors playing to an empty landscape. They felt deeply betrayed:

You don't understand the humiliation of it—to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable—that somebody is watching. . . . There we were—demented children mincing about in clothes that on one ever wore, speaking as no man ever spoke, swearing love in wigs and rhymed couplets, killing each other with wooden swords, hollow protestations of faith hurled after empty

2 Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 25. (All forther quotations will be taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.)
promises of vengeance—and every gesture, every pose, vanishing into the thin unpopulated air.

The Player's speech hints at the fundamental difference between illusion and reality. Illusion requires an audience in order to have any function at all. By its very nature, an illusion is intended to fool someone. The existence of an observer is implicit in the existence of an illusion. The speech also hints at a distinction which the Player is capable of making—some situations have meaning or viability and others do not. The Player is the only character who lays claim to finding meaning in anything, even though he admits that his meanings are themselves illusions.

There are further reminders of the absurdism of the world, largely in the speeches of Ros and Guil themselves. Their inability to keep their names straight or to understand what is going on around them points up the chaos both within and without them. Time and again their attempts to exercise control over their destinies—in the form of reasoning, trying to upset the court's plans, breaking open their sealed orders—come to nothing. Their status as Shakespeare's characters leads one to question their independent being. The fact that absurdity exists in the world is clear and ever-present in this play, but it is not the main thrust of the play.

A comparison with Waiting for Godot, a play whose main goal is the demonstration of absurdity, makes this point clearer. Although there are superficial resemblances between the two pairs of characters from the two plays, there are even more important differences. Vladimir and Estragon make no progress at all in the course of Godot, chiefly because
they do not try to change anything. So thoroughly has the chaotic, meaningless world defeated them that they can only huddle together and try to pass the time as best they can with insults and dreams of suicide. Ros and Guil are not notably more successful in understanding the world around them, but they are distinctly more willing to try. They believe that some sort of order or explanation is owed them, and the play is a record of their various strategies for getting just that. As Victor Cahn points out, they have moral sensibilities capable of being offered by the Tragedians' pornographic proposals, and they understand and cling to the concept of "home." Even when absurdity exists all around them, they can sustain belief in some sort of escape. In this respect they resemble the title character of Albert's Bridge, who also believed that he could climb out of the chaos and establish his own private system of meaning.

The chief tasks of Ros and Guil is the determination of what to believe in, what is real and what is illusionary. Consequently, the play as a whole is not about generalized absurdity, but about a more specific problem related to it. How does one deal with illusion in a world where everything that gives apparent meaning to life is probably an illusion? Ros and Guil find themselves in a philosophical funhouse, in a race to find the exit before death finds them. Just as in a real funhouse, they must determine which bits of information can be trusted and which are deceptive and distorted reflections that will only lead them into blind

alleys. The ideas within this play that are important are the various strategies of Ros, Guil, and the Player in finding their ways toward the exit. If one pictures the "classic" absurdist theatre as going only so far as recognizing that the characters are in a funhouse with no guarantee that there is any way out other than death, it becomes clear that Stoppard promises a much more engrossing and stimulating experience in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, as well as a more optimistic one.

The nature of the play's theme—how does one determine what, if anything, is real—moves *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* into a different sphere from that of the media plays. The difference is that between a simple paradox and a genuine ambiguity. The themes or issues one has seen in the shorter plays have been of the sort which, at most, look more complex or original at first glance than they do on close inspection. The notion of finding order or logic in apparent confusion, as presented in *After Magritte*, is a good example. Goldstein effectively exposed the ideas in that play as ultimately superficial, and in particular as not leading to any new understanding of the world.\(^4\) I have shown that none of the plays discussed in the second chapter leads to fresh insights about the world or is aimed toward inspiring the audience to think out their own insights.

The same thing cannot be said of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* or of *Jumpers*. These plays deal with enduring questions about the

human condition. Philosopher Jonathan Bennett has examined *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and identified five major topics which the play touches on: reality, identity, memory, activity, and death. Of these five areas, Bennett names identity and death as the crucial ones. He sees Ros and Guil as figures devoid of identity, who have no memorable names, no past, no inner reality. He blames this lack of substantial personality for their failure to seize control of their destinies and avoid death. While Bennett's five topics are all ideas which have been examined frequently, Stoppard adds a new aspect by examining them under the conditions of absurdity. Traditional beliefs and theories about death and identity must be abandoned. The characters in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* start out from ground zero and must establish new beliefs, testing by trial-and-error to find what assumptions work in the absurd world and what will lead them into trouble.

Stoppard employs multiple viewpoints for conducting this exploration. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* represents his first well-developed use of this technique. By creating three major characters, each of whom has a different temperament and a correspondingly different set of beliefs and concerns, Stoppard sets the stage for exploration rather than exhortation. Ros, Guil, and the Player banter, debate, and argue their points of view back and forth throughout the play. At the conclusion, no character has been declared a winner, although there are subtle factors of characterization that tend to shift audience sympathy to one side or the other.

---

another. Stoppard never definitively closes the question, however, and far from indicating that he is uncommitted or himself a symbol of modern man's powerlessness, as some have charges, that fact harbors one of the greatest strengths of the play.

Were Stoppard to attempt a definitive answer to the questions raised in this play, he could only diminish the effectiveness of his work. The vastness of the topic, and the number of possible approaches and viewpoints that could be taken, render the labelling of any one as correct a presumptuous act. Clive James has given one of the best explanations of the importance of Stoppard's multifaceted viewpoint:

But physics, to the small extent that I understand it, ceased being Newtonian and started being modern when Einstein found himself obliged to rule out the possibility of a viewpoint at rest. Nobody could now believe that Einstein did this in order to be less precise—he did it in order to be precise over a greater range of events than Newtonian mechanics could accurately account for. Mutatis mutandis, Stoppard abandon fixed viewpoints for something like the same reason. The analogy is worth pursuing because it leads us to consider the possibility that Stoppard's increasingly apparent intention to create a dramatic universe of perpetual transformations might also spring from the impulse to clarify...It might have been a comfort to them (people who find his drama cold) if Stoppard had rested content with merely saying: listen, what looks odd when you stand over there is perfectly reasonable if you stand over here, whereupon the place you left begins looking odd in its turn. That would have been relativity of a manageable Newtonian kind, which

---


anyone patient enough could have hoped to follow. But Stoppard added: and not they you're Here, you ought to know that Here is on its way to somewhere else, just as There is, and always was. That was Einstein's kind of relativity—a prospect much less easily grasped.

That simpler Newtonian relativity of which James speaks is the sort one finds in *After Magritte*. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* presents Einsteinian brand, more complex, less easily grasped, but more rewarding.

Even if Stoppard did believe that he had the proper answer to one of the looming questions in the play, he would not have been wise to assert it. The open-ended nature of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* not only avoids didactic presumption, but invites audience participation of a belated sort. The average spectator has probably given some thought to questions about reality and death in his/her lifetime. That person leaves a performance of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* not just appraised of what some other person thinks but informed of a variety of viewpoints and wondering which among them is most accurate. A play which didactically presents a single line of thought as the correct one is likely to inspire one of two simple reactions: the viewer agrees or disagrees. But a play such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is far more likely to send the viewer out of the theatre with an open mind and an inquiring one.

The three major characters' views can be divided into two camps, one of which is further sub-divided to produce the third view. The

major division falls between the Player and the courtiers. The Player lives by illusion, recognizing and accepting that fact. Ros and Guil refuse to be reconciled to a life of sham and pretense; they believe in the possibility of making sense, if not of the world at large, at least of their own lives. They are divided according to how they pursue that possibility. Guil seeks logic and order, a predictable series of events which follows natural laws. Ros is the more impetuous and emotional of the two, given to wider swings of mood and more easily frustrated. In an interview, Stoppard has confirmed that Ros and Guil are two halves of a whole personality, his own, and that "They're carrying out a dialogue which I carry out with myself. One of them is fairly intellectual, fairly incisive; the other one is thicker, nicer in a curious way, more sympathetic. There's a leader and the led."

The divergent directions of their search for meaning are established at the opening of the play, in the coin toss game. Stoppard uses their reactions to the run of ninety-two heads to delineate their characters:

The run of "heads" is impossible, yet ROS betrays no surprise at all—he feels none. However, he is nice enough to feel a little embarrassed at taking so much money off his friend. Let that be his character note.

GUIL is well alive to the oddity of it. He is not worried about the money, but he is worried by the implications; aware but not going to panic about it—his character note.

---

Guil's order-seeking mentality shows itself in his fourth line: "A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability" (p. 12). He continues to think in ordered terms, rationalizing a way for the run of heads to end: "It must be the law of diminishing returns. . . . I feel the spell about to be broken" (p. 23). When the spell goes on unbroken, Guil delivers a series of possible explanations that depend on order and logic, and which is itself tightly ordered (he numbers his ideas as he produces them):

It must be indicative of something, besides the redistribution of wealth. (He muses.) List of possible explanations, One: I'm willing it. Inside where nothing shows, I am the essence of a man spinning double-headed coins, and betting against himself in a private atonement for an unremembered past . . . Two: time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times. . . . On the whole, doubtful. Three: divine intervention, that is to say, a good turn from above concerning him, cf. children of Israel, or retribution from above concerning me, cf. Lot's wife. Four: a spectacular vindication of the principle that each individual coin spun individually (he spins one) is as likely to come down heads as tails and therefore should cause no surprise each individual time it does. (p. 16)

Logical as all this has been, it is only a warm-up for a long speech in which Guil exhibits several of his most important characteristics. He prefers not to react emotionally, especially fearfully, although he has admitted that the situation is a fear-inspiring one. He also indicates that the nature of their world has undergone a sudden change—things used to fall into ordered pattern and operate along predictable lines. And although the change has been from order to disorder, predictability to inexplicability, Guil clings firmly to the principles of
logic in his effort to understand what has happened:

The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defense against the pure emotion of fear. Keep tight hold and continue while there's time. Now—counter to the previous syllogism: tricky one, follow me carefully, it may prove a comfort. If we postulate, and we just have, that within un-, sub- or supernatural forces the probability is that the law of probability will not operate as a factor, then we must accept that the probability of the first part will not operate as a factor, in which case the law of probability will operate as a factor within un-, sub- or supernatural forces. And since it obviously hasn't been doing so, we can take it that we are not held within un-, sub- or supernatural forces after all; in all probability, that is. Which is a great relief to me personally. (Small pause.) Which is all very well, except that—(He continues with tight hysteria, under control.) We have been spinning coins together since I don't know when, and in all that time (if it is all that time) I don't suppose either of us was more than a couple of gold pieces up or down. I hope that doesn't sound surprising because its very unsurprisingness is something I am trying to keep hold of. The equanimity of your average tosser of coins depends upon a law, or rather a tendency, or let us say a probability, or at any rate a mathematically calculable chance, which ensures that he will not upset himself by losing too much nor upset his opponent by winning too often. This made for a kind of confidence. It related the fortuitous and the ordained into a reassuring union which we recognized as nature. The sun came up about as often as it went down, in the long run, and a coin showed heads about as often as it showed tails. Then a messenger arrived. We had been sent for. Nothing else happened.

(pp. 17-18)

There is an emotional tone in this speech which reveals Guil's underlying desperation. The syllogism which he expects to prove comforting provides little in the way of actual comfort. He has backed himself into a corner, having shown through two syllogisms that they are and are not held within "un-, sub- or supernatural forces." This is logic's first failure—it has given him two diametrically opposed conclusions. Retrenching, he steps down the certainty he is willing
to assign to the familiar operation of events, starting with law, falling back to tendency, and finally retreating to probability and chance. He fondly recalls the days when such a diminishing faith in laws was not necessary.

Abandoning this abstract theorizing, Guil turns to a more practical examination of the day's events as he and Ros remember them. Though he is somewhat reassured to find that they both recall the messenger bearing the summons to the court, he is also dismayed to realize just how little information they are acting on. He does have a faith that their actions are not without meaning, however. The idea of an absurd world in which they could be racing toward Elsinore for no purpose is completely foreign to Guil: "We have not been . . . picked out . . . simply to be abandoned . . . set loose to find our own way . . . We are entitled to some direction . . . I would have thought" (p. 20).

In the courtiers' first encounter with the Tragedians, Guil reveals another aspect of his rejection of absurdity. The Player admits his own lack of control over whom he meets and where his company plays. Guil asserts a contrar condition, believing that he not only controls his own life but that he can exercise some control over the actions of others as well:

```
GUIL: Perhaps I can use my influence.
PLAYER: At the tavern?
GUIL: At the court. I would say I have some influence.
PLAYER: Would you say so?
GUIL: I have influence yet.
PLAYER: Yet what?
    GUIL seizes the PLAYER violently.
GUIL: I have influence!  (p.26)
```

Again there is a desperation in his claim to influence that indicates
his own seeds of doubt in the matter are beginning to strout.

Guil, though his doubts about the orderliness of their situation are growing, is still capable of recognizing a pattern when he sees one. Having seen tossed coins come down heads ninety-two times in a row, he has learned a new pattern, if not any reason behind it. He offers a bet to the Tragedians, and the coins come down heads in the same way they have since the opening of the play. The Player soon becomes uneasy and refuses to bet any more. Guil eggs him on, demonstrating the endless run of heads. Fortunately for Guil, the Tragedians refuse to bet on any more coins. The final coin is tossed but ignored for several minutes until the troupe goes off to take their places for "Number 38." When Ros picks up the coin, he finds a significant change:

ROS: I say--that was lucky.
GUIL: (turning): What?
ROS: It was tails.

(p. 34)

The importance of this change in coin-toss results stems from its implications about logic. Not only are the traditional laws such as probability not operating, but new laws are not taking their place. Guil thought he had rationally observed and learned something about how their strange new world proceeds, but when he acted on his new "knowledge," it slipped out from under him just as his earlier attempts at rational action had.

Guil's rage for order is also a desire for a sort of imprisonment. The sort of order he seeks would eliminate the need to make decisions constantly and to cope with the new or unexpected. It is the order of the prison cell, in which the prisoner is in one sense free from having to cope with much of the vicissitudes of day-to-day life but is in a
much larger sense bound to the directives of some controlling force. Soon after arriving at Elsinore, Guil offers an attractive picture of this sort of order:

There's a logic at work—it's all done for you, don't worry. Enjoy it. Relax. To be taken in hand and led, like being a child again, even without the innocence, a child—it's like being given a prize, an extra slice of childhood when you least expect it, as a prize for being good, or compensation for never having had one. ... (p. 40)

Later, in the third act, he gives a similar description of the benefits of shipboard life:

Yes, I'm very fond of boats myself. I like the way they're—contained. You don't have to worry about which way to go, or whether to go at all—the question doesn't arise, because you're on a boat, aren't you? Boats are safe areas in the game of tag ... the players will hold their positions until the music starts. ... I think I'll spend most of my life on boats. ... One is free on a boat. For a time. Relatively. (pp. 100-101)

Gradually, one sees that Guil's order is not an ideal but an escape. Cahn connects the courtier's willingness to give up freedom in return for a measure of certainty with Pirandello's idea of art as a form of escape from uncertainty. The only reality Guil will admit is an artifice, a comfortable fiction that allows him to exercise choice in small matters (which way to promenade around the deck) while freeing him from responsibility for larger matters (which way the boat, and consequently he, sails).

\[^{10}\text{Cahn, pp. 47-48.}\]
The flaw in Guil's theory is his perception about the larger force that provides his order. He characterizes it as benevolent—its dictates are a "prize" and "safe areas." He assumes that something is watching over his protectively, that order is inherently concerned with the welfare of all that moves within its sphere. In fact, Guil has given himself up to an illusion of reality; the wheels that turn are not even aware of his identity, much less concerned with providing a meaning for his life.

As a character, not only in Stoppard's work but in Shakespeare's, Guil provides the perfect image of a man whose freedom is sacrificed to someone else's order. His place in Hamlet can be interpreted in two ways. Hamlet himself condemns Guildenstern, along with Rosencrantz, as knowing henchmen of the king who deliberately betray their old friend for a pittance. He can confidently justify his sending them to their deaths: "Why, man, they did make love to this employment; / They are not near my conscience." But many modern writers see the courtiers' position differently. Kenneth Tynan draws together the views of Stoppard, Oscar Wilde, Clive James, and himself in his commentary on Ros and Guil, picturing them as a pair of bewildered innocents who have been called into a situation they neither understand nor ask for. Wilde's expression of their spot says it all:

They are close to his secret and know nothing of it. Nor would there be any use in telling them. They are little cups that can hold so much and no

---

more... They are types fixed for all time. To censure them would show a lack of appreciation. They are merely out of their sphere: that is all.

But no matter which interpretation of Guil's actions one holds, the end must be the same. Whether he willingly betrayed his friend or uncomprehendingly stumbled through his encounter at the court, Guil's actions lead inevitably to his death. In surrendering his freedom to an outside force, he achieves not meaning, but an arbitrary death. As a character, he has, of course, no choice in whether or not to follow the author's dictates. But within the play, he also chooses to be controlled and led. He is doubly the dupe of the illusion or order and meaning.

Guil's telling discussions on the nature of reality surround the subject of death. In these exchanges, Guil is quite certain that he knows what is real and what is merely illusionary. He berates the Player for presenting a false image of death:

Actors! The mechanics of cheap melodrama! That isn't death! (More quietly.) You scream and choke and sink to your knees, but it doesn't bring death home to anyone—it doesn't catch them unawares and start the whisper in their skulls that says—"One day you are going to die." (He straightens up.) You die so many times; how can you expect them to believe in your death?

(p. 83)

Logic tells him that people will not believe what they have seen to be a lie. It also says that the essence of death is not in the end of life but in the void that is left behind. His own definition of death

concentrates on the after-effects rather than the initial signs:

No, no, no . . . you've got it all wrong . . . you can't act death. The fact of it is nothing to do with seeing it happen--it's not gasps and blood and falling about--that isn't what makes it death. It's just a man failing to reappear, that's all--now you see him, now you don't, that's the only thing that's real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back--an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death. (p. 84)

Guil's ideas of death are put to the test in the final encounter with the Tragedians. He and Ros have just opened the letter which commands their death. The shock of this revelation is enough to convince Guil that he was wrong in giving over so much control to others:

"Where we went wrong was getting on a boat. We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current. . . ." (p. 122). He still clings to the hope of meaning, however. While he feels betrayed at learning that others have marked him for death, he assumes that there is some reason for the action: "But why? Was it all for this? Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths?" (p. 122). The Player makes light of the notion that Ros and Guil have some importance unknown to them, and remarks that all things end in death. His implication is that nothing the courtiers have done has meaning, at least not in the sense that they desire. Guil, outraged at the belittlement, again insists that actors cannot comprehend reality, especially the reality of death which they take so lightly:

I'm talking about death--and you've never experienced that. And you cannot act it. You die a thousand casual deaths--with none of that intensity which squeezes out life . . . and no blood runs cold anywhere.
Because even as you die you know that you will come back in a different hat. But no one gets up after death—there is no applause—there is only silence and some second hand clothes, and that's—death—

(p. 123)

At this point, Guil stabs the Player and watches on the edge of hysteria as he dies, clutching at his wound, weeping, falling to his knees and finally lying still. Guil has been deceived; he has fallen for what he pronounced unbelievable, been taken in by a fake that was obvious to the rest of the Tragedians.

Although his deception amounts to a tacit admission that the Player's form of death is not so insignificant as Guil had claimed, he will not relinquish his own belief. He does, however, reduce the scale of his claims about death. Now he can only say that the quiet absence is what death is for him, and for Ros:

No . . . no . . . not for us, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over . . . Death is not anything . . . death is not . . . It's the absence of presence, nothing more . . . the endless time of never coming back . . . a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound . . .

(p. 124)

In this smaller claim, Guil is justified, for his death is just the sort he describes:

Well, we'll know better next time. Now you see me, now you—(and disappears).

(p. 126)

True to his nature, he comforts himself that this whole episode will be given some ultimate sort of meaning, if not in connection with the events just past, then as preparation for some future occurrence. His death is quiet, without gasps and chokes; in that way, he refutes the Players ideas.
Within Guil's character, Stoppard presents the logical man, the one who wants very badly to believe in some greater order directing his life. He is willing to follow along, even when he personally cannot comprehend that order. When it leads to his death, he has a moment of doubt about his choice of leaders, but his basic faith that life has meaning never falters. He goes to his death composed. But Guil cannot be called a hero. He has been shown to be fallible, to be capable of error and to be obsessed absolutely with the pursuit of an illusory ideal. As a character, he gains audience sympathy at some points, but he is unlikeable at others (when, for instance, he rationalizes sending Hamlet to his death). Ultimately, his point of view is shown to work for him, but it cannot be extended further than that.

Ros, like Guil does not willingly accept the absurdity around him at surface value. His desire is to escape it rather than to understand it. This fact makes him in many respects a shallower character than Guil, less interested in delving into meanings and truths, but in no way does it diminish his validity as a human type. He shows much more emotion than Guil does; he thinks less accurately, easily falling into clichés. His mind wanders, and it is usually he who introduces the diversions from the main action of understanding their situation.

Ros's character, just as Guil's, is quickly established in the opening scene. As already noted, he is aware that the coin-toss game runs strangely in his favor, but he does not penetrate into the larger implications of that fact. Instead, he is overjoyed at having set a new record. Guil's rapid-fire syllogisms and lists of explanations only leave Ros dumfounded; his typical reaction to one of Guil's long
speeches in "I'm sorry I—what's the matter with you?" (p. 17). Another early exchange which sets the tone for Ros's character shows his inability to concentrate for more than a few moments and his density in dealing with even simple questions, but also his friendly disposition and patience at Guil's badgering:

GUIL: What's the first thing you remember?
ROS: Oh, let's see... The first thing that comes into my head, you mean?
GUIL: No--the first thing you remember.
ROS: Ah. (Pause.) No, it's no good, it's gone. It was a long time ago.
GUIL: (patient but edged): You don't get my meaning. What is the first thing after all the things you've forgotten?
ROS: Oh I see. (Pause.) I've forgotten the question.

(p. 16)

When the Tragedians enter, Ros takes longer than Guil to catch on to the pornographic nature of their dramatics, and he is more intrigued and embarrassed than outraged when he does understand what they do. While Guil is disgusted, Ros sees what he can get for little money:

Well, all right--I wouldn't mind seeing--just an idea of the kind of--(Bravely.) What will you do for that? (And tosses a single coin on the ground between them.)

(p. 28)

When his paltry offer is rejected with scorn, Ros grows moralistic out of his shame: "Filth! Disgusting--I'll report you to the authorities--perverts! I know your game all right, it's all filth! (p. 29). In this reaction, Ros shows himself more hackneyed and less sincere than Guil, whose quiet but appalled response evoked a greater distaste for the Player and his troupe.

Ros has a pragmatic side as well as a dense one, however. He is the one who notices the Player's trying to sneak off with the last coin thrown in Guil's game and smoothly asserts his own claim to it.
Following their disastrous first interview with Hamlet, Ros faces up to their loss, while Guil rationalizes their performance:

GUIL: I think we can say we made some headway.
ROS: You think so?
GUIL: I think we can say that.
ROS: I think we can say he made us look ridiculous.

(p. 56)

And when Guil begins to tie himself up hopelessly in a quasi-rational attempt to determine the direction of the wind, Ros suggests: "Why don't you go and have a look?" (p. 58). His intuitive pragmatism leads him to an early and essentially correct response to their situation at the court. Immediately after their first meeting with Claudius and Gertrude, Ros senses how out of place they are:

ROS: I want to go home.
GUIL: Don't let them confuse you.
ROS: I'm out of my step here---
GUIL: We'll soon be home and high--dry and home--I'll---
ROS: It's all over my depth---
GUIL: --I'll hie you home and---
ROS: ---out of my head---
GUIL: --dry you high and---
ROS: (cracking, high): --over my step over my head body!---I tell you it's all stopping to a death, it's boding to a depth, stepping to a head, it's all heading to a dead stop---

(pp. 37-38)

Although he cannot articulate his fears in a coherent way, Ros has intuited the doomed nature of their position while Guil is still reasoning and rationalizing. It seems there is something to be said for trusting one's instincts. On the single occasion when Ros tries to act on his instincts, however, he is easily thwarted. He declares, "I'm going," (p. 73), after another kingly interview but gets no further than the wings, where Hamlet's presence cows him down. The stage directions note that he acts "without confidence" when Guil ignores him. The instinctive requires support from the intellectual in order to take
effective action.

Ros does very little in the way of questioning what is real and what is illusory around him. He assumes that what he sees is real, neither searching for deeper meaning, like Guil, nor accepting events as illusory, like the Player. He refrains from entering the arguments on the nature of death which involve the other two, but he does give voice to his feelings in one remarkable speech. In a stumbling manner, Ros tries to separate the real from the illusory, here centering on what he thinks divides death from an end of living that still retains consciousness. Critics such as Jill Levenson often point out the trite, repetitive nature of this speech as evidence of Ros's fundamental thick-headedness, and they are correct in that his phrasings are inaccurate, generalized, and continually stray from his central point. But Ros is making a genuine effort to deal with a complex, and for him, very pertinent idea. One should note that he has at least a basic, although fuzzy, sense that one's ideas about a think are not always accurate:

It's silly to be depressed by it. I mean one thinks of it like being alive in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is dead... which should make all the difference... shouldn't it? I mean, you'd never know you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being asleep in a box. Not that I'd like to sleep in a box, mind you, not without any air--you'd wake up dead for a start, and then where would you be? Apart from inside a box. That's the bit I don't like, frankly. That's why I don't think of it... Because you'd be helpless, wouldn't you? Stuffed in a box like that, I mean you'd be in there for ever. Even taking into

13Jill Levenson, "Views From a Revolving Door: Tom Stoppard's Canon to Date," Queen's Quarterly, 78 (Autumn 1971), p. 436
account the fact that you're dead, it isn't a pleasant thought. Especially if you're dead, really . . . ask yourself, if I asked you straight off--I'm going to stuff you in this box now, would you rather be alive or dead? Naturally, you'd prefer to be alive. Life is a box is better than no life at all. I expect. You'd have a chance at least. You could lie there thinking--well, at least I'm not dead! In a minute someone's going to bang on the lid and tell me to come out. (pp. 70-71)

Ros's understanding of the absurdity around him resembles John Brown's in *A Separate Peace*. Like Brown, he sees a chaotic society where events leave him confused and bewildered. He also remembers a simpler time when he felt secure and in control of his life:

I remember when there were no questions. . . . Answers, yes. There were answers to everything. . . . I haven't forgotten--how I used to remember my own name--and yours, oh yes! There were answers about it--people knew who I was and if they didn't they asked and I told them. (p. 38)

His simple response is to assume that absurdity is a product of some portion of society, not a general condition of life. Just as Brown wished to get back to the set routine of hospital or P.O.W. camp, Ros believes he will be able to return to the ideal condition he recalls if only he can escape the physical surroundings of the court. He is content to view the entire interlude at Elsinore as just a bizarre interruption into his normally placid life, if only he is released:

I don't pretend to have understood. Frankly, I'm not very interested. If they won't tell us, that's their affair. (He wanders upstage toward the exit.) For my part, I'm only glad that that's the last we've seen of him--- (p. 92)

ROS: He said we can go. Cross my heart.
GUIL: I like to know where I am. Even if I don't know where I am, I like to know that. If we go there's no knowing.
ROS: No knowing what?
GUIL: If we'll ever come back.
ROS: We don't want to come back.
GUIL: That may very well be true, but do we want to go?
ROS: We'll be free.  

In the third act, Ros rapidly loses his hope of ever returning home. His emotional response amounts to a simple urge for retaliation— if someone is going to ruin his life, then he can at least ruin their attempts:

ROS: I could jump over the side. That would put a spoke in their wheel.
GUIL: Unless there're counting on it.
ROS: I shall remain on board. That'll put a spoke in their wheel. (The futility of it, fury.)
All right! We don't question, we don't doubt. We perform. But a line must be drawn somewhere, and I would like to put it on record that I have no confidence in England. Thank you. (Thinks about this.) And even if it's true, it'll just be another shambles.  

When he attempts to recapitulate their adventure, his memories prove to be a loose conglomeration of insignificant points. He makes no meaningful pattern out of them and doesn't care to, so long as the faint promise of release still looms ahead:

The position as I see it, then. That's west unless we're off course, in which case it's night; the King gave me the same as you, the King gave you the same as me; the King never gave me the letter, the King gave you the letter, we don't know what's in the letter; we take Hamlet to the English king, it depending on when we get there who he is, and we hand over the letter, which may or may not have something in it to keep us going, and if not, we are finished and at a loose end, if they have loose ends. We could have done worse. I don't think we missed any chances . . . . Not that we're getting much help.  

Although he is the more emotional of the two, Ros's reaction here is
more content, more dispassionate that Guil's. Because he does not question deeply into events and search out meanings, he is not distressed when disorder rules. He does not require that everything fit neatly into place. Periods of chaos can be tolerated as long as they are punctuated by periods of return to the safe center of home. Ros rests content in the knowledge that, put in a difficult situation, they did the best they could, and escaped (so he thinks) as quickly as possible.

Ros's reaction to the death orders of the third act shows his basic sense of justice. He does not insist on a deep and understandable meaning to all of his life, but he does want to know why a death should be ordered—and he is as concerned for Hamlet's life as he is for his own. While Guil is inventing reasons for not interfering in the scheduled execution of Hamlet, Ros raises basic objections: "we're his friends. . . But what's the point? . . . He's done nothing to us. . . . It's awful" (pp. 110-111). But the time his own sentence is revealed, Ros is beyond the point of objecting. He accepts the reality he sees before him: "They had it in for us, didn't they? Right from the beginning" (p. 122). And following one brief moment of an almost reflexive instinct for self-preservation ("Couldn't we just stay put? I mean no one is going to come on and drag us off. . . . They'll just have to wait" (p. 125), he returns to his resigned acceptance, unconcerned that he has extracted no meaning from the preceding events: "All right, then. I don't care. I've had enough. To tell you the truth, I'm relieved" (p. 125).

Throughout the play, Ros's level of awareness of absurdity has
been far lower than Guil's. When their lives change from a presumably ordered existence (although note that Guil insists that it was never so simple or certain as Ros remembers it) to the chaos of the court, Ros is confused by the lack of order, even if he is not deeply upset by it. He finds it more of an inconvenience than a threat to his understanding of the world. He barely comprehends the idea of a division between reality and illusion at all; when he grasps the edge of the concept, in his speech on death, his grip is tenuous and easily shaken. Ros's faith is the simplest and in a way the most unshakeable of all the three main characters. He trusts what he sees and hears to be real. The idea that life is made up of illusions which one treats as reality for want of anything better is completely beyond him. He requires that things make sense only in a basic way—that deaths are deserved according to his simple ideas of justice, or that Hamlet's strange behavior is attributable to his circumstances. He is the simple man, and though one may castigate his lack of fine discrimination and his gullibility, one must also admit that he moves through the experience at Elsinore and on the boat with less anguish and anxiety than Guil, and arrives at the same end. He sums up his own philosophy: "Be happy—if you're not even happy what's so good about surviving?" (p. 121).

The third approach to dealing with the absurd world belongs to the Player, and, by extension, to his troupe of Tragedians. Several critics have tried to make a case for the Player's being the central role in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Such claims refer to the Player's solitary survival. Jill Levenson writes of him as "the most coherent
and intelligent character in the play. Other critics, including John Weightman and Robert Egan, concur in Levenson's judgment that the Player possesses more direction and mastery over his situation than do Ros and Guilt.

The Player's philosophy is intimately bound up with his profession. As an actor, he creates his own realities out of fiction. But he also extends that creative action to his life, acting all the time:

GUIL: Well . . . aren't you going to change into your costume?
PLAYER: I never change out of it, sir.
GUIL: Always in character.
PLAYER: That's it. (p. 33-34)

Playing roles becomes a way of life for the troupe. "We do onstage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else" (p.28).

Although they are acting all of the time, the Tragedians depend on others to write the scripts for them. Their scenarios are "pirated from the Italian" (p. 22). The Player views being thrown on their own resources as the depths of misfortune:

PLAYER: Well met, in fact, and just in time.
GUIL: Why's that?
PLAYER: Why, we grow rusty and you catch us at the very point of decadence--by this time tomorrow we might have forgotten everything we ever knew. That's a thought, isn't it? (He laughs generously.) We's be back where we started—improvising. (p. 22)

Levenson, p. 437

Improvising—making one's own way in the world without benefit of a script to indicate direction—is an activity the Player consigns to beginners. He implies that it is not to be admired for the originality it might take but to be avoided for its uncertainty.

In this way, the Player is in a position similar to Ros and Guil's. Egan has noted that

Like them, the Player and his band are doomed to act in scenarios not of their own devising. Yet unlike the protagonists, who at this point fear to recognize, let alone come to terms with, the truth of their situation, the Tragedians accept from the outset their dislocated and unfree condition. Acknowledging that they exist within a dramatic plan over which they have no control, they "take (their) chances where (they) find them," playing their roles as best they can, wherever and whenever they must play them.  

Experienced as he is in acting out a role defined by someone else, the Player offers advice to the pair, and particularly to Guil, about how to survive in such surroundings:

Uncertainty is the normal state. You're nobly special... Relax. Respond. That's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn.  

(p. 66)

That advice is not enough for Guil, who is concerned with finding out truths and meanings. Acting according to another's dictates can't guarantee him that he knows the truth of the situation (as he would define truth, something in harmony with the greater meaning or pattern he seeks). Rather than suggest a change in actions, the Player compensates with a new definition of truth, one that clearly originates

16Egan, p. 62.
in Camus's absurdist conception of all beliefs or certainties as illusions:

Everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true. It's the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn't make any difference so long as it is honoured. One acts on assumptions.

(p. 67)

The Player has a coping strategy here, one that says in effect, "It's so if you think it's so" and echoes Pirandello's Right You Are, If You Are. One of Stoppard's later plays, Professional Foul, resurrects this notion in the form of Prof. Anderson's "ethical fictions as ethical foundations." But while Anderson uses this notion only to justify his concepts of truth and responsibility, the Tragedians apply it more widely, to every aspect of their lives.

The Player accepts the fact that everything is illusory, but he is content to act as though those illusions were real. For him, an accepted illusion is the only reality. He makes this point clear when he discusses death with Guil. The courtier has challenged the gasping, choking stage deaths of the troupe as unbelievable: "You die so many times; how can you expect them to believe in your death?" (p. 83). The Player points out that within his value system, something need only be accepted, not plausible. Anything may be believed if it is what is expected:

On the contrary, it's the only kind they do believe. They're conditioned to it. . . . Audiences know what to expect, and that is all they they are prepared to believe in.

(p. 83-84)

His assertion is borne out when he fools Guil into believing in just such a stage death during Act III.
The Player's coping strategy does save him a great deal of questioning, wondering, and anxiety. Robert Egan contends that it does even more, allowing him the possibility of finding meaning in the absurdity, creating something out of nothing. The Player expresses this action as making the unimportant seem important:

I extract significance from melodrama, a significance which it does not in fact contain; but occasionally, from out of this matter, there escapes a thin beam of light that, seen at the right angle, can crack the shell of mortality.

(p. 83)

But it may be possible that the questioning saved by this strategy is really the essence of humanity. Jill Levenson admits that the Player's approach to life is ultimately more successful than the courtiers' (at least he stays alive), but she expresses reservations about it:

A purely defensive measure, it does nothing to enrich the soul it protects. It leaves little room for real emotion, for compassion and tolerance and love. Like Albert's bridge, it can be dehumanizing; perhaps it too is only a temporary respite.

The Player survives; that is the strongest recommendation one can give his philosophy. Of the three coping strategies shown in the play, his is the one that works. But it works at what expense? The Tragedians have little dignity or admirability. They are aptly described by Guil as "a comic pornographer and a rabble or prostitutes" (p. 27). Little Alfred surely is not given much of a life by the acting he does:

\[^{17}\text{Egan, p. 65.}\]

\[^{18}\text{Levenson, p. 437.}\]
GUIL: Come here, Alfred... Do you lose often?
ALFRED: Yes, sir.
GUIL: Then what could you have left to lose?
ALFRED: Nothing, sir.

Pause. GUIL regards him.
GUIL: Do you like being... an actor?
ALFRED: No, sir. (pp. 31-32)

Egan admits the failure of the Player's philosophy to make life bearable for all the Tragedians when he deals with Alfred's role:

The Player replies by presenting them with an even more explicit and tawdry emblem of their condition: poor Alfred, whose role, no matter what the script, must be that of the helpless and used victim. That happens to Alfred literally in The Rape of the Sabine Women reflects figuratively what will happen to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they are "caught up in the action" of Hamlet.¹⁹

Whether one believes that he is dealing with real life, as Ros and Guil do, or with an illusion, as Alfred does, the victimization is the same. Granted, the Player himself seems to have escaped the fate of these three victims, but his stature as an admirable figure is diminished by his willingness to victimize Alfred. He is a survivor, but not one whose survival techniques appear desirable. John Weightman celebrates the Player as the modern hero and master of all identities, but even he must admit that the qualities which give vibrancy to the role are forces of lust and greed.²⁰

The use of the three viewpoints just examined—Ros's, Guil's, and

¹⁹Egan, p. 61.

²⁰Weightman, p. 40.
the Player's—contributes to the strength of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Stoppard keeps a careful balance among the three approaches to absurdity. Ros's emotional, somewhat dense attitude appears objectively to be the least effective way of dealing with his situation. He never gets anywhere, never understands anything, and doesn't seem to care. Standing against that weakness is his likeability as a character. Stoppard noted that Ros is a nicer person than Guil, and one need not be told that he is far nicer than the Player. He has a child-like quality which makes it easier to think of him as a bewildered innocent and draws audience sympathy. His obvious befuddlement and occasional collapses into despair are moods with which the audience member can identify, typical of one's reaction to the increasing complexity of life. Ros is the average figure among the three, the man-on-the-street flung into the midst of absurdity. Much as one would like to believe that he or she would react with Guil's intelligence or the Player's savoir faire in their situation, it is Ros who gives the measure of the common person. Therein lies the balance of Ros's role. One rejects his viewpoint for its ineffectiveness but is drawn to it for its sheer humanity.

Guil's point of view appeals to the desire for reason and order. His intelligence and persistence stand out as favorable traits. He seems to be resolutely a realist, especially in his insistence on the true nature of death, a topic in which he makes the crucial distinction

---

21 Hayman, p. 40.
between actual death and the end of life that is usually labelled as death. Guil's rationality becomes a stumbling block, however, when it prevents him from recognizing the absurdity around him and thus leads to his futile search for order. His mistake is assuming he has killed the Player exposes his fallibility, and especially in Act III his reason smacks of rationalization. Guil's personality shifts between the self-confident intellectual and the kindly friend. His attitude toward Ros can be haughty at one moment ("What could we possibly have in common except our situation?" (p. 48)) and gentle the next ("There! . . . and we'll soon be home and dry. . . ." (p. 38)). Particularly because he is correct about the style of his own and Ros's deaths, one tends to find Guil a credible figure, even while seeing that he is clearly mistaken about many of his assumptions.

Certainly, between the two, they present a range of reactions to absurdity. Guil consciously recognizes the signs of absurdity; he has an intellectual awareness of it. He uses reason to forestall any emotional response, particularly fear. Ros never reaches any clear intellectual awareness of the absurdity, but almost instinctively he feels the fear and uncertainty without knowing just what he is afraid of. They are complementary halves of a full human response. Neither one is exclusively desirable. As a protagonist, either one without the other would soon grow tiresome. Together, they reinforce each other, shore up weaknesses, and manage to keep on going until their deaths are decreed. Their fully human combination gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead the quality of humanism mixed with absurdism which Giankaris
finds so admirable. 22

I have already discussed the balance within the Player's role. He is practical and successful if one's definition of success is closely allied with survival. And yet his energy, wit, and pragmatism are not enough to make him hero of the play. His survival has the ring of a hollow victory. He and his troupe are tattered in both clothing and spirit; survival may not be so good a word for their condition as subsistence. In the long run, can one really say that a personality known as the Player survives, or only that a series of meaningless roles "pirated from the Italian" survives? The Player is even more nameless than Ros and Guil. They may not remember which name belongs to which one, but they have only two possibilities. As Guil remarks, their situation is "comparatively fortunate; we might have been left to sift the whole field of human nomenclature, like two blind men looting a bazaar for their own portraits" (p. 39). Together, as halves united, they have a clearly identifiable composite image which could not be confused with the Player or any other figure in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. They make a sort of homo gestalt (to borrow Theodore Sturgeon's terminology) with its own name, ROS & GUIL. The Player goes on with a title, not a name. One knows the parts he plays, but whether there is an individualized human being beneath those parts cannot be known. The troupe is even more nameless, except for poor little Alfred, always distinguishable in his victimization.

The balance achieved among the three principle roles insures that no one character's point of view can be completely espoused or condemned. Each has strong and weak aspects, admirable and dislikeable traits. The ending brings each character the sort of death he believed in—a stage death for the Player, a quiet disappearance for Ros and Guil. Each opinion is confirmed for the person who believed in it. Stoppard presents a useful picture of absurdity here. He tells the audience that there is no one way of living with the absurd that is right for everyone; he implies that there is ample room for multiple views to exist side by side. And he presents a selection of views that the audience may choose among, choose to reject in favor of their own ideas, or, of course, choose to make no judgment whatsoever. One of Guil's speeches contains an implicit argument for Stoppard's multiple viewpoint style:

A man breaking his journey between one place and another at a third place of no name, character, population or significance, sees a unicorn cross his path and disappear. That in itself is startling, but there are precedents for mystical encounters of various kinds, or to be less extreme, a choice of persuasions to put it down to fancy; until—"My God," says a second man, "I must be dreaming, I thought I saw a unicorn." At which point a discussion is added that makes the experience as alarming as it will ever be. A third witness, you understand, adds no further dimension but only spreads it thinner, and a fourth thinner still, and the more witnesses there are the thinner it gets and the more reasonable it becomes until it is as thin as reality, the name we give to the common experience. . . . "Look, look!" recites the crowd, "A horse with an arrow in its forehead! It must have been mistaken for a deer."

(p. 21)

The shared experience or opinion grows thin; were Stoppard and his audiences to agree on any one viewpoint as the true one, it would be
in this case a poor, bodiless viewpoint, one innocuous enough to please everyone.

While the open-mindedness of multiple viewpoints is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*('s) major strength, it is not the sole one. Stoppard also marshalls his jokes into tighter order than in his early plays. As in his best media plays, *If You're Glad I'll Be Frank* and *Albert's Bridge*, Stoppard draws his humor from the central ideas. Jokes are not made merely for the experience of hearing the audience laugh. And the best jokes and most sustained passages of humor are placed so as to highlight the important ideas in the play. One thinks immediately of the question game, perhaps the funniest exchange of dialogue in the show and much more than a pseudo-vaudeville routine. It points up the helplessness of Ros and Guil to comprehend their situation and emphasizes Guil's dominant personality and Ros's difficulty in thinking at all. The same points are made in the long monologues spoken by the protagonists. Ros's chief speech, his reminiscence on death, presents the audience with his ideas, such as they are, and also demonstrates the essentials of his character. Guil's comical speeches, notable his attempt to determine the wind's direction, make much of his orderly mind falling into its own traps, as well as showing the futility of reasoning about the irrational.

Stoppard indicates an even greater control over his fertile comic spirit by restraining it all together at times. Guil's speeches on the nature of death as a void are quite serious. Unlike Ros, he can resist the temptation to make a pun when the mood is somber. Although Guil and Albert have been compared as having the same basic flaw in their
approaches to absurdity, and both go to their deaths, one finds it more
natural to take Guil seriously, while Albert never escapes his status as
a purely comical figure.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Stoppard proved two things. He could write a full-length play of serious import without sacrificing
his comic style, in which he used the added length to explore topics he
had only touched on in other places, and he did so without falling into
despair or triviality. The advance over his earlier full length work,
*Enter a Free Man*, can safely be called a giant step. Stoppard also, and
more importantly, showed that absurdist theatre has room for humanistic
elements. It has room for a variety of ideas about how to confront
absurdism and how to decide what one is going to believe. Most of all,
Stoppard wrote a piece of absurdist theatre that went beyond saying that
life is a crazy funhouse to asking how one can find his way through it.
*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a play of ideas without being
overtly didactic, and a laughing comedy without being trivial. Stoppard
has stated his goal in playwriting: "What I try to do, is to end up by
contriving the perfect marriage between the play of ideas and farce or
perhaps even high comedy." In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, he
has succeeded.

Stoppard's *Jumpers*, which first appeared in 1972, marks the se­
cond high point of his achievement. This play shares many of the
strengths which distinguished *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, but

it also adds new factors of its own which enhance its effectiveness for the contemporary audience. It presents a clearly absurd world, recognizable from the beginning as a place in which traditional rules and beliefs have been abandoned. Within this absurd world, Stoppard examines the conflicting ideas of four characters, playing one off against the others in a carefully balanced consideration which once again reaches no definite conclusions.

In *Jumpers*, Stoppard takes one forward rather than backward in temporal setting. This world is a futuristic one, indicated primarily through the existence of new political parties and a British moon landing expedition. The behavior of these of these new groups illustrates the changes in society brought about by forsaking traditional values. The new Rad-Lib party, whose victory is being celebrated at the play's opening, seems a political nightmare come true. Sir Archie Jumper, a party mainstay, has openly hinted at fraudulent election tactics: "Archie ways it was a coup d'état not a general election. . . . Democracy is all in the head. Archie says. . . . It's not the voting that's democracy, it's the counting."24 The victory is marked by a parade of a very military cast, featuring marching soldiers and squadrons of jets. Sweeping changes in the fabric of British life are announced, including the imprisonment of property companies and the Masters of Foxhounds, the rationalization of the Church of England, and the appointment of the Rad-Lib spokesman for agriculture, a veterinarian, to the post of

24 Tom Stoppard, *Jumpers* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1972), pp. 34-35. (All further quotations will be taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.)
Archbishop of Canterbury. Meanwhile, a spaceship carrying two British astronauts reaches the moon, but is disables in landing there. When they find that their ship retains only enough power to carry one of them back to earth, the two engage not in heroics but in a brawl to see who can be the first one back inside the ship.

The world is implied by these few events is firmly anti-traditionalist in stance. Altruism, fair play, and honesty are replaced by selfishness and relative values. Ronald Hayman sums up the moral stance of the Jumpers world: "Traditional ethics cannot survive in a universe where quarrelsome jumpers can land on the moon, churches are converted to gymnasiums, . . . and the police can be persuaded to connive at murder."25 This abandonment of tradition is the primary absurdist trait in the world of Jumpers. Characters are not so bewildered or lost as they were in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. They have pasts which they can remember, and while some of them heartily disapprove of the direction in which their society moves, they are capable of grasping how and why society changes. This form of absurdity is one in which events and people seem to be acting unconscionably to those who maintain traditional views, but not one in which every familiar idea proves undependable.

The world of Jumpers stands in closer relation to the contemporary world than did that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. While its absurdity is manifest, so are many identifiable institutions and activities. A modern audience can identify more closely with

political parties and elections (even such odd ones as the Rad-Libs) than with courts and divine right monarchy, with musical comedy theatre more than with strolling Tragedians, and with the adventure of a moon shot more than that of a sea voyage. While both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers create worlds in some respect removed from the familiar reality, Jumpers is far closer to the world one knows. One can think of it as one’s own potential future, perhaps ten or twenty years from now, while the world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead lies in the remote past, and one cannot think of it in so personal a manner. Stoppard gives one a minimally absurdist world, separated from the real by only a few exaggerations.

The problem facing the characters in the play is also closer to common experience than was that in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. By closer I mean that more people probably ask it of themselves in the form in which it is expressed in the play. The problem of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, what is real and what is illusion, is so large and overwhelming a question that to dwell on it for long would be to induce a paralysis of action such as that which afflicts the courtiers. It is a looming question which impinges on one’s life, but of which one is not often directly and totally aware. Jumpers asks an equally ambiguous question, but one which works on a smaller scale. This play asks whether there are moral absolutes of good and evil, and whether or not a supreme god exists. As in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, the question is one of enormous import. The character of one’s life depends on one’s answer. Yet it is also a more manageable question. It arises in certain contexts and its answer can be applied directly to
determining one's behavior. *Jumpers*' central question is more easily comprehended than *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*('s). Certainly, no one misses the point in *Jumpers*, while numerous disagreements have arisen about that the point of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is. Without slipping into didacticism or losing his comic touch, Stoppard in *Jumpers* brings his debate on living absurd one step closer to the experience of his audience.

Stoppard uses the technique of multiple viewpoints to good advantage in *Jumpers* as he did in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. He distributes his characters in much the same way, as well. George Moore, like Guil, refuses to accept the world as absurd. He pursues a vision of rationality and meaning, happy to admit the existence of a greater force than his own human mind if only that force will serve as a stabilizing, ordering influence. Moore's opponent, Sir Archie Jumper, echoes the Player in his acceptance of absurdity. His values are completely relative, and like the Player's roles, they can be changed at a moment's notice. Both Archie and the Player are opportunists who operate happily in an absurd world, freed of the restrictions and distractions of moral absolutes and ultimate meanings. Dotty Moore makes the third point of the triangle, the position filled by Ros in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Both these figures depend on emotion to determine their response to the world. Both have an almost instinctive, rather than intellectual, recognition of absurdity, and both react to the recognition by withdrawing, Ros to an insistence that he and Guil can return home and resume normal lives as he remembers them and Dotty to her bedrood and endless games of charades. *Jumpers* presents one with a three cornered
argument quite similar in structure to that in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; only the addition of McFee breaks the similarity, adding a fourth viewpoint to *Jumpers*, but one that is minor compared to the three other views and not significant enough to turn the triangle into a square.

*Jumpers'* central question of belief and morality proceeds on two levels. The most obvious of these is the academic debate which George prepared for throughout the play, and which forms the Coda. This debate presents the topic in abstract form; it is pure discussion, a battle of wits and arguments which has, in all probability, no practical or tangible effects. The action of the play which goes on around George's preparation introduces a more pragmatic aspect of the central question. The shooting of Prof. Duncan McFee and the possibility of an affair between Dotty and Archie raise much more immediate questions of belief and morality. The connection between these two levels of the central question is implied in the degree to which the philosophers' abstract musings help them to deal with the mysterious events of the play.

George states his philosophical position most clearly of all the characters. The speech he prepares for the upcoming symposium provides him with the perfect platform for his ideas. George has a two-fold purpose—to argue for the existence of God and for moral absolutes of good and evil. He takes on the question of God first, doing his best to proceed in a logical manner. Despite his strong conviction of God's existence, George has little interest in religion or religious proofs: "If God exists, he certainly existed before religion. He is a
philosopher's God, logically inferred from self-evident premises. That he should have been taken up by a glorified supporters' club is only a matter of psychological interest" (pp. 39-40).

George's arguments for the existence of this "philosopher's God" take the form of attacks on the opposition rather than well-reasoned statements of his own belief. He begins by asserting that the need to question God at all is a product of technology and intellectual fashion:

... while a man might believe that the providence of sheep's wool was made in heaven, he finds it harder to believe the same of Terylene mixture.

Well, the tide is running his (the unbeliever's) way, and it is a tide which has turned only once in human history. ... There is presumably a calendar date—a moment—when the onus of proof passed from the atheist to the believer, when, quite suddenly, secretly, the noes had it. (p. 25)

The second speech, in particular, shows George's awareness that the predominant mode of thinking swings toward the absurd. The trump card in George's rational approach to God's existence is the First Cause argument. He sets out to prove that everything must have a beginning, that infinity does not extend both forward and backward. To this end, he neatly demolished a famous paradox based on the idea of infinite series:

But it was precisely this notion of infinite series which in the sixth century BC led the Greek philosopher Zeno to conclude that since an arrow shot towards a target first had to cover half the distance, and then half the remainder, and then half the remainder after that, and so on ad infinitum, the result was, as I will now demonstrate, that though an arrow is always approaching its target, it never quite gets there, and Saint Sebastian died of fright.

(pp. 27-28)
He cites several more series of events or objects, all showing that "everything has to begin somewhere and there is no answer to that" (p. 29).

Despite his logical approach, George falls repeatedly into a more intuitive mode of thinking and speaking. He slips from logic to intuition easily, almost unconsciously, as shown in this speech:

There is reason and there is cause and there is motion, each in infinite regress towards a moment of origin and a point of ultimate reference—and one day!—as we stare into the fire at the mouth of our cave, suddenly! in an instant of grateful terror, we get it!—the one and only, sufficient unto himself, outside the action, uniquely immobile!—the Necessary Being, the First Cause, the Unmoved Mover!! (pp. 28-29)

Although he holds the rational up as the best method of thinking, George displays a qualitative difference between his logical and his intuitive arguments which does not favor the logical. Almost inevitably, when he attempts to follow purely rational lines of thought, George places himself in verbal difficulties. Like Gull, he finds that his logic is not sufficient to deal with the world. He either makes jokes at his own expense or seriously undercuts the points he habors to make. His joke about St. Sebastian is typical of the sort of wordplay that engulfs his reasoning. At another point, he draws a very neat distinction between two sorts of Gods but carries through by denigrating the importance of his own idea:

There is, first, the God of Creation to account for existence, and second, the God of Goodness to account for moral values. I say they are unconnected because there is no logical reason why the fountainhead of goodness in the universe should have necessarily created the universe in the first place; nor is it necessary, on the other hand, that a Creator should care tuppence about the behavior of his creations.
Still, at least in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, nothing is heard either of a God who created the universe and then washed his hands of it, or, alternatively, a God who merely took a comparatively recent interest in the chance product of universal gases.

(p. 26)

Much later in his speech, George falls once again into the intuitive as he grows more and more desperate to make his belief believable:

And yet I tell you that, now and again, not necessarily in the contemplation of rainbows or new-born babes, nor in extremities of pain or joy, but more probably ambushed by some quite trivial moment—say the exchange of signals between two long-distance lorry-drivers in the black sleet of a god-awful night on the old A1—then, in that dip-flash, dip-flash of headlights in the rain that seems to affirm some common ground that is not animal and not long-distance lorry-driving—then I tell you I know— I sound like a joke vicar, new paragraph.  

(p. 71)

Attempting one last rational proof of God, George analogizes that if polygons imply a perfect form—the circle—then human life implies a more perfect form of life—God. "And if I doubt it, the ability to doubt, to question, to think, seems to be the curve itself. Cogito ergo deus est. The fact that I cut a ludicrous figure in the academic world is largely due to my aptitude for traducing a complex and logical thesis to a mysticism of staggering banality" (pp. 71-72). At this late point in his preparation, George realizes both his strength and weakness as an apologist for God. His rational approach falls apart repeatedly, but his basic convictions come through strongly. He does sound like a vicar, as he noted, but that is not necessarily the flaw that he considers it. After all, who is more convincing on the subject of God's existence than a clergyman?

There is solid background for George's recognition of God on both
the intellectual and the emotional levels. Recognized philosophical thought admits three ways of coming to an awareness of God's existence: reason, revelation, and religious experience. Although George pays lip service to the first of these, he makes his most convincing statements in the second mode. In this recognition of the intuitive, George reflects his nominal ancestor, the British philosopher G. E. Moore. Moore himself argued for the usefulness of intuition in knowing such undefinable concept as good. That George the character is meant to remind one of Moore the philosopher is implied by the extended use of historical names in such appropriate contexts throughout the play.

George's second major focus is the proof of moral absolutes of good and evil, a defence of traditional beliefs. This portion of his lecture has but one major premise. He attacks the relativist position that because various cultures have differing concepts of good, good can be reduced to whatever a group of people agrees to call it, and it can be changed in much the same way as changing aesthetic tastes may change the definition of beauty from one age or culture to another. While George willingly admits that different cultures do possess different ideas about what constitutes ethical behavior, he goes on to point out that the concept of ethical behavior is a universal:

What is surely more surprising is that notions such as honour should manifest themselves at all. For what


is honour? What are pride, shame, fellow-feeling, generosity and love? If they are instincts, what are instincts? . . . But what can be said to be the impulse of a genuinely altruistic act? Hobbes might have answered self-esteem, but what is the attraction or the point in thinking better of oneself? What is better? . . . What, in short, is so good about good? . . . It is not nameable because it is not another way of referring to this or that quality which we have decided is virtuous. It is not courage, and it is not honesty or loyalty or kindness. The irreducible fact of goodness is not implicit in one kind of action any more than in its opposite, but in the existence of a relationship between the two. It is the sense of comparisons being in order.

(pp. 54-55)

On the whole, George produces a better argument for moral absolutes than he could for the existence of a deity. He consigns his opponents to the "moral limbo" of a completely relative view, one that admits that "one man's idea of good is no more meaningful than another man's whether he be St. Francis or--" (p. 67). He demonstrates that many of the exercises of the logical positivists amount to no more than wordplay of a meaningless sort, considering such uses of good as in "a good bacon sandwich" rather than any true moral context. But when Archie challenges him on these points, George returns to the safe haven of the emotional, intuitive recognition of good once again:

All I know is that I think that I know that I know that nothing can be created out of nothing, that my moral conscience is different from the rules of my tribe, and that there is more in me than meets the microscope.--

(p. 67)

Just as G. E. Moore claimed to be able to recognize good when he saw it and to be able to make relative judgments about which of two things
was better than the other without ever being able to offer a definition of good, George lays claim to the same intuitive discriminatory ability. His final trump is played in the Coda, when he points out that even the most entrenched of logical positivists hold certain of these instinctive moral beliefs:

These same people will, nevertheless, and without any sense of inconsistency, claim to know that life is better than death, that love is better than hate, and that the light shining through the east window of their bloody gymnasium is more beautiful than a rotting corpse! (p. 88)

George's abstract musings seem inevitably to trip him up, to end in pure intuitive conviction rather than to succeed by way of reason. The one fact that he proves incontrovertably is the depth of his own faith in God and in moral absolutes. His arguments fail to convince anyone else. A measure of the effectiveness of his arguments is provided by George's dealings outside the limits of preparing a lecture. Events in the play, McFee's murder and Dotty's affair, pose problems in belief, credibility, and ethics. In the long run, George's abstractions do very little to help him cope with those problems.

One should remember George's frequent claims to infer his beliefs logically; the same claims are repeated in reference to his relationship with Dotty, as soon as he suspects that she is seeing Archie on less than a professional level:

I can put two and two together, you know. Putting

28 Nelson, p. 379
two and two together is my subject. I do not leap to hasty conclusions. I do not deal in suspicion and wild surmise. I examine the data; I look for logical inferences. . . . Now let us see. What can we make of it all? Wife in bed, daily visits by gentleman caller. Does anything suggest itself? (p. 32)

Contrary to his claim, George has leapt to a conclusion about Dotty. He believes she is having an affair, in spite of the fact that he was in possession of several pieces of information (Archie is a psychiatrist; Dotty has recently suffered a nervous breakdown) which suggest a completely different conclusion. He makes a similarly wrong conclusion later in the play when he finally realizes that McFee was killed during the party at his house. A mix-up in conversation has led George to think that Dotty killed his pet rabbit, Thumper, and is eating it; he intuitively extends the limits of her murderous capacity: "... and I think that I know that something happened to poor Dotty and she somehow killed McFee, as sure as she killed my poor Thumper" (p. 79)

The facts available in these questions are sketchy at best. Whether Dotty is having an affair and who killed McFee are never answered. But one knows that George killed his own rabbit accidentally, and one sees that his reasoning in relation to the other two questions is marked by more assumptions and hasty conclusions than he recognizes. His faith in an abstract God does not extend to more mortal areas of concern, such as faith in his wife. At the height of his frustration he bursts out "How the hell does one know what to believe?" (p. 71).

The split between abstraction and action in George's character is recognized by many critics. Julian Gitzen notes that when George is working on his speech, he marshalls a "more reliable weapon," argument,
in defense of his view of life as meaningful than most of Stoppard's characters ever use. And yet when George's convictions are put to the test of reality, he is no more effective than any other Stoppard character in controlling his own life; his great work goes unwritten, he fails to establish an intimate relationship with his wife, he remains oblivious to a murder committed under his roof, and he kills his own pets. The failure of George's stance to benefit anyone shows most clearly in the Coda. When Archbishop Clegthorpe makes a sudden reversal and begins to argue for George's side, the Rad-Libs threaten him with death. He appeals to George, "Professor— it's not right. George— help" (p. 86), but George vacillates in uncertainty and abstraction:

Well, this seems to be a political quarrel. . . . Surely only a proper respect for absolute values . . . universal truths— philosophy---(A gunshot. It stops the music, and knocks Clegthorpe out of the pyramid, which disintegrates. . . .) (p. 87)

For all his moral convictions, George proves unable to answer any direct call for help which is made in the play. As G. B. Crump notes, George demonstrates that academia really is a place of inaction, and in his own failure to help others he earns the fate which befalls him at the end of Act Two— his own cry for help goes ignored.

In George, Stoppard creates another figure who will not accept the absurdity around him. As a counter to that absurdity, George offers

29 Gitzen, p. 145

30 Gitzen, p. 148

rationality, at which he is no more successful than Guil was. His reasoning dissolves into assumptions and suspicions, often wrong and never productive. He also offers faith; on this ground he cannot be proved wrong, but neither can he be proved right. As a crusader against absurdity, George is sympathetic but comically inept; his proffered alternatives are unproductive, bogged down in abstractions and dependent on nothing but his own faith.

The absurdist side of this philosophical argument is presented in a much more piecemeal fashion than is George's. One of its principle spokesmen, McFee, is murdered before he ever gets to speak a word. Sir Archie, the remaining live logical positivist, presents very little of his thought directly. Instead, his ideas are voiced by his aspiring disciple, Dotty, and by George as he tries to explain the logical position to Inspector Bones. Archie speaks for himself only in the Coda, which, as a dream sequence, distorts its contents into bizarre, oneiric, almost nonsensical forms. The result of this scattering of logical positivism through the play is that one must look sharply in order to discern just what the argument is which George opposes.

One is introduced first to Archie's politics, a subject which has already been touched on. He ardently supports the Rad-Libs, and glibly explains their suspicious tactics as the new wave in politics. The first extended look at his philosophy comes from Dotty, who explains that Archie has convinced her that she (or anything else) can never get "better:"

There's no question of things getting better. Things are one way or they are another way; 'better' is how we see them, Archie says, and I don't personally, very much; though sometimes he makes them seem not so bad
Things do not seem, on the one hand, they are; and on the other hand, bad is not what they can be. They can be green, or square, or Japanese, loud, fatal, waterproof or vanilla-flavoured; and the same for actions, which can be disapproved of, or comical, unexpected, saddening or good television, variously, depending on who frowns, laughs, jumps, weeps or wouldn't have missed it for the world. Things and actions, you understand, can have any number of real and verifiable properties. But good and bad, better and worse, these are not real properties of things, they are just expressions of our feelings about them.

(p. 41)

The key words "real and verifiable" identify Archie's line of thinking as logical positivism, a branch of philosophy whose chief tenet was Wittgenstein's "verifiability principle," the notion that nothing has meaning unless its truth or falsity is provable. The logical positivists, who established themselves in the 1930's (when, as George remarks, British philosophy "went off the rails" (p. 46)), rejected the possibility of making meaningful ethical assertions at all, concluding that such ideas as good and bad have no intrinsic meaning, but only serve to express the speaker's own opinions about his or her topic. This belief that value judgments are only expressions of feeling is known as emotivism.

Further elucidation of the logical positivist position comes from George, as he tries to explain McFee's beliefs to Inspector Bones:

He thinks good and bad aren't actually good and bad in any absolute or metaphysical sense, he believes them to be categories of our own making, social and psychological conventions which we have evolved in order to make living in groups a practical possibility, in much the same way as we have evolved the rules of tennis without Wimbledon Frprtnight would be a complete shambles, do you see? . . . Well, in simple terms he believes that on the whole people

Ill should tell the truth all right, and keep their promises, and so on—but on the sole grounds that if everybody went around telling lies and breaking their word as a matter of course, normal life would be impossible. . . . He wouldn't kill anyone. He would prefer it to be kept to a minimum. Otherwise—shambles.

(pp. 48-49)

Thus far, one would conclude that although the moralists and the logical positivists have taken different routes, they have both arrived at the same conclusion about what constitutes acceptable behavior, and so they have no insurmountable disagreements. But George makes a further point which exposes his real worry about Archie and his crowd; while George's beliefs are fixed, Archie's could be changed to whatever seems expedient in a given situation:

BONES: Well, if that's the case, I don't see any difference whether he thinks he's obeying the Ten Commandments or the rules of tennis.
GEORGE: The difference is, the rules of tennis can be changed.

(p. 49)

It is the threat of change, of instability and unpredictability, that George distrusts most in Archie's philosophy. If the rules can be changed at any time, there cannot be any ultimate order or meaning with which they accord. Archie's changeable rules imply an absurd world.

Archie provides one with an example of his own thought rather late in the play, as he and George have a brief discussion about religious faith. In arguing that faith and atheism are for the most part in accordance, differing only on what he considers the minor point of God's existence, Archie shows great insensitivity to what George certainly considers the major difference between their philosophies:
Religious faith and atheism differ mainly about God; about Man they are in accord: Man is the highest form of life, he has duties he has rights, etcetera, and it is usually better to be kind than cruel. Even if there is some inscrutable divinity behind it all, our condition for good or ill is apparently determined by our choice of actions, and choosing seems to be a genuine human possibility.

(p. 68)

Archie willingly shifts his focus and makes his ideas sound accommodating to whomever he speaks to, while George maintains a steadfast position of belief, unwilling to change in order to please others. In this shiftiness and lack of a steadfast position, Archie reminds one of the Player, willing to capitalize on whatever the vicissitudes of fortune bring him. Although George's position can occasionally make him appear to be an old curmudgeon, Archie's attitude is even more detrimental. He appears to glib and smooth to be trustworthy at all. His extra-legal efforts to have Dotty acquitted of a murder she may have committed reinforce that impression.

In the Coda, Archie makes his most important stand. One should remember, of course, that the Coda presents the philosophical symposium which George has been preparing for throughout the play, but presents it as he dreams it. Archie looks more ridiculous than one might expect him to be in a more realistic setting. In the first of his major speeches, he sets forth the supposed points he will make. They emerge as double-talk sprinkled with just enough recognizable words and phrases to suggest the possibility of meaning somewhere under the confused surface:

Indeed, if moon mad herd instinct, is God dad the inference?—to take another point: If goons in mood, by Gad is sin different or banned good, f'r'instance?

(p. 83)
In moving from one "point" to another, Archie merely reshuffles the same basic sounds, using almost the same letters, suggesting that his points are not very meaningful or very numerous. His speech also devalues language, using it in a nonsensical fashion, a trait strongly associated with absurdity.

In his second speech, Archie questions Captain Scott, the surviving member of the moonshot, about his process of decision. Although he inserts the requisite disclaimer "I would like you to describe to my Lord in your own words..." (p. 84), Archie constructs the most leading question one can imagine, a virtual catalogue of emotivist thinking on the subject of altruism:

. . . with special reference to your seniority over Captain Oates, your rational assessment of your respective usefulness to society on earth, your responsibility to yourself without which there can be no responsibility to others, and your natural responses to a pure situation that robbed you of history and left you naked, an Adam in a treeless, leafless and fruitless present without a past. (p. 84)

Captain Scott can only reply "That's it" (p. 84), his entire response having been anticipated in the question. Archie, through the tactics of confusion and intimidation, is clearly controlling the symposium.

In his final speech, Archie reveals what he claims is a message of hope, but what George would surely find the most dangerous aspect of logical positivism. He pleads for the acceptance of things as they are on a relative scale—the "things could always be worse" argument. While he admits the existence of much that George would brand as indisputably evil, he sanctions it all with the comforting thought that life goes on and some positive things happen as well:
Do not despair—many are happy much of the time; more eat than starve, more are healthy than sick, more curable than dying; not so many dying as dead; and one of the thieves was saved. Hell's bells and all's well—half the world is at peace with itself, and so is the other half; vast areas are unpolluted; millions of children grow up without suffering deprivation, and millions, while deprived, grow up without suffering cruelties, and millions, while deprived and cruelly treated, none the less grow up. No laughter is sad and many tears are joyful. At the graveside the undertaker doffs his top hat and impregnates the prettiest mourner. Wham, bam, thank you Sam. (pp. 88-89)

Archie's philosophy may be cold and superficial, but one cannot deny that he gets more done than George does. While George wanders in his abstract fog, Archie makes his way into circles of power. While George remains unaware of the murder that took place in his own house, Archie arranges for the body to be carried away in a very appropriate large plastic bag (". . . the Rad-Lib philosophy: 'No problem is insoluble given a big enough plastic bag'" (p. 40)). He has it placed in a public park and uses his authority as coroner to declare the death a suicide. Later, he frames Inspoecot Bones on a rape charge (with Dotty's cooperation), and so effectively disposes of the only person who threatened to disrupt his plan. Archie's methods are thoroughly disreputable, but that fact doesn't prevent his successfully manipulating others and furthering his own personal powers.

Archie reflects the absurdist position in the Jumpers debate. Like his predecessor, the Player, he moves comfortably in a world without fixed rules or grand design. In keeping with the world of Jumpers, similar to the familiar world in many respects and deviating from reality in only a few instances, Archie is not a completely unbelievable character. He goes beyond realism in his glibness and the audacity of some
of his actions (such as setting up McFee's "suicide"), but on the whole he is simply the complete opportunist. Archie demonstrates the behavior one might expect of sophisticated but unscrupulous people who no longer have rules or traditions restraining their actions. When belief in concepts of good and evil are removed, one has very little to guide one's behavior except self-interest. Archie is completely motivated by self-interest, with results which appear appaling to devotees of traditional morality such as George.

Thus far in this analysis, the characters have held firmly fixed philosophical positions, George at one extreme and Archie at the other. But other characters move in the intervening territory, uncertain of which line of thought offers them the correct conclusions. Chief among these undecided characters is Dotty, although one learns that McFee was also drifting into a state of uncertainty about his beliefs.

Dotty's drift in faith began with the moon landing. While the literal fight for survival aggravated her unhappy reaction to the lunar landing, it was not just the brawling and the abandonment which set her off. The very fact that men had walked on the moon was enough to disillusion her:

When they first landed, it was as though I'd seen a unicorn on the television news... It was very interesting, of course, but it certainly spoiled unicorns... They thought is was overwork or alcohol, but it was just those little grey men in goldfish bowls, clumping about in their lead boots on the television news; it was very interesting, but it certainly spoiled that Juney old moon; and much else besides. . . . (pp 38-39)

As a musical comedy star, Dotty was closely associated with the romantic view of the moon. She represented, for her many fans, "Illusion,
Romance, Myth, Mystery."\(^{33}\) Her retirement left the audience staring at "that stupid spangled moon" (p. 39), and in her attempt at singing for the Rad-Lib party, she tries to sing a variety of moon songs but can get none of them right. For Dotty, the moon landing resulted in the same sort of disappointment it provoked for Eric Sevareid:

> The moon was always measured in terms of hope and reassurance and the heart pangs of youth on such a night as this; it is now measured in terms of mileage and foot-pounds of rocket thrust. Children sent sharp, sweet wished to the moon; now they dream of bluntnosed missiles.\(^{34}\)

The moon passed from the realm of myth and ideal to the realm of the possible, provable, and explorable. Its traditional meanings and associations were blasted, it moved from George's sphere to Archie's, and Dotty finds herself moving after it.

The end of mystery signalled the end of belief in moral absolutes for Dotty as well. When the earth was the universe, for all practical purposes, what was common on the earth could be interpreted as being a universal. But man reached the moon, and suddenly what had been a universal became simply one way of looking at things, not necessarily applicable to a viewer on another celestial body:

> Man is on the Moon, his feet on solid ground, and he has seen us whole, all in one go, Little—local... and all our absolutes, the thou-shalts and the thou-shalt-nots that seemed to be the very condition of our existence, how did they look to two moonmen

---


with a single neck to save between them? Like the local customs of another place. When that thought drips through to the bottom, people won't just carry on... Because the truths that have been taken on trust, they've never had edges before, there was no vantage point to stand on and see where they stopped.

(p. 74-75)

Dotty, who was one of those people who took the rules and beliefs on trust, has been cut loose from her moorings by the events on the moon. She retires to her room, where she takes refuge in playing charades and being comforted by Archie.

George's insensitivity to his wife's emotional needs, which are paralleled with her philosophical ones, has already been noted. He offers her tradition in every aspect of life—monogamous marriage, faith in God and in moral absolutes, a quiet and ordered life devoid of noisy parties and "theatricals." But her faith has been shaken, and she cannot regain it on the basis of George's intuitions. Archie, on the other hand, offers only a cold sort of comfort. He plays her games with her, and may well be offering the purely physical affair which George suspects. He teaches her to spout emotivist theory, but he does not make her confident or happy. She still stays in the bedroom and can only whisper for help when left to dispose of McFee's body. Despite his treatment, she remains the "incomparable, unreliable, neurotic Dorothy Moore" (p. 17). By the play's end, she states (musically) that

35 Crump, p. 360

36 Crump, p. 360
she has a relative view of man ("Some ain't bad and some are revelations"),
cannot believe in heaven, and sees the past when she still held on to
ideals as "happy days," the present being diminished by her loss of
faith. Her inability to function sexually after her breakdown also
suggests unhappiness and sterility in the absurd world. Her final line,
and the closing note of the play, is "Goodbye spoony Juney Moon" (p. 89),
a farewell to all the ideals that the moon represented and George ar-
gues for. Dotty becomes a reluctant convert to absurdity.

Dotty loses a joy in life when she drifts away from George and
toward Archie. Her musical comedy life was associated with glamour,
excitement, love, and romance. But as she picks up the emotivist line
of thought, she recaptures none of her old happiness. Archie's philoso-
phy is thin and superficial; it does not bear looking into difficult
questions. Her life at the end of the play seems greatly diminished
from the life she described herself as leading before her crisis of
faith. Dotty provides the living proof that logical positivism is not
sufficient to fill the void that is left by the death of God and moral-
ity. One critic called her a reality-seeker amidst a group of abstract
academics; another has labelled her as representative of the common
man, adrift in a confusion of irrational, emotional needs. In that
respect she reminds one of Ros, who was also the emotionally oriented
common man figure of his play. The most disturbing note about Dotty's
position is that neither George nor Archie can even come close to meet-
ing her needs. If she does represent humanity, then Stoppard seems to

37 Crump, p. 368

38 Crump, p. 362

despair of philosophy's being of practical use. Traditional belief without action or conviction provide as cold a comfort as absurdity does.

Duncan McFee, the murder victim, was moving in a direction opposite to Dotty's just before his death. He, of course, never gets to speak for himself, leaving one with only second-hand information about his ideas. Through the greater part of the play, one has only George's description to rely upon, and his view is somewhat biased because of McFee's position as the other debater in the upcoming symposium. Indeed, although the murder is one of the first events of the play, George does not become aware of it until the closing minutes of the second act. And George was equally unaware that his own secretary was McFee's girlfriend of several years. This oblivion which enshrouds George reflects his extreme remove from the real world into an academic fog, a remove which proves to have misled him about McFee.

George describes McFee as "Professor of Logic, and my chief adversary at the symposium. . . . Well, he's completely mad, of course. They all are..." (pp. 48-49). He classified McFee's philosophy as "Mainstream. . . . Orthodox mainstream" (p. 49), but of course he considers that the current mainstream is one which "went off the rails" some forty years before. George accuses McFee of prostituting his ideas to win Sir Archie's favor and thus advancing in academia, something George has failed to do:

On the other hand, McFee, who sees professorship as a license for eccentricity, and whose chief delusion is that Edinburgh is the Athens of the North, very soon learned to jump a great deal better than he ever thought, and was rewarded with the Chair of Logic.  

(p. 51)
The composite picture presented by George characterizes McFee as a logical positivist who has chosen his beliefs according to what is politically expedient and professionally popular rather than according to his own inner convictions. One can easily picture McFee as a toady ing companion to Archie.

Some distance into the second act, Archie begins to hint at an alternative view of McFee. One learns two important things about the dead jumper here. One is the position of importance he held, and the other is a hint that his beliefs were not so completely sole to Archie as George believed:

Who knows? Perhaps McFee, my faithful protégé, had secretly turned against me, gone off the rails and decided that he was St. Paul to Moore's Messiah . . . . But McFee was the guardian and figurehead of philosophical orthodoxy, and if he threatened to start calling on his masters to return to the true path, then I'm afraid it would certainly have been an ice-pick in the back of the skull. (p. 63)

Archie's comment appears to be no more than idle, almost jocular, speculation. Thus far, one has seen no real indication that McFee was altering his philosophical stance. Not until the end of the second act does one hear what seems to be the true state of McFee's mind, and then the information comes not from either of his professional colleagues, but from Mr. Crouch, the janitor for the Moore's building. He had developed quite a friendship with McFee as the latter stopped by almost every day to pick up George's secretary after work. Crouch describes McFee as his mentor, philosophy being the janitor's hobby. And clearly, Crouch knew McFee better than did any of the other characters. McFee revealed to Crouch the doubts that assailed him as a result of the moon landing, the same event that unhinged Dotty's faith:
Of course, his whole life was going through a crisis, as he no doubt told you. . . . It was the astronauts fighting on the Moon that finally turned him, sir. Henry, he said to me, Henry, I am giving philosophical respectability to a new pragmatism in public life, or which there have been many disturbing examples both here and on the moon. Duncan, I said, Duncan, don't let it get you down, have another can of beer. But he kept harking back to the first Captain Oates, out there in the Antarctic wastes, sacrificing his life to give his companions a slim chance of survival. . . . Henry, he said, my argument is up a gum-tree. . . . Duncan, I said, Duncan, don't you worry your head about all that. That astronaut yobbo is good for twenty years hard. Yes, he said, yes maybe, but when he comes out, he's going to find that he was only twenty years ahead of his time. I have seen the future, Henry, he said; and it's yellow.

(p. 80)

And then Crough reveals the startling fact which confirms Archie's earlier speculation that McFee might be returning to religious faith:

"Well obviously, he had to make a clean breast and tell her it was all off--I mean with him going into the monastery" (p. 81).

That is the last heard of McFee, except for the "approximately two minutes of approximate silence" (p. 83) granted his memory at the beginning of the symposium. His movement in philosophy was exactly opposed to Dotty's. While the moon landing forced her to abandon ideals of good and faith in God, they frightened Duncan into questioning the direction his philosophy might lead the world. If McFee was correct and twenty years' time would bring a world which could approve Captain Scott's action, then Dotty is indeed the "reality-seeker" that Virginia Leonard called her. She sees the future's direction and accepts it, although it brings her to a breakdown. McFee, surprisingly, does not accept the future he sees. He is moved to make a moral judgment, to reject the actions that his former emotivism might sanction, and to begin a search for ideals as a way of countering that
future.

This criss-crossing movement of Dotty and McFee is one example of Stoppard's carefully maintained balance among the philosophical positions in *Jumpers*. This balance is not perceived by many critics who hold that the play is intended to support George's position and argue for moral absolutes. Kenneth Tynan, for instance, places Stoppard firmly on George's side:

> In that great debate there is no question where Stoppard stands. He votes for the spirit . . . he defined himself as a supporter of "Western liberal democracy, favouring an intellectual elite and a progressive middle class and based on a moral order derived from Christian absolutes."

Victor Cahn agrees with this position, describing George as a mouthpiece through which Stoppard protests the emotivist vision of the world.\(^41\)

Stoppard himself seemed to confirm these critics in their conclusion that *Jumpers* espouses moral standards when he said, "*Jumpers* was the first play in which I specifically set out to ask a question and try to answer it, or at any rate put the counter-question."\(^42\) But one must remember that to Stoppard, putting the question is not synonymous with answering it. In the same interview, he suggested that he prefers not to answer such questions:

> . . . the element which I find most valuable is the one that other people are put off by— that is, that there is very often no single, clear statement in my

\(^{40}\) Tynan, p. 86

\(^{41}\) Cahn, p. 123

\(^{42}\) Stoppard, "Ambushes," p. 16.
plays. What there is, is a series of conflicting statements made by conflicting characters, and they tend to play a sort of infinite leap-frog. You know, an argument, a refutation, then a rebuttal of the refutation, then a counter-rebuttal, so that there is never any point in this intellectual leap-frog at which I feel that is the speech to stop it on, that is the last word.43

This is not to say that Stoppard has no convictions about morality. Tynan and others who know Stoppard speak very convincingly of his strong beliefs in moral absolutes. Stoppard's own statements about politics illustrate his moral convictions: "I believe all political acts must be judged in moral terms, in terms of their consequences."44

In fact, his own strong convictions show the magnitude of his achievement in the fact that he doesn't write dogmatically about them. Stoppard proves himself capable of forming his own opinions, and yet respecting the fact that there are multiple facets to every argument. In general, his plays leave one with little doubt about which position Stoppard personally favors (the one given to the more sympathetic characters) but do raise doubts about which of the positions presented can be most efficacious in real life. In effect, one is asked to choose between the satisfaction of believing one has done the "right thing" and the satisfaction of surviving and prospering.

One faced the same sort of conflict among characters of Jumpers that one found in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Characters who


are sympathitic are also ineffectual; those who seem to have more control, or at least more effective strategies for dealing with the world around them, are personally distasteful. Stoppard clearly intended George to garner audience sympathy. He has been described as a stubborn survivor of a shipwrecked culture who projects a "lively and sympathetic impression" of human needs, "humane and therefore human," attracting "sympathy and affection" although not for his beliefs so much for his personality, and sympathetic while not totally divorced from modern feeling and thought. Ayer, Britain's ranking logical positivist, found himself identifying more with George than with Archie, who is supposedly modeled on him, for he enjoyed the solid parody of philosophical styles of thinking and speaking in George's speeches.

George is undercut primarily because of his failure to apply his thinking to life. Grump finds this judgment borne out in George's attitude of anguish at the end of Act Two. Had he been able to apply his abstract moral goodness to show sympathy for his wife or to take more notice of other events such as McFee's death, he would not be left to sob piteously and alone over the bodies of his pets. George's position as a musty academic is further supported by the reputation of the original G. E. Moore, who was considered to deal with the abstract very well but to be naive and ineffectual in the real world. His failure

45 Hayman, p. 108.
49 Crump, pp. 366-368.
to recognize McFee's fatal shift in beliefs, his willingness to jump to conclusions about Dotty's relationship with Archie, and his dream image of his refusal to help Clegthorpe during the Coda all argue that George's philosophy is at least difficult to put into action. As the chief representative of moral absolutes and religious faith, George must carry the burden which he lets drop from him when he retreats into rhetoric.

Archie, like the Player of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, is undercut by his own personal qualities. One cannot argue with his success—he is Vice-Chancellor of his university, wields obvious power over other members of the philosophy department, possesses an impressive string of titles and degrees, and is moving upward in the Rad-Lib political structure. But there is a bit too much of the snake oil salesman in Archie's character. He speaks too glibly and shows himself too ready to circumvent the law in gaining his desired ends. While George does jump to his conclusions about Archie's role as Dotty's lover, there is evidence which the audience, but not George, sees that could support that conclusion. Archie only assumes a traditional psychiatrist's manner when George enters the room unexpectedly, and yet whenever he is caught kissing Dotty, the kiss is part of the game of charades. The ambiguous nature of Archie's and Dotty's relationship is well represented by the dermatograph, the machine he uses to examine her skin in the interests of medical research:

The Screen lights up with a picture: DOTTY's naked skin. But the Dermatograph is still ambiguous: in the presumed interests of medical research, the picture moves with erotic obsession over DOTTY's body in very big close-up: it is never a 'pin-up'.

(p. 82)
But why should a psychiatrist be examining skin at all? Dotty's problem lies far deeper than her skin, but Archie makes no attempt to reach that level. He deals only with the superficial, the easily observable and classifiable; like the philosophy he represents, he has no way of approaching the difficult questions. He either evades them or settles for glib, clever, but shallow ripostes.  

The Coda shows Archie at his worst. As already noted, his speeches are intended to confuse issues, lead witnesses, and offer a pathetically cold comfort to those who are touched by the presence of evil in the world. His closing line, "Wham, bam, thank you Sam" (p. 89), does of course pay homage to Samuel Beckett. But it also contains the implication that someone is being "screwed over," and as Archie speaks the line, he is not likely to be the one getting the short end of the deal. Just as the Player's did, Archie's character raises the questions of what price survival and success?

Dotty's move from idealism to pragmatism implies an acceptance of reality, but a corresponding loss. She loses a large degree of intimacy with her husband, she loses a career, and she loses her ability to come out of the bedroom. She accepts a world she hates and gives up happiness and romance. McFee's move in the opposite direction produces even more instantaneous and disastrous results. He is murdered for, presumably, his changing allegiance. Those who attempt to change direction in mid-life come to no happy endings, no matter in which direction

50 Crump, p. 362.

51 Cahn, pp. 122-123.
the change is made.

In *Jumpers*, Stoppard has worked a refinement into his multiple viewpoint technique. He presents the audience with two opposing positions, George's and Archie's. The former speaks for the traditional values, the latter for a philosophical position which shares some tenets with absurdism (atheism and abandonment of traditional morality). But the third of the multiple views is not an independent position. Dotty does not present another aspect of the debate; she attempts to choose between Archie's and George's beliefs. In this capacity, she adds another dimension to Stoppard's exploratory drama. Dotty's position parallels that of the average person. Aware on an emotional level of an upheaval in her world, unable to cope with the shattering of romance and illusion, she turns to the professional philosophers for guidance and understanding. Her vague comprehension of uneasiness with the world—she has seen through the illusions on one point—are analogous to the dim perception of absurdity by several of Stoppard's early characters—John Brown of *A Separate Peace*, for example.

Stoppard's major advance in *Jumpers* is in asking what happens to people who have achieved this limited vision of the absurd. His play does not indicate much hope that abstract philosophy can assist such people. Dotty is left in indecision at the play's end, facing alternatives which seem unworkable on one hand and unappealing on the other. *Jumpers* makes an obvious statement about the failure of academic philosophy to be of practical use, while leaving the debate between George and Archie unresolved. In this play, Stoppard has advanced his exploration of the absurd in a form accessible to the average playgoer. By
creating Dotty, a character with whom a person who has found formal philosophy confusing or different may identify, Stoppard has taken the audience along on his exploration of the absurd, and he has enriched his play by showing not just multiple viewpoints, but the dilemma of a woman caught between them.

The major difference between the ambiguity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and that of Jumpers lies in the definition of the central question. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, that question could be only loosely outlined as the difference between illusion and reality in relation to coping strategies. As Stoppard said, Jumpers was the first play in which he set out to consider a definite question. On that question, does God exist and, more importantly, do moral absolutes exist, artistically he remains uncommitted. But it is far easier to draw the lines which separate the factions and to define each side's point of view in this play than it was in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Jumpers benefits from an improved focus while retaining the strengths of the previous play. The question does not wait for the audience to ferret it out; it makes a frontal assault on their minds and demands to be thought about. While Jumpers offended at least one philosopher by its content (Jonathan Bennett found the concepts dated and the arguments thin from a professional point of view), it offers the average audience member far more challenging fare than can usually be found in most Broadway or West End productions.

52 Bennett, pp. 5-8.
Stoppard expands his use of the confused of misconstrued conversation, along with other forms of ambiguity, in *Jumpers*. I have already mentioned several key events which must remain ambiguous in order to enhance the uncertainty of the characters: who shot McFee and what Dotty and Archie are really doing in her bedroom, for example. But ambiguity pervades far deeper than just those few glaring instances. Dotty states that she is "all right in bed" (p. 70), which can be taken to mean that she feels well in bed, or that she is sexually adept. The dermatograph may be a medical tool or a voyeur's best excuse. The best example of misconstrued conversation occurs between George and Crouch, the former speaking of Thumper and the latter of McFee:

GEORGE: You know about it? . . . Who killed him?
CROUCH: Well, I wouldn't like to say for certain . . .
   I mean, I heard a bang, and when I looked, there
   he was crawling on the floor . . .
   (GEORGE winces.) . . . and there was Miss Moore . . . well-
GEORGE: Do you realize she's in there now, eating him?
CROUCH: (pause): You mean--raw?
GEORGE: (crossly): No, of course not!--cooked--with
   gravy and mashed potatoes.
CROUCH: (pause): I thought she was on the mend, sir.
   (p. 76)

Dotty is eating neither Thumper nor McFee, but the misunderstanding illustrates the ease with which even factual events can be misinterpreted and twisted out of context. In locating a great deal of the play's humor in such ambiguities, Stoppard reinforces the impact of his philosophical subject by reminding the audience of it in his jokes as well as in the direct speeches.

In a final defense of Stoppard's ambiguity, one can turn to works of philosophers themselves. Writing on the topic of doubt, one has
noted that doubt grows more and more justifiable as the penalties for a wrong decision grow larger. Few decisions could be larger than choosing the ideas and tenets according to which one will conduct his or her life. Particularly from the point of view of a believer, the decision between faith and atheism is likely to have penalties or rewards which will last throughout eternity. In order for a proposition to be regarded as indubitable, it must be drawn from premises which are themselves beyond doubt. Traced back along the line of reasoning, those premises must in turn be verifiable in the same way, and so on, and so on. These rigid requirements mean that little, if any, knowledge can be truly called indubitable. In the face of such a thought, Stoppard's unwillingness to proclaim that any one statement about large issues can be "the last word" becomes a perceptive and realistic approach to life. He is not uncommitted, as some have called him, but open-minded to the fact that opposing sides on any question each have arguments which they regard as valid, and which deserve to be heard. Rather than forcibly stop a debate after a statement which he might personally agree with, Stoppard sees that each side has endless opportunity for rebuttals and refutations. For the inquiring mind, this procedure produces plays which fascinate and challenge, rather than dictate to and deaden, the intelligence. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*, Stoppard has produced two of the more entertaining and enriching comic plays of the last two decades.

---

In his five most recent plays, Stoppard has moved increasingly toward the polemical and the pragmatic. These plays include three full-length stage plays, *Travesties* (1974), *Dirty Linen* and *New-Found-Land* (1976), and *Night and Day* (1979), short play for actors and orchestra, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor* (1978), and a television play, *Professional Foul* (1978). Two major changes mark these plays as works of less importance than *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*. One is the choice of central concerns, and the other is the lessening of debate in favor of espousing a single line of thought.

The questions Stoppard deals with in this most recent stage of his career may be divided into three categories. The first is made up of questions to which multiple answers are possible, as was true of the questions in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*. These later questions differ from the earlier ones, however, in scope and importance. They concern specific topics such as art and journalism rather than the broader areas of belief and behavior. While they are not the trivial concerns of the short plays, neither are they the universals of the best plays. They strike a middle ground between the unimportant and the essential. Most of all, they are pragmatic questions, questions whose answers can be applied directly in life, less in forging a general
philosophy than in deciding how to act in specific situations. This increase in pragmatism implies a decrease in absurdity. Stoppard has adopted the position that order can be established and life can be meaningful.

Travesties asks a question which can be seen as a transition between metaphysical speculation and pragmatic thought. The play's central concern is the relationship between art and politics, specifically whether the artist is under any obligation to justify his work in political terms.¹ For the artist, this question deals with fundamental issues and can be considered a practical one, one that must be decided before work can proceed. For the nine hundred ninety-nine out of a thousand who are not artists, the question remains theoretical. Whether the question is theoretical or practical, however, it is clearly of lesser importance than considerations which decide one's stance on morality, religion, or basic approach to life. Art, as a human creation, does not pose problems on the grand scale of topics which are commonly associated with supernatural powers or unknowable designs. I believe that the consequence of a wrong decision about art will not be so great as those or a wrong decision about ethics, for instance.

Night and Day poses a more mundane question. The play deals with the uses and abuses of journalism and asks several questions about that field. The most important is whether the advantages of a free press outweigh the disadvantages to be found in trivial reporting and harassment.

of subjects. But the play also considers whether the press should be controlled by unions, as well as taking side trips into the subjects of sexual morality and colonial politics. Night and Day deals with a question that affects everyone who depends on a newspaper for information. While it would seem most directly applicable to journalists themselves, the question bears on the quality of information which the public receives about daily events, and so it has a more immediate and pragmatic importance for the average citizen than does the question of Travesties.

Both these plays remain in the realm of the debatable; arguments can be and are given for each of several viewpoints on the questions. Stoppard goes further in these plays than he has previously in indicating a correct answer, however. The pattern of philosophical correctness vs. efficacy breaks down here, as characters are permitted to be both approved of and successful. Especially in Night and Day, characters are presented as capable of making meaningful contributions to life and of helping others, a clear contradiction of the assumptions of absurdity.

Two more plays, Every Good Boy Deserves Favor and Professional Foul, pose questions which are outside the area of debate. Their central concerns are at best rhetorical questions, and one is never in doubt as to what the answer will be. These are Stoppard's most obvious political plays, and they are the most clearcut as to his own position. Both deal with the plight of the individual in living or working under a totalitarian government. Both were published in 1978, the year, after Stoppard experienced a sort of ecstatic re-committment to Western political ideals.
Stoppard had hinted at growing interest in the conflicts between Eastern and Western political thought as early as 1974, when he commented in an interview, "It's not an argument about tactics—that's just surface dressing—it's an argument about philosophy." In the same interview he said that he did not believe the Russian people were any better off, and may well have been worse, under communism than they were under the czars. At this time, however, his political commitment was still in terms of ideas and philosophies.

By 1976 he joined the Committee Against Psychiatric Abuse, a group opposed to such practices as using mental hospitals as places and treatments as methods of punishment for political dissidents. In August he addressed a CAPA rally in London and led an effort to present a petition of protest to the Soviet Embassy there. In early 1977, Stoppard travelled to Russia along with several representatives of Amnesty International to visit political dissidents. There he met several dissidents and the families of others who were imprisoned. He returned to London to write an informative piece of the plight of these people for the London Times.

Also in 1977, Kenneth Tynan relates, Stoppard recognized the Czech playwright Vaclav Havel as his "mirror image" and grew increasingly concerned with Havel's situation as a political prisoner. Havel was one of the signers of Charter 77, a document detailing the lack of human rights in Czechoslovakia; for his signature he was imprisoned for four months. His work has been under severe government censorship since 1969. In February Stoppard wrote an article about the Charter for the New York Times, and in June he visited Havel in Czechoslovakia. One month later, Every Good Boy Deserves Favor made its debut.

Every Good Boy Deserves Favor presents the case of Alexander Ivanov, a Russian who wrote letters of protest to Pravda. For his "crime," he was placed in a mental hospital. The play deals with the conflicts among Alex, who has stubbornly refused to recant his position, his doctor, who prefers patients to conform to the system, and Alex's young son Sacha, who admires his father's stand for truth but also feels strong pressure to conform and wants his father back home at any price. The central point made by the play is the evil of using hospitals for punishment. This concern is hardly phrased as a question; there is never the slightest doubt about what Stoppard's position is on the matter, or what he expects the audience to believe. A more interesting question, with a less certain answer, concerns Alex's choices in the hospital. Should he continue to insist on his dissenting beliefs, or should he go along with the doctor's wishes in order to return home to his son? This question

---

6 Tynan, pp. 110-111.
pits public values against private ones, duty as a citizen against duty as a father. Unfortunately, this more intriguing question gets short shrift in the play; it is brought out openly in only one scene and finally resolved through a gimmick rather than a process of rational decision.

Stoppard's next produced work, Professional Foul, deviates from several patterns in his work. Although he wrote for television in the beginning of his career, it had been eight years between his last television script ("The Engagement" in 1970) and Professional Foul. This play also shows Stoppard in a very different stylistic vein from that which one expects. Ronald Hayman notes that if the play had been presented pseudonymously, it would have been difficult to identify it as Stoppard's work. Professional Foul is serious and suspenseful in tone through most of its length, broken only by a few brief sequences of wordplay among the philosopher characters.

The play's central concern is, like Every Good Boy Deserves Favor's located in conflicts between an individual and a totalitarian government. The specific situation forces a character to choose between what he has always regarded as correct behavior and an act which he believes to be "bad manners": the choice is complicated because he is placed under the control of a communist government rather than that of the


British democracy which is familiar to him. The process of choice forms the main action of the play, but once again there is very little doubt what choice the character will make. Certainly, if he is to create sympathy, Anderson must choose to help his old student and thus deceive the government which has made him its guest. The factors which lead Anderson to his decision are carefully shown; factors which might have inspired the opposite choice are downplayed. Like Every Good Boy Deserves Favor, Professional Foul unabashedly argues for an anti-Soviet line of thought.

While I don't wish to denigrate the importance of the conflict between the major political philosophies of the world or to imply that the plight of dissidents is a trivial topic, I do contend that the subjects of these two plays are less timeless than those of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers. They are highly specific, topical subjects which are far more likely to become dated than are generalized philosophical questions. In terms of social utility, these plays represent an advance over the more vague ideas of the major plays. They suggest issues and concerns which are important in dealing with totalitarian governments. However, their applicability seems limited; few Westerners ever find themselves in the situations which call for such thoughts. In a more generalized way, these plays might be considered useful in, as Stoppard has phrased it, providing the "moral matrix, the moral sensibility, from which we make our judgments about the world."\(^9\) A moral sensibility is a complex thing, however, calling for awareness of

conflicting interests and arguments and allowing a careful selection among options. These two plays are far too simplistic in their approach to political problems to be of great value in establishing that sort of moral sense. One reviewer labelled Every Good Boy Deserves Favor "agitprop" theatre. It is always easier to recognize propaganda from the other side than from one's own; propaganda one agrees with is likely to be labelled truth. But no matter which side they espouse, treatments such as Every Good Boy Deserves Favor and Professional Foul are not deep enough considerations of the political issues involved to be called elements of a moral matrix.

The final play of Stoppard's recent works to be considered is Dirty Linen. While the previous four plays have dealt with less than universal, and sometimes obvious, questions, Dirty Linen descends to the trivial. Most reviewers discussed the play entirely in terms of the bedroom farce (committeeroom farce, in this case), ignoring the "political" question on which the plot is built. Gerald Weales was one of the few who noted that the question of sexual morality among government figures lies beneath all the double entendres and pin-up poses. Put simply, Dirty Linen asks, "What should the code of sexual conduct be for Members of Parliament?" and answers, "Just what it should be for anyone else: what one does in leisure time is no one's


If the subject itself seems trivial, Stoppard's treatment of it does nothing to change that impression. Weales goes on to point out that although Stoppard's conclusion seems eminently reasonable at first glance, it fails to take into account such factors as expense—i.e., when a "secretary" is paid with tax money to perform in an official's bedroom rather than office, the issue moves from the realm of private lives to misuse of public funds. Although this situation seems to be precisely what Stoppard's play depicts, he never touches on that aspect of the question.  

Dirty Linen undoubtedly ranks as the lowest achievement in Stoppard's collection of full-length plays. It enjoyed popular success when it was introduced in 1976, but a great deal of that success may have been due to fortuitous timing. The play opened coincidentally with the publicity about the Fanne Fox and Elizabeth Ray sex scandals in Washington, D.C., and so rode a tide of public interest. With a decline of such scandals in the news, Dirty Linen may well be Stoppard's first major work to fade into a well-deserved oblivion.

As Stoppard's concerns have become more pragmatic and less philosophical, his approach to exploring those concerns has narrowed. Abandoning his freewheeling open debate, he now arranges character and plot in his plays to support a single point of view. The five recent plays range from those which allow debate but favor one side through those

\[12\] Weales, p. 19.
which have mock debates in which only one side is really presented well, the other being treated lightly, to the completely polemican play which presents only one side of its issue.

_Travesties_ illustrates how the appearance of debate can be maintained while one side is favored. In fact, with four major characters, the debates in _Travesties_ are more complex than in any other play. Personal animosities among the characters cause them to change sides of arguments, in order not to agree with someone they dislike. That fact makes identifying the lines of argument difficult.

Lenin has extremely clear-cut opinions, possibly because his character is not so fictionalized as the others. His lines are taken from his own writings rather than created by Stoppard. In a play which questions the relationship between art and politics, Lenin represents the extremely political interests which see art as at best an adjunct to social and political revolution. His lengthy Act Two speeches show clearly the order of his priorities:

> Today, literature must become party literature. Down with non-partisan literature! Down with literacy supermen! Literature must become a part of the common cause of the proletariat, a cog in the Social Democratic mechanism. . . . We want to establish and we shall establish


14 Tom Stoppard, _Travesties_ (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1975), p. 15. (All quotations will be taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.)

15 Margaret Gold, "Who Are the Dadas of Travesties?" _Modern Drama_, 21 (1978), p. 64.
a free press, free not simply from the police, but also from capital, from careerism, and what is more, free from bourgeois anarchist individualism

But Lenin's wife, Nadya, shows another side of her husband as she speaks about his aesthetic tastes in private life:

He wrote very little about art and literature, generally, but he enjoyed it... He was moved to tears when we saw La Dame aux Camelias... Gorki tells us in his Days with Lenin how Ilyich admired Tolstoy, which is true, of course, especially War and Peace... The new art seemed somehow alien and incomprehensible to him... He admitted that he was not a competent judge of poetical talent. Ilyich was much more concerned with the question of bourgeois intellectuals.

(pp. 86-87)

A picture of a man who enjoys traditional arts himself but denies them to his followers emerges here. In his climatic speech, Lenin reveals that he distrusts art because it inspires feelings in him which obstruct revolutionary politics:

I don't know of anything greater than the Apassionata. Amazing, superhuman music. It always makes me feel, perhaps naively, it makes me feel proud of the miracles that human beings can perform. But I can't listen to music often. It affects my nerves, makes me want to say nice stupid things and pat the heads of those people who while living in this vile hell can create such beauty. Nowadays we can't pat heads or we'll get our hands bitten off. We've got to hit heads, hit them without mercy, though ideally we're against doing violence to people... Hm, one's duty is infernally hard...

(p. 89)

Clive James has faulted this speech for splitting Lenin in two. He finds that the scene sets up conflicting images of Lenin—one as ruthless, power-mad leader and the other as a soft-hearted music-lover.16

---

But I believe Victor Cahn has identified the impression Stoppard wished to make. He sees Lenin as a man who is so ruthless that he can recognize the beauty and power of art and find in them a danger to his own power. His denial of "bourgeois anarchist individualism" in art is a denial of a major force which opposes his revolution. If art can make one proud of people's achievements under a capitalist system, it represents a danger to a socialist revolution. It proves, in fact, Henry Carr's contention that people can rise above class limitations through their own efforts, without a revolution: "Deprived, self-interested, bitter or greedy as the case may be, they showed streaks of superior intelligence, superior strength, superior morality" (p. 77). Lenin is confirmed as a man whose political goals rise above his other beliefs, and who would deny what he himself considers good art to the masses because it may threaten his power base.

Lenin's willingness to take a hypocritical stand on art is underscored by giving the speeches defending a socialist view of art to one of his converts, Cecily, rather than to Lenin. While he remains free to enjoy Tolstoy and Beethoven, Cecily argues for the abolition of such art in favor of art which "is a critique of society or it is nothing!" (p. 74). She explains to Carr that they "live in an age when the social order is seen to be the work of material forces and (they) have been given an entirely new kind of responsibility, the responsibility of changing society" (p. 74). A final blow to Lenin's socialist theory

17 Victor Cahn, Beyond Absurdity (Cranbury, N. J.: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1979), pp. 139-140.
of art comes in the inability of either speaker, Lenin or Cecily, to name an artist who both met the party's dictates and produced anything memorable in art, while the names of various artists nurtured and well-remembered by Western society are scattered throughout the play.

James Joyce takes the position most completely opposite to Lenin's. He goes to the far extreme, discounting everything but art as unimportant. "As an artist, naturally I attach no importance to the swings and roundabout of political history" (p. 50). He believes in the supreme importance of the artist as a figure who can supply meaning to the rest of human history, and in his own supreme talent among artists:

An artist is the magician put among men to gratify—capriciously—their urge for immortality. The temples are built and brought down around him, contiguously and continuously, from Troy to the fields of Flanders. If there is any meaning in any of it, it is in what survives as art, yes even in the celebration of tyrants, yes even in the celebration of nonentities. What now of the Trojan War if it had been passed over by the artist's touch? Dust... And yet I with my Dublin Odyssey will double that immortality, yes by God there's a corpse that will dance for some time yet and leave the world precisely as it finds it—and if you hope to shame it into the grave with your fashionable magic, I would strongly advise you to try and acquire some genius and if possible some sublety before the season is quite over. (pp. 62-62)

Stoppard considers this speech to be the most important in the play, and in it Joyce makes several points important to the argument of art for art's sake. First is the notion that it is the artist who determines what is remembered and what is permitted to fade away into

18 Tynan, p. 102
oblivion. Second, the artist is not a social scientist or a mere crafts-person. Two key terms surrounding artistic work are capriciously and magician. These terms imply mysterious, uncontrollable forces rather than rationality and easily understandable concepts. Finally, Joyce presents the idea that even the greatest works of art (which he would undoubtedly have considered to include his own) do not change the world; such is not the function of art.

In answer to the central question, "Does art need to be justified politically?", Lenin speaks for one extreme in saying "Yes, always and exclusively," and Joyce for the other in saying "Absolutely not. Art need not be justified at all." These positions are steady points of reference for the arguments within Travesties.

The remaining two major characters present points of view which are not so easily fixed. Tristan Tzara's beliefs about the artist waver according to whether he is speaking about art in general or about himself in particular. His thoughts on politics remain constant, if shallow. Henry Carr also seems to change his point of view about art, but he too holds a steady political line.

When speaking about art in general, Tzara adopts a line of thought similar to Beauchamp's in Artist Descending a Staircase. Art should not be confined to an elite few; everyone is a potential artist. This popularization calls for a redefinition of what is meant by art: "Nowadays, an artist is someone who makes art mean the things he does" (p. 38). "It's too late for geniuses! Now we need vandals and deco-crators, simple-minded demolition men to smash centuries of baroque subtlety, to bring down the temple, and thus finally, to reconcile the
shame and the necessity of being an artist!" (p. 62).

However, when Carr attacks Tzara personally, calling the Dadaists "formless . . . senseless" artists, Tzara reverses himself to argue that the artist is a special and talented member of society. "It's not the hunters and the warriors that put you on the first rung of the ladder to consecutive thought and a rather unusual flair in your poncey trousers" (p. 46). Tzara believes that art has fallen to a position of degradation in the modern world: "Art created patrons and was corrupted. It began to celebrate the ambitions and acquisitions of the paymaster. The artist has negated himself" (p. 47). Nonetheless, he retains his opinion of himself and his fellow Dadaists as superior people with a special vision of humanity.

Tzara's political opinions are even more patently absurd. He denies the action of cause and effect and argues that if any cause can be inferred for World War I, that cause is a mere trifle: "In point of fact, everything is Chance, including design. . . . the causes we know everything about depend on causes we know very little about, which depend on causes we know absolutely nothing about. . . . You ended up in the trenches because on the 28th of June 1900 the heir to the throne of Austro-Hungary married beneath him and found that the wife he loved was never allowed to sit next to him on royal occasions, except! when he was acting in his military capacity as Inspector General of the Austro-Hungarian army" (pp. 37-40). For Tzara, political and artistic revolution are all one, and all are equally the types of chance. 19

19 Cahn, p. 139.
Sharing the stage with these three well-known historical figures is Henry Carr, minor British diplomat. Although Carr too was an actual personage in Zurich during the war, his personality remains free of the myths and legends which surround the others. Stoppard borrowed little more than a name and a few facts of Carr's acquaintance with Joyce, creating the personality of Carr as a fiction. While the three famous men have historical positions which determine their stands and postures, Carr is left to sort out his own position and importance. His attempts at sorting show clearly in his shifting memories, as he alters his knowledge of the other three to suit his whims. He exists on a different level from Lenin, Joyce, and Tzara, by virtue of the fact that they make things happen, while he does not.

Carr's own beliefs suffer from his shifts and slips in memory, but a fairly coherent picture can be extracted. On the subject of politics, he is staunchly traditional. A former soldier, he believes that he went to war to defend freedom and democracy. Faced with a political argument, he speaks cogently for the values of individualism rather than collectivism, and the possibilities of capitalism as a solution for the world's ills:

*I went to war because it was my duty, because my country needed me, and that's patriotism. I went to war because I believed that those boring little Belgians and incompetent Frogs had the right to be*

\[20\text{Cahn, p. 142}\]

\[21\text{Gold, p. 63.}\]
defended from German militarism, and that's love of freedom. That's how things are underneath, and I won't be told by some yellow-bellied Bolshevik that I ended up in the trenches because there's a profit in ball-bearings! (p. 40)

This premise was that people were a sensational kind of material object and would behave predictably in a material world. Marx predicted that they would behave according to their class. But they didn't. . . . Legislation, unions, share capital, consumer power—in all kinds of ways and for all kinds of reasons, the classes moved closer together instead of further apart. The critical moment never came. (pp. 76-77)

On art, he takes two stands, but these can be traced to personal animosity toward other characters. His ideas about the purpose and use of art are as traditional as his politics. He opposes Cecily's argument that art must be socially useful, holding out the older ideal of art as something which "has no function and yet in some way . . . gratifies a hunger that is common to princes and peasants" (p. 74). And he asserts to Tzara that "an artist is someone who is gifted in some way that 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" (p. 38). What Carr cannot bear to admit is the superiority of the artist over the rest of humanity, although he does admit that the artist is a gifted person. And so, while he claims to admire the art, he frequently denigrates the artist:

Artists are members of a privileged class. Art is absurdly overrated by artists, which is understandable, but what is strange is that it is absurdly overrated by everyone else. (p. 46)

The idea of the artist as a special kind of human being is art's greatest achievement, and it's a fake! (pp. 46-47)
I dreamed about him, dreamed I had him in the witness box, a masterly cross-examination, case practically won, admitted it all, the whole thing, the trousers, everything, and I flung at him—"And what did you do in the Great War?" "I wrote Ulysses," he said. "What did you do?"

Bloody nerve.

(p. 65)

Carr both admires and resents the artist for his special abilities, but he recognizes that those abilities exist. That recognition is clearly implied in his dream exchange with Joyce, wherein he cannot dispute Joyce's claim to greatness for writing Ulysses but feels that making such a claim represents unfair advantage over the non-artist.

Critics have made many interpretations of the argument in Travesties. They do not even agree on who argues with whom. For instance, one finds Joyce pitted against Lenin and Tzara, another sees Tzara and Joyce joining forces against Lenin, and a third aligns Joyce against Lenin, with Tzara and Carr as mediating figures.

Coppelia Kahn makes a valid point when she notes that none of the arguments are resolved in the play itself in the sense of any character's winning a debate. But the form of the play, which is pure enjoyment, "uninhibited, speculative, purposeless," argues for Stoppard's own agreement with Joyce and his art for art's sake. Cahn and Tynan also support the idea that Stoppard has a natural affinity for the Joycean view.

22 Cahn, pp. 136-140.
23 Hayman, p. 118
24 Gold, p. 64
25 Kahn, pp. 193-197.
Travesties, for all its bursts of brilliance, is a flawed work. Its debate never coalesces into a connected series of statements, remaining a random collection of ideas. The sheer difficulty of sorting out whose views are opposed to whose indicated a major problem. Stoppard has gone too far in bringing in multiple views and not taken the same care that he took in the earlier plays to make sure that beliefs are clear and evident. A reader may be able to keep them straight after a careful search of the text, but a playgoer who has only the production before him to follow may be easily lost, too confused by the brilliance and the constant shifts that turn the dazzle to daze.

Stoppard has also lost the careful balance among his debaters in this play. The socialist side of the argument is given to Lenin and his follower, Cecily. These two are characterized as a monomaniacal powermonger and a robotic, parrotting disciple. Thus the side of the argument which opposes Stoppard's own beliefs has no redeeming factors, unlike the positions of Archie and the Player, who were at least successful, if not approved of. In dwelling on such episodes as Lenin's hope to slip back into Russia disguised as a Swedish deaf-mute, Stoppard simply makes the character look ridiculous.

The same technique is applied to Tristan Tzara, although as one critic noted, Tzara was such a bizarre character in his own right that it becomes difficult to know what is authentic and what is travesty.²⁶

²⁶Kahn, p. 190
Stoppard gives this character shifting accents, a penchant for smashing crockery as a form of argument, and the general attitude of "an over-excited little man, with a need for self-expression far beyond the scope of (his) natural gifts" (p. 62). Tzara's original addities, such as his approach to composition (through his hat) and his insistence that art must desecrate society, do nothing to increase his credibility in the play.

James Joyce, on the other hand, is caricatured with a more affectionate hand. His chief oddities are habits of speaking in limericks and of dressing in mis-matched suits. In his speeches, however, Joyce remains acute and incisive. He is not given outrageous positions to defend; his assertion, for example, that the troubled history of Ireland was justified because it produced him and he wrote *Ulysses* is left out of the play. Even Old Carr's personal dislike of Joyce cannot hide the magnitude of the artist's achievement, as in Carr's fantasy of getting Joyce on the witness stand.

*Travesties* retains the window-dressing of the open-minded debates Stoppard conducted among his characters in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers* but not the spirit. Here he is out to make a point and unwilling to settle for anything less. The debate is weighted and foreordained from the start to fall solidly for capitalism and art for its own sake and against socialism and certain forms of modern art. Tynan objects, with good reason, that in pursuit of his point Stoppard

has included historical inaccuracies which give the whole argument a false premise. Stoppard's portrait of Joyce is the main target of Tynan's criticism, for he points out that Joyce was in fact a socialist himself, a severe blow to Stoppard's argument if included in the play. Travesties signals clearly that Stoppard no longer has the "courage of (his) lack of convictions." Stoppard tries so hard to make his own points and to educate the audience to the evils of Dadaism and socialism that he forgets to make Travesties theatrically compelling. While most critics were seduced by the surface glitter that Travesties has in common with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers, Kenneth Tynan saw beyond the puns to the basic weakness of the play:

... the scene resembles a triple-decker bus that isn't going anywhere. What it lacks, in common with the play as a whole, is the sine qua non of theatre; namely, a narrative thrust that impels the characters, whether farcically or tragically or in any intermediate mode, toward a credible state of crisis, anxiety, or desperation.

Travesties also includes far less absurdity than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers do. Tzara is the only character who openly accepts absurdity, rejecting the concept of cause and effect and creating formless, meaningless art to mirror his vision of the world.

28 Tynan, pp. 102-107.

29 Hayman, p. 2.


31 Cahn, p. 134.
The other characters all present a belief in one form of order or another, and they all use rational argument as an important tool. Stoppard's characters have attempted rationality before, but Guil and George Moore had little success with it. Carr, when he defends capitalism and traditional ideas of honor and duty, is notable more successful. The status of absurdity is greatly reduced in *Travesties* and its only proponent is pictured as a crazed, ineffective buffon.

*Night and Day* uses the same sort of weighted debate as *Travesties* to make Stoppard's desired point. The play purports to ask what, if any, limits should be placed on the activities of journalism, and who should set and enforce such limits. A former journalist himself, Stoppard could hardly be expected to remain neutral in such an argument, and in fact *Night and Day* speaks for the elimination of any restraints on the press. One might guess from the distribution of characters (three journalists among the major characters, arrayed against one woman who is a major character and one black who is a minor character) which side will present the stronger argument.

Of the three journalists, Wagner is most vehement and vocal about his trade. His conversation dwells on two points: the importance of facts and the need for strong unions. Against charges of triviality in reporting, he offers the public's demand for pulp. While Wagner readily admits that portions of most papers are given over to inconsequential material, he points out that as long as people read such pieces, they will continue to be printed:

If someone had convinced the paper that the A/B readership has got bored with sex, money, and titles and had gone over to astronomy, Nick (a gossip columnist) would have found himself on the roof with a telescope
Yeah— I agree with you. Newspapers have got more important things to do.

And more important to him is his own type of reporting, which he considers to be hard-bitten and factual:

I am not a foreign correspondent. A foreign correspondent is someone who lives in foreign parts and corresponds, usually in the form of essays containing no new facts. I am a fireman. I go to fires. Swindon or Kambawe—they're both out-of-town stories and I cover them the same way. I don't file prose. I file facts. So don't imagine for a moment you've stumbled across a fellow member of the Traveller's Club.

(p. 32)

WAGNER: What are you saying, then?
CARSON: Use your imagination.
WAGNER: Unprofessional. What I use has to check out.

(p. 46)

... I'm known for doing two things well: I can usually find out what's going on in a place while I am in it, and I can usually find a way to get the story back to my office in time to catch the first edition. It's not so much to be proud about, and if I fail nothing happens—not to Kambawe, not to the paper—but such as it is it's my pride. ...

(p. 56)

Wagner's implication, although he never spells it out, is that his own sort of strictly factual coverage balances out the gossip columns and trivial features which are printed side by side with the news.

Wagner expresses his opinions about who should be controlling the papers in no uncertain terms. A strong union man, he refuses to listen to the position taken by the non-union Milne, and he spouts conventional rhetoric as soon as the union issue surfaces:

32 Tom Stoppard, Night and Day (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1979), pp. 48-49. (All further quotations will be taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.)
Do you see who we've got here?—It is the Grimsby scab. . . . Is it your principle to betray your fellow workers when they're in confrontation with management? . . . So the management dumped you. You had to learn the hard way, didn't you? Bosses are bosses, and that's what it's all about, kid . . . Well, I hope the experience radicalized you a little. We're working to keep richer men than us richer than us, and nothing's going to change that without worker solidarity.

(pp. 30-33)

Wagner's ideas about unionism tend to the extreme; he advocates keeping on reporters whom he acknowledges are unskilled at reporting, because they are good at negotiating with the paper's management. When he learns that Milne was involved in the labor dispute at Grimsby, he sends a message to his own paper's union representative in hopes that Milne's reports will be censored. The immediate return on this message is a terse line from his editor: "Upstick protest arsewards" (p. 62). For the time being, skill appears to have triumphed over union membership.

Milne, the young reporter who has accidentally gotten the scoop of a lifetime, provides Wagner's major foil in the union dispute. An idealist, he refused to go out on strike at his local paper when he thought the reason for the strike was inadequate. Censured by the union, not the management, he eventually had to quit his job because his fellow journalists refused to work with him. Although he and Wagner nearly come to blows over the union issue, they think very much alike on the topic of journalism. Like Wagner, Milne admits the presence of much "junk journalism" but accepts it as a necessary evil:

... the celebration of inanity, and the way real tragedy is paraphrased into an inflationary spiral of hackneyed melodramas---... It's the price you pay for the part that matters. ... Junk journalism
Milne and Wagner agree on the sort of things that should be included in the papers—virtually anything—but are divided along the issues of who should control access to the papers. Milne, the idealist, holds out for as little control as possible, while Wagner's sympathies are with the union first, and idealism appears to have died in him.

The third journalist in this trio is Guthrie, the photographer. Guthrie says almost nothing in the course of the play about the theory or ethics of journalism. Instead, Stoppard allows this character's actions, past and present, to speak for him. Guthrie is a veteran of dangerous assignments. One learns that he has worked in Viet Nam, Lebanon, Somalia, and similar places. He is acutely aware of the dangers of his profession, able to quote the numbers of journalists killed and missing in Viet Nam. He has nightmares about being killed while covering a war. And when Milne shows up to go on assignment with him dressed in "army type clothing, including a camouflage-colored cotton bush hat" (p. 68), Guthrie explodes in anger. Yet he goes with Milne, and eventually risks his own life in order to recover Milne's dead body from a crossfire.

Guthrie does not involve himself in the union dispute between the other two reporters. He utters no opinion about who, if anyone, should control the papers. In fact, during the play, he speaks only one line about the central question on journalism. After he has brought back Milne's body and has obviously been through a hellish experience himself, he justifies the death to Ruth:

I've been around a lot of places. People do awful things to each other. But it's worse in places where everybody is kept in the dark. It really is. Information is light. Information, in itself, about
anything, is light. That's all you can say, really.  
(pp. 108-109)

On that note, he exits with the intention of heading back to the battle, in order to provide "light."

Guthrie personifies the working journalist. He shares Milne's idealism, but he demonstrates it, rather than theorizes about it. Like Wagner, he is concerned with getting facts, with providing information. And in a sense he rises above both of them by not taking note of the union-management battles. As long as he can provide the information he believes to be important, Guthrie cares little about whether the paper is controlled by a millionaire or a collective of journalists.

The major opposition to this group of journalists comes from Ruth Carson, the wealthy wife of a colonial industrialist. Her hostility to the reporters is evident from her first encounter with them.

She makes nasty little jokes at their expense:

As far as I remember Fleet Street was yellow and rather cheap (in reference to a Monopoly game).

(p. 41)

Perhaps I'll get him a reporter doll for Christmas. Wind it up and it gets it wrong.

(p. 43)

I've always wanted to meet a popular journalist. I mean socially, I don't mean under one's bed or outside the law courts. One is not normally introduced to journalists.

(p. 47)

One quickly learns that her dislike of the papers stems from a personal incident, an ugly divorce case when she left her first husband and Geoffrey Carson left his wife:

But don't imagine that I despise them because of any injury done to me--on the contrary I looked jolly nice in my divorce hat and being on the front page of four
morning newspapers did my reputation nothing but good in my part of Highgate. . . . It isn't even—of any­
way not entirely—the way it was written up, or rather snapped together in that Lego-set language they have. . . . Of all the husbands who ran off with somebody's wife that week, Geoffrey qualifies be­
cause he had a measly title and if the right three hundred people went down on the Royal Yacht he'd be Duke of Bognor. Has anyone ever bothered to find out whether anybody really cares? (pp. 47-48)

Personal bias froms the base of Ruth's dislike and distrust of the press. She objects to the tricialization and inanities that make up so much of the papers. But even Ruth does not oppose the idea of freedom to publish. As she says to Milne, "I'm with you on the free press. It's the newspapers I can't stand" (p. 66).

Ruth also enters into the discussion about who should control the papers. She voices her opinion in the guise of a conversation with her eight-year-old son, Alastair, whom she describes as arguing cogently for leaving control of the papers in the hands of the owners:

"You see mummy," he said, "you don't have to be a millionaire to contradict one. It isn't the millionaires who are going to stop you, it's the Wag­
ners who don't trust the public to choose the marked card. . . . You are confusing freedom with capability. The Flat Earth News is free to sell a million copies. What it lacks is the capability of finding a million people with fourpence and the conviction that the earth is flat. You see, mummy," he said, "people don't buy rich men's papers because the men are rich: the men are rich because people buy their papers." . . . freedom is neutral. Free expression includes a state of affairs where any millionaire can have a national newspaper, if that's what it costs. A state of affairs, Allie says, where only a particular ap­
proved, licensed, and supervised non-millionaire can have a newspaper is called, for example, Russia. (pp. 97-98)

Although Ruth's other points may be discounted as the result of per­
sonal misfortune, her arguments in favor of anyone's freedom to publish hold together well. She shows the effects of Milne's insistence that
once a control system is set up, it can be appropriated and used for a variety of purposes in her argument that freedom should be a neutral entity, one that guarantees rights to all sides.

The fifth participant in the press debate is Mageeba, president of the imaginary African country where the play is set. Mageeba presents a counterpoint to the views raised by the journalists and by Ruth. He is, in effect, the owner of a paper by virtue of his position as ruler. Mageeba's rule, one learns, is capricious at best. He is sometimes generous, but he can quickly turn violent and cruel. His demeanor reflects the culture of his English education, but that veneer drops with no warning when he physically attacks Wagner.

The sole newspaper in Kambawe was owned by an Englishman when the African nation won its independence. Mageeba believed that "a newspaper is not like a mine, or a band, or an airline; it is the voice of the people and the Kambawe paper was the voice of an English millionaire" (p. 95). The paper conveniently burned shortly after the change in government, leaving Mageeba faced with a choice:

But what to put in its place? ... I did not believe a newspaper should be part of the apparatus of the state; we are not a totalitarian society. But neither could I afford a return to the whims of private enterprise. ... A democratic committee of journalists?—a thorn bush for the editor to hide in. No, no—freedom with responsibility, that was the elusive formula we pondered all those years ago at the L.S. E. And that is what I found. ... Do you know what I mean by a relatively free press, Mr. Wagner? ... I mean a free press which is edited by one of my relatives.

(pp. 99-100)

Although he disclaims that the Kambaew paper is part of the state apparatus, one can see that in effect the paper is controlled by a government figure. Kambawe illustrates a society in which the flow of
information is restricted by censorship. The results are that no one seems to know very much about the sides' goals in the undecided "war" that surrounds the play, and Mageeba is free to promote his own political views unopposed.

The actions of these five debaters provide the final commentary in the play. Guthrie's actions have already been mentioned; they are his chief statements. Milne is most similar to Guthrie in that he is conscientious in his work and tries to live according to his ideals. However, he is naive in going about his job, a shortcoming that results in his death as he assumes that no one could shoot at a journalist. One also sees that Milne behaves ethically in his private life; he avoids Ruth's sexual invitation, acting so honestly that she can't seduce him even in her fantasy. And in his work, one might say that he takes advantage of lucky breaks but not of people.

The same could not be said of Wagner, who shows his small side when he tries to have Milne's copy cancelled out of spite and gloats triumphantly when he thinks he can get a scoop before the younger man. His sending Milne off to do the dangerous job and playing the martyr's role over being left behind when he knows that Mageeba will be at the Carsons' home show his cutthroat attitude toward his work. For his actions, however, Wagner receives punishment. His union protest backfires when the entire Sunday Globe is cancelled and a strike called because of it. The cancellation renders his Mageeba scoop worthless. His final decision, to go to the front with Guthrie and continue to cover the war despite the strike, earns Ruth's approval in the closing moments of the play. That approval, given for his loyalty to ideals first instead of union, is his final reward.
The actions of Ruth and Mageeba, on the anti-journalist side of the argument, do nothing to help their positions. Ruth is shown as a bored and promiscuous housewife whose opinions are influenced largely by her bedmates. One critic has noted that although she seems to provide a different viewpoint on reporting, she has little to do with the real action of the play. It does appear that her only way of expressing approval or disapproval is to grant or withhold her sexual favors. Stoppard's use of women in his plays does little to encourage one to take Ruth seriously. He imagined that the opening of Act Two of Travesties would be very funny simply because it featured "a pretty girl (Cecily) delivering a lecture on Lenin." If he considers any solemn comment to be automatically rendered comic by giving the line to a woman, he cannot intend Ruth's views to be taken very seriously.

Mageeba has been compared to Idi Amin as a portrait of an African leader. His actions in the play—setting a trap for his opponent, baiting the journalist into unwise statements, and finally cracking Wagner over the head with his walking stick—all show him as an unpredictable and dangerous man. While his conversation about the press at first appears reasonable, it slowly reveals deep-seated resentments and a willingness to practice control and censorship, under the gloss of a "relatively free press." The deference and fear shown toward Mageeba by the Carsons underscores his image as a ruthless and untrustworthy

33 Catherine Hughes, "Half Time," rev. of Night and Day, America, 142 (Jan. 26, 1980), p. 64

34 Tynan, p. 107.
leader.

The debate in Night and Day is clearly weighted. To the first question, what should the limits on the press be, Stoppard clearly answers "none." Milne's argument, supported by Wagner's, stands as rational defense of even the triviality and stupidity of gossip columns, while the opposition offered by Ruth is seen to spring from a bad personal experience and that of Mageeba from desire for unopposed political power. The second issue, who should exercise control over the presses, is less clearly decided. The play answers the question through process of elimination. Three possibilities are raised. Government control, as represented by Mageeba, is clearly disapproved of. Union control and private enterprise are the remaining choices. Union control results, as Wagner's protest demonstrates, in disruption of publication because of personal squabbles, and as both Milne and Mageeba imply, in the easy exclusion of any reporter who does not toe the line. Private enterprise is left as the only apparent solution. One major objection to this system is raised and left unanswered by Mageeba:

It was free to select the news it thought fit to print, to make much of it, or little, and free to make room for more and more girls wearing less and less underwear. You may smile, but does freedom of the press mean freedom to choose its own standards?

(p. 99)

The implication is that a free press controlled through a private enterprise system may suffer from lapses in taste, but that the alternatives, as they are presented here, are far more appalling than gossip columns and pin-up pictures.

In Night and Day, one finds no character who argues for the acceptance of an absurd world view. The sole hint that absurdity exists
at all, in any form, is the unspoken assumption that traditional values such as honor, friendship, and pride are not sufficient motivations for one's actions. The characters feel compelled to advance rational arguments not based in those traditions in order to explain what they do. But that very compunction implies a rejection of absurdity, for rationality itself is not an element of the absurd world. In Night and Day, Travesties, and Professional Foul, Stoppard's world view cannot be accurately called absurd; his characters reject many traditional values, but their continuing use of reason and belief that lives can be ordered and meaningful negate many essential elements of absurdity.

Critical reaction to Night and Day noted almost universally that in his efforts to argue in favor of freedom of the press, Stoppard created a play that shows too much strain and exposes its shifting gears. At least one critic questioned whether the bland conclusion which the play supports was worthy of the effort, although he did find the arguments "sharp" and "dramatic." Nor did Stoppard's new tone of seriousness win much approval. Critics found it "all-too-carefully-crafted," and felt uncomfortable with the mix of Stoppard's witty dialogue and a


37 Kroll, p. 66.
purportedly serious play. Certainly, the veneer of open debate fooled one into believing that Night and Day was the work of the same freewheeling thinker behind Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers.

In others among his recent works, the appearance of debating a question grows even thinner. These shows, Dirty Linen and Professional Foul, provide the semblance of discussion, but they do not actually involve an exchange among characters about the central issue. In the two shows just examined, the debate existed, although its outcome was ordained by personal characteristics of the participants and the bases for their arguments. In the two plays presently under consideration, an opposition to Stoppard's point of view makes itself known, but never presents any actual competition. In Dirty Linen, it is especially true that the opposition is merely a joke.

Dirty Linen focuses on the question of sexual conduct among Members of Parliament. The play shows the meeting of a Select Committee which has been called to report on rumors of widespread sexual promiscuity among the Parliament and several other government departments. The bulk of the play consists of this meeting, made up of six M.P.'s and their secretary, Maddie. The situation would seem to offer ample opportunities for discussion as the M.P.'s hash out their opinions and formulate their report. Intention, however, must be seen as a major factor in determining the direction of this play. Stoppard did not

intend to write a serious consideration of sex scandals in government.
"I've done a little joke play rather quickly—Dirty Linen and New-Found-Land."\(^{39}\)

As the play opens and the Members arrive one by one, Maddie's relationship to each of them becomes clear. She is the "mystery woman" who is "going through the ranks like a lawn-mower in knickers."\(^{40}\)

McTeazle and Cocklebury-Smythe, the first two to arrive, launch into warnings to Maddie to be discreet about their meetings. Chamberlain comes in next, and he immediately bends over backward to pretend that he has never met Maddie, all the while leering and goosing. The chairman, Withenshaw, pretends to be similarly uninvolved, as he tries to inconspicuously pass underwear from his briefcase to Maddie's desk.

When Mrs. Edbury, the only female committee member, arrives, one thinks that the pattern may change. But that expectation is confounded as the verbal innuendos give over to physical contact. Maddie and Mrs. Edbury disappear behind the blackboard for several minutes, re-emerging in advanced states of disarray. With this bisexual surprise delivered, one finds out at last where the opposition can be expected to come from:

WITHENSHAW: Well we seem to be a full complement except for Mr. French. Has anybody heard whether he's coming?

MRS. EDBURY: I hope to God no.

WITHENSHAW: Mr. French always has the best interests of the House at heart. That is why he comes over as a sancimouious busybody with an Energen

\(^{39}\)Hayman, p. 139.

\(^{40}\)Tom Stoppard, Dirty Linen and New-Found-Land (New York: Grove Press, 1978), p. 20. (All further quotations will be taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.)
roll where his balls ought to be. . . .
McTEAZLE: I don't know what the P.M. was thinking of.
COCKLEBURY-SMYTHE: I expect he was thinking of hav-
ing a balanced committee to lend the kind of credi-
bility to our report which has eluded him in pub-
lic life.

(p. 34)

One expects French to provide the opposition, and that expecta-
tion seems to be a correct one, as the committee gets down to work.
French arrives late, but he immediately begins to raise objections to
the obvious whitewash being practiced in drafting the report:

. . . there is a way of doing things, and if we're not
going to do them in that way let it be shown in the
proceedings of the Select Committee that the committee
voted on that point.

(p. 43)

The proper business of this Committee is to examine
witnesses!

(p. 45)

But French's concern for proper procedure lasts only as long as the
first half of the meeting. The Committee adjourns for ten minutes,
leaving French to show Maddie the way to the women's cloakroom. By
the time they reassemble (the interval filled on stage by the playlet
New-Found-Land, which celebrates Stoppard's friend Ed Berman's natural-
ization as a British citizen), French has been thoroughly corrupted by
Maddie and goes along with the rest of the Committee in drafting a
report which absolves all M.P.'s of any wrongdoing.

In addition to French's short-lived stand as the protector of
traditional morality, other Committee members make noble-sounding
speeches about public responsibility; however, Maddie quickly exposes
these as the mere lip-service they are:

MADDIE: Actually, what I meant was, who would it
bring them into disrepute?
McTEAZLE: Because the country by and large looks to its elected representatives to set a moral standard. . . .
MADDIE: No it doesn't--
McTEAZLE: (smoothly): No it doesn't--you're quite right. Then it's because the authority of the--er--authorities is undermined by losing the respect of--
MADDIE: I don't think people care.
McTEAZLE: No, people don't care--of course they don't.

(p. 20)

Maddie continues to correct the Committee when they turn to the matter of the press:

COCKLEBURY-SMYTHE: The press, you see, is not just an ordinary commercial enterprise like selling haberdashery.
MADDIE: Yes it is.
COCKLEBURY-SMYTHE: Yes I know it is, but it is also the watchdog of democracy, which haberdashery, by and large, is not.
MADDIE: If the press is all that, you should be asking them about chasing after anything in a skirt, which they do. . . . You're just as entitled to enjoy yourself as they are.

(p. 37)

In the end, Maddie's opinions form the bulk of the Committee report. Stoppard intended his play to explode the stereotype of the sexy secretary:

If you think about it, Dirty Linen is a play in which a sexy dumb blonde walks on and is utterly patronized, and the play ends with the entire committee adopting the resolution which she said they ought to adopt on page four or whatever it is. She actually is Miss Common Sense rather than Miss Empty Head.  

Whether he changes the secretary's image so much as he lowers the image

41Hayman, p. 144.
of M.P.'s to match it is questionable.

At any rate, Dirty Linen provides no serious discussion of any issue, whether of sexual conduct of government figures or of the stereotype of attractive secretaries. The committee's "debates" are purely farcical. Points are raised and conceded with no more discussion than a simple "Of course not." Critics recognized the lightweight nature of this work and were generally disappointed in Dirty Linen. Those who had admired Stoppard's earlier work and expected more substance from him were not kind:

I wish Stoppard would dig beneath the surface a bit instead of dashing off whatever comes to his quick and witty mind.  

Another described the play as "better suited to a summer camp than to Broadway.  

Critics who enjoyed the play uniformly praised the wordplay and the slapstick elements that provided easy laughs, never mentioning any serious themes or lack thereof. One found it an "elegant ballet for foot in mouth," and another likened Stoppard's humor to that of S. J. Perelman, "antic, satirical, and civilized." Dirty Linen, where Stoppard's comic talents sparkle without illuminating any ideas, points up the superiority of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead,

42 Catherine Hughes, "If It Weren't For the British," rev. of Dirty Linen, America, 136 (Feb. 19, 1977), p. 149.


Jumpers, and even Travesties as plays that attempt a mix of comedy and thought.

Professional Foul also enjoys a setting which would seem to be a natural one for a debate, but which in fact contains little of no real debating. This play concerns the actions of a British professor of philosophy in attendance at a colloquium in Prague, Czechoslavakia. Although the three central characters do not debate positions. They simply offer a situation in which ethical questions can be raised and spoken on at length by one figure or another, without entering into discussions among opposing views.

The Czech student, Pavel Hollar, raises the first issue when he comes to visit Anderson, who had been his teacher in England. Hollar has completed his thesis, which he wants Anderson to smuggle out of the country for him. The thesis raises ethical questions in two senses. The first is strictly academic. Hollar's thesis questions the priorities given to collective ethics over individual ones in communist countries. He argues that collective ethics must grow from individual ones, which are in turn denied or repressed by the state ethic:

I ask where it comes from, the idea of a collective ethic. . . . I reply, it comes from the individual. One man's dealings with another man. . . . The ethics of the State must be judged against the fundamental ethic of the individual. The human being, not the citizen. I conclude there is an obligation, a human responsibility, to fight against the State correctness.  

46 Tom Stoppard, Every Good Boy Deserves Favor and Professional Foul (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1978), p. 61. (All further quotations from both plays will be taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.)
More immediate than the academic issue, however, is a practical one raised by the thesis. Hollar believes that he is watched by the government. He entrusts his thesis to Anderson, asking him to return it to Hollar's wife if he will smuggle it out to England. Anderson finds himself facing an ethical choice. Does he follow the impulse given by his belief in individual freedoms, or the restraints imposed upon him as a guest of the Czech government?

Having raised the two-pronged question of his thesis, Hollar disappears from the play, arrested just as he had feared. Anderson is left in the position of George Moore of _Jumpers_. His mind grapples joyfully with the academic side of experience; he easily raises possible objections and answers to those objections to the content of Hollar's thesis. But in dealing with the possession of the thesis, he is hesitant and unsure of himself. He seems to resent being asked to enter into the practical world.

McKendrick, the second English philosopher, enter obliquely into Anderson's dilemma. McKendrick's specialty concerns catastrophe theory, an idea which abandons the notion of eternal, unbreakable ethical principles in favor of a more pragmatic approach which recognizes a point beyond which such principles no longer apply. He attempts to explain his theory to Anderson over a dinner which follows Anderson's meeting with Mrs. Hollar and the Czech police. Unknown to McKendrick, Anderson's personal situation provides a remarkable illustration of catastrophe theory. Hollar has been arrested and framed with false evidence; Anderson is personally involved in the case through his visit; and he still holds the forbidden thesis. McKendrick innocently attacks Anderson's
ideas of unchanging ethical principles as he explains his own ideas:

You have to think of a principle as a curved line, too--and in three dimensions. . . . And what we call the catastrophe point is where the principle reverses itself, at the point where rational man would abandon it. . . . There aren't any principles in your sense. . . . You know they're fictions but you're so hung up on them you want to treat them as if they were God-given absolutes. . . . So you end up using a moral principle as your excuse for acting against a moral interest. (pp. 97-98)

McKendrick's proposed dilemma fits exactly Anderson's argument that correct behavior towards the Czech government forbids him from helping Hollar to publish his work. One moral principle gets in the way of another.

Hollar's argument in favor of the individual ethic and McKendrick's attack on traditional ethics and morality combine to affect Anderson's decision. He tells Mrs. Hollar that he will return the thesis at the next day's colloquium meeting. But he is obviously disturbed by this face-to-face encounter with the family of a dissident. The next day, Anderson does not present his planned paper at the meeting but begins to read his own thoughts about individual and collective rights and ethics. Given the facility with which he attacked Hollar's arguments when first presented with the thesis, some of Anderson's statements are surprising. Apparently his experience with the Hollars has made a difference in his philosophy. Anderson draws a distinction between rights and rules, associating the former with individuals and the latter with communities. He claims precedence for rights over rules, while admitting that rights are in themselves fictions which one is obligated to treat as truths. His paper, or as much of it as he is allowed to deliver, argues for the existence and the priority
of the individual ethic over the state ethic; Anderson has come to
tee with Hollar:

> There is a sense of right and wrong which precedes utterance. It is individually experienced and it concerns one person's dealings with another person. From this experience we have built a system of ethics which is the sum of individual acts of recognition of individual right.

(p. 118)

In this speech Anderson shows his similarity to George Moore. He insists that right and wrong spring from some intuitively knowable impulse. He dismisses the belief in God as a necessary condition for behaving according to absolutes of good and evil, while acknowledging that religious belief has provided re-enforcement for such absolutes. 47 Anderson, like Moore speaks out for Stoppard's belief in moral absolutes. But his speech still remains in the realm of academia. The practical question of what to do with the thesis is unsolved.

As Anderson passes through customs, he is carefully searched. The search itself appears very much like that practiced on Stoppard and his companions when they visited Russia for Amnesty International. 48 When no thesis appears, one assumes that Anderson did return it to Hollar's friend at the colloquium. In the final twist, however, the thesis shows up in McKendrick's luggage, where Anderson had hidden it the night before. Using McKendrick's own argument as his justification,

47 Cahn, pp. 151-152.

Anderson had reversed a principle in a successful but risky move.

The ideological content of *Professional Foul* proceeds in three steps. Each looks like a debate, but really presents only one side of an argument. The first step in Hollar's presentation of his thesis to Anderson. Hollar explains his argument; Anderson plays devil's advocate on one point, but he also provides a rebuttal for his own objection. This step is heavily weighted toward Hollar's point of view. The second step, McKendrick's explanation of his theory, is similarly one-sided. He expounds on it, with only Anderson's comment, "You make your points altogether too easily, McKenrdick" (p. 98), offered against him. And a few moments later, Anderson acknowledges the complexity of moral dilemmas, noting that if principles were always clear-cut and never in conflict, such complexity would not exist. The third step is, of course, Anderson's speech to the colloquium, to which no objection is offered except the subterfuge of the Czech officials in bringing his speech to an early close.

The appearance of debate is created without the actuality of debate. No characters ever enter into an in-depth discussion of any philosophical points. The ambience of debate is further enhanced by the presence of such minor characters as the American philosopher, Stone, who offers his linguistic theories both in the meetings and over dinner. But Stone's points are sidelights, ones which argue ironically for the necessity of ambiguity in a language which contains literature. Stoppard chooses this play in which to acknowledge publicly the importance of ambiguity, a play which shows his own art becoming less and less ambiguous. *Professional Foul* has moments of lightness, particularly those scenes in which ambiguity of language causes confusion between
philosophers and soccer players, but it is neither light nor ambiguous about its central point. In this play, Stoppard uncompromisingly champions individual rights, an inherent sense of justice, and the correctness of opposing a totalitarian government.

In Every Good Boy Deserves Favor, Stoppard makes not even the pretense of debate. As noted earlier, the cause of dissidents imprisoned in mental hospitals is close to Stoppard's heart. His seriousness about that cause shows in his refusal to allow any suggestion that there can be an argument in favor of such practices. Every Good Boy Deserves Favor does not contain arguments so much as it is an argument.

Stoppard attacks the Soviet prison/hospital system by making it look ridiculous, more comical than horrifying. The doctor spends much of his time playing in an orchestra. He makes jokes at his patients' expense and his treatments consist of handing out pills which have nothing to do with mental illness:

Yes, he has an identity problem. I forget his name.
(p. 25)

DOCTOR: ... For example, you are here because you have delusions that sane people are put in mental hospitals.
ALEX: But I am in a mental hospital.
DOCTOR: That's what I said. If you're not prepared to discuss your case rationally, we're going to go round in circles.
(p. 25)

DOCTOR: ... Take one of these every four hours.
ALEX: What are they?
DOCTOR: A mild laxative.

Cahn, pp. 144-145.
ALEX: For schizophrenia?
DOCTOR: The layman often doesn't realize that medicine advances in a series of imaginative leaps.

The head doctor is a doctor of philosophy, a specialist in semantics. His plan to cure Alex consists of placing his in a cell with a genuine lunatic who happens to share Alex's name, another of the system's "imaginative leaps." Alex is confronted with a world which is truly absurd, one in which nothing makes sense and in which dissidence is equated with insanity.

The chaos and foolishness of the hospital signals a small revival of the absurd, but it is a revival in a form significantly changed from Stoppard's earlier uses of absurdity. Only the official Soviet system is made to appear absurd. Alex, with his rational explanations of his behavior and his pointed questioning of the "treatments" given to him, is a small island of sanity in the chaos of the hospital. Stoppard seems almost to have adopted John Brown's viewpoint—a society may be absurd, but an individual can create order on a smaller scale. By linking the absurd with a repressive government, he implicitly rejects absurdity as an acceptable philosophy.

Alex himself presents a very sane counterpoint to the Soviet system. He is no wild-eyed radical, but an ordinary man who wrote a letter of protest. His normalcy is stressed, implying that his fate could happen to anyone under totalitarianism:

50 Hayman, p. 136.
My childhood was uneventful. My adolescence was normal. I got an ordinary job, and married a conventional girl who died uncontroversially in childbirth. Until the child was seven the only faintly interesting thing about me was that I had a friend who kept getting arrested.

Then one day I did something really crazy.

(p. 21)

Alex also presents the terrifying side of the hospital/prison in a description of his earlier treatments:

For the politicals, punishment and medical treatment are intimately related. I was given injections of aminazin, sulfazin, triflazin, haloperidol, and insulin, which caused swellings, cramps, headaches, trembling, fever, and the loss of various abilities including the ability to read, write, sleep, sit, stand, and button my trousers. When all this failed to improve my condition, I was stripped and bound head to foot with lengths of wet canvas. As the canvas dried it became tighter and tighter until I lost consciousness. They did this to me for ten days in a row, and still my condition did not improve.

(p. 28)

His recitals of earlier experiences insure that the ugly truths of the "hospital" system are not replaced by the comically absurd portrayal seen on stage. Alex is further raised in the audience's estimation through his relationship with his son, Sacha. Concern for Sacha, who is already motherless, is the single factor which prevents Alex from sacrificing himself to his conceptions of justice. As Cahn notes, the presence of Sacha injects a note of "extraordinary compassion and anguish" into the play. 51

Sacha also raises the one question which is left unresolved by the

51 Cahn, p. 145.
play. Is Alex's first duty to his beliefs in truth and justice, or to his son? Should he hold firmly to his principles and remain imprisoned, or relent in order to be allowed to return home? This question holds enormous potential for debate. It echoes the choices forced on Moore and Anderson, between abstractions and pragmatic action. The choice is so difficult to decide that to decide it would be to diminish Alrx's character in some way. He would either betray his beliefs or sacrifice his son's happiness and welfare.

On this difficult question, Stoppard sidesteps the issue altogether. He provides a comic ending in which Alex is released by mistake, the result of bureaucratic incompetence and hurry. Alex is freed without ever having to recant his principles, and everyone seems happy. Only Sacha's joyous insistence that "everything can be all right!" (p. 39) reminds one that everything is not all right, that Alex's freedom may in fact convince his son that the Soviet system is in fact a benevolent one.

There is no opposition to Stoppard's opinions in Every Good Boy Deserves Favor. Nothing suggests that the "hospital" system is anything other than a prison, run by incompetent doctors and headed by men who are only nominally doctors. Neither does anything suggest that Alex is other than a just man and a devoted father. Even the question of where one's duty lies is sacrificed in order not to interfere with black-and-white distinction between hero and villains.

Every Good Boy Deserves Favor cannot be faulted for making its point. The play delivers its message clearly and unmistakably. What can be questioned is the play's value as theatre. One reviewer noted
that character development is sacrificed to political message.  
Another called the entire play poorly developed in every aspect except its usefulness as propaganda.  
The play makes its point, but the point is not a surprising one, and the humor which surrounds it lessens the impact of the message. Alex's speech reminds one that Soviet "hospitals" are not all comical blunderings, but the rest of the play makes it too easy for one to laugh at the doctors' acts. Stoppard's message that terrible abuse and maltreatment go on in such places is clear but not forceful. Such a topic would be better served by a more realistic approach that did not attempt to sugar-coat its medicine.

Stoppard's most recent works follow a pattern of clearly identifiable changes from his better plays. They deal with smaller, more pragmatic issues in a less open, more polemical way. His work moves even farther into the range of the didactic. That movement in itself does not make these five plays better or worse than their predecessors. But the move toward didacticism has entailed changed in Stoppard's artistry that do lessen the appeal of his plays.

Stoppard's plays are becoming increasingly naturalistic. Although he continues to include scenes which take the audience into characters' dreams, fantasies, and memories, these scenes are now scattered through predominantly naturalistic plays like raisins through a loaf of cinnamon.


53Clarke, p. 59.
bread. Naturalistic is not his strength, however. His flair for verbal wit is not easily disguised as believable conversation. His characters don't seem fully rounded; they serve as spokespersons for various beliefs and are often cliché-based figures with only a slight twist added to dress up the familiar stereotype. These flat characters spouting extraordinarily witty lines do not seem out-of-place in the early unrealistic ambience of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* or the frenetic future of *Jumpers*. But placed within the confines of a realistic contemporary scene, they show themselves to bad advantage. Their ideological motivations stand out like exposed struts and bracing. Against the realistic settings and situations, Stoppard's characters appear too contrived.

The absurdity he dealt with in such an original manner has also disappeared from the later plays in all but the slightest forms. The absence of reliable traditions and conventions is the only hint of absurdity left in plays like *Night and Day* and *Professional Foul*. *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor* retains a more obvious absurdity in the bizarre methods of Soviet doctors, but the play seems almost anti-absurdist in other ways, particularly in its dependence on rationality. Although Cahn sees in Stoppard's recent work a new direction for the absurd theatre, that same work can also be interpreted as a retreat from absurdity. His plays tend increasingly to imply that although older beliefs such as religion and divinely inspired order may be illusions,
one can still create and maintain an ordered, meaningful life through rationality and responsibility. Indeed, if Stoppard were not associated with absurdism through his earlier works, I doubt that his more recent plays would be identified as even remotely connected with theatre of the absurd.

Stoppard appears to have ended his debate with himself. He no longer plays "a sort of intellectual leap-frog."55 His current decision has been made in favor of by and large traditional Western values, especially individual freedom, and his plays proclaim that decision in each weighted debate. Unfortunately, in implementing his decision, Stoppard has retreated from the large and difficult issues to smaller and less complex ones; his art has lessened its scope, open-mindedness, and originality.

STOPPARD'S ACHIEVEMENT

Tom Stoppard's fame among contemporary dramatists is now well established, although he cannot be said to be known by all who attend the theatre. But even people who do not know his name recognize at least the title of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Among the well versed, his steady succession of new works automatically attracts attention and often praise.

Stoppard's highest achievements reflect originality, open-mindedness, and willingness to take on large, ambiguous topics. The last of these three traits, in particular, exhibits a clear pattern of growth from the start of his career through the early 1970's, then seems put aside. Stoppard's most significant plays showed his interest in paradoxes and in the recognition of absurdity. His early career was marked by a fondness for clever ideas which, on closer examination, proved to be no more than amusing. On the occasions when he did deal with a potentially serious theme, his treatment of it was superficial. He seemed more interested in picking up the surface nuggets of humor than in tunnelling for the significant ideas.

This shallow approach to his material gave way to a more exploratory method in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead which continued in Jumpers. Stoppard expanded his view to take in ambiguous questions which were not merely clever gimmicks. In writing about these looming
and universal matters, he found himself unwilling, in fact unable, to identify a single line of thought as inevitably correct. This uncertainty led to the development of one of his early assets as a playwright, his exploratory rather than exhortatory style. In his best plays, Stoppard presents multiple points of view in conflict with one another, allowing them to interact on two levels, one purely conversational or abstract and the other concerned with more pragmatic actions. Although Stoppard's own preferences are identifiable, lying with the characters who are most sympathetically presented, the plays remain artistically balanced between the tradition-oriented figures who are appealing but ineffective and the new breed who accept an absurdist world view and accomplish their goals but have unpleasantly exploitive personalities.

This balance among characters, which is maintained only in the major plays, suggests Stoppard's own attitude toward absurdity, an attitude which changes through his career. The short plays only hint at the existence of absurdity; they do not take it seriously as a concept that affects everyone's life. Absurdity is an amusing idea, one that gives rise to gimmicks and allows Stoppard to create clever jokes. When one looks at the best plays, however, he or she can see that Stoppard's attitude toward absurdity becomes far more serious. The playwright associates it with the essentials of life and death, good and evil, reality and illusion. The characters who represent the absurdist point of view in these plays--The Player and Sir Archie--are in some respects almost villainous. They are certainly opportunists who do little to inspire confidence or affection in their acquaintances.
Stoppard, in taking absurdity seriously, perceives it as a threatening force against which the Western traditions and ideals in which he believes are not effective. As his commitment to those ideals has grown more overt, his attitude toward absurdity has metamorphosed yet again. In his most recent plays, he shows absurdity as a concept which can be dealt with according to traditional ideas. He achieves this not by producing new and forceful arguments for the traditional, but by modifying his view of absurdity to make it less threatening. These modifications include lessening the scale of problems or issues that he deals with and allowing the absurd to melt into a mere part of the ideological background rather than displaying it prominently. His strategy for promoting anti-absurdist ideas has not been to strengthen them, but to weaken subtly the opposition, taking on only a small flanking army instead of the main battalion.

Stoppard's open-mindedness on such topics as death, divinity, and morality forms an important component of his originality. A distinctly Stoppardian style, marked by verbal wit, unrealistic settings, and characters who serve as mouthpieces for various philosophies, emerged in the major plays and several of the shorter comedies such as Albert's Bridge. While all these elements are not necessarily interconnected, they have proved to be so in Stoppard's case. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and Jumpers, they came together in a fortuitous blend which resulted in "high comedy of ideas."¹ More recently, Stoppard has

altered his style and has not struck on another so fortunate mix of elements. When he moved to a more naturalistic style, for instance, his propensity for joking and his mouthpiece characters seemed out of place. Even more disruptive to his successful style has been his decision to write more polemical, didactic works. While his debating style worked well to expose the multiple views of his earlier plays, it seems an artificial construction when used to promote a single idea.

At his best, Stoppard provides an original and thus far unduplicated experience for the theatre-goer. While the ideas he raises in his best plays are not original with him and may be easily found in other sources, he uses them in an original manner. His best plays revolve around conflicts among ideas, embodied in characters like Ros, Guil, Sir Archie, The Player, and Goerge Moore. These plays show ideas as vital, changing, challenging forces. They bring out the difficulty of choosing and consistently following one line of thought while remaining aware of and open to arguments for other opinions. Stoppard's plays also indicate the difference between abstract consideration of an idea and pragmatic action based on such thought.

The direction of his more recent plays has been away from the open-mindedness and unrealistic form of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*. In choosing to write in a naturalistic vein and in taking clearcut stands on topical issues, Stoppard foregoes several of the qualities which made his work original. His verbal wit has been slightly reined in to retain verisimilitude in dialogue; his characters still speak wittily, but one senses more puns and jokes champing at the bit, ready to leap onstage if allowed. His characters still serve as mouthpieces for different points of view, but in the naturalistic plays
they acquire additional backgrounds and motivations absent in the more absurd pieces. These new factors muddy the waters of argument which were crystalline in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Ruth's sex life or McKendrick's boorishness intrude on one's consideration of the press or of politics; they inject elements extraneous to the central problem. Most disturbing is Stoppard's shift from universal issues to narrower, more topical ones. As he often was content to aim for the easy joke in his short plays, his recent plays show him securing easy audience involvement by trading on the headlines. While this change in focus earns him greater attention and popular interest now, it may well mean that his recent plays will be more easily forgotten in the coming years as current issues and crises give way to newer ones.

Stoppard's final position among contemporary dramatists is far from settled. Now only 43, he has a potentially long career before him. Whether his current fascination with naturalism and politics proves to be a passing phase or the ultimate direction of his writing should strongly affect the way in which future generations view him. Thus far, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers* are undoubtedly Stoppard's highest achievements and plays which deserve to be remembered. Whether they are aberrations in a canon that grows more conventional with each new play or the harbingers of a drama that is fresh and original remains to be seen. But no matter what the future direction of his career, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers* Stoppard has provided the theatre with at least two fine examples of his elusive ideal, the high comedy of ideas.
LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED


Crossley, Brian M. "An Investigation of Stoppard's 'Hound' and 'Foot.'" Modern Drama, 20 (March 1977), pp. 77-86.


Lambert, J. W. (Rev. of Jumpers.) Drama (Summer 1972), pp. 15-17.


Levenson, Jill. "Views From a Revolving Door: Tom Stoppard's Canon to Date." Queen's Quarterly, 78 (Autumn 1971), pp. 431-442.


