

Stoppard's Postmodern Differance: The Courage of *No Convictions*

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Abstract: The Stoppardian play enacts a postmodern situation where an acknowledgment of the undecidable, however incoherently comprehended, is met with realistic, identifiable men but with witty measures of parody, inscribed with an enlivening sense of playfulness. In this, Stoppard aims to self-discursively move beyond the limits of the absurd. Stoppard's dramatic texts are steeped in dialogic premises which can be lighted by the Bhaktinian socio-linguistics. Stoppard reveals that he is "a man of no convictions," and believes that one should have the courage of no convictions. This amply reveals the playwright's moral of no convictions explored through interplay of convictions and counter-convictions; in other words, he interrogates and subverts established beliefs under dominant traditions that drive his dramatic characters and situations which ignore or oppress the other silent and suppressed ones.

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The idea of humans holding onto no convictions with courage sounds not only paradoxical but unappealing too; and it appears more uninteresting when it is literature's domain, since art characteristically posits an exemplary courage at the center of its conflicts. But Stoppard does not fail to capture the imagination of the age and that of the theatre world in particular. His attitude toward convictions or confirmed beliefs gets revealed through many dramatic modes, especially through parody, dialectic and play. Stoppard has admitted that his chimed line comes from Christopher Hampton's *The Philanthropist*: "I'm a man of no convictions — at least, I think I am." (Delaney 108) Kenneth Tynan once charged that Stoppard preferred to float above the battle rather than take an uncomfortable position in the moral trenches (108). To this Stoppard's response would be that he does not believe some overall context like an intellectualized cosmos is always ideal to make sense of his writing, in other words, make up "a certain sort of writer with certain appropriate preoccupations" (108). But that he is not morally involved is a pseudo-truth. He asserts, "I am always morally, if not politically, involved." (ibid 107). His *Professional Foul* and *Every Good man Deserves Favor* dispels even the misconception of Stoppard's politically detached or morally uncomfortable position. The courage of having no convictions is insinuatingly a kind of conviction in itself. This inescapable paradox defines the characteristic attitude of Stoppard as a dramatist who would claim no authority of miraculous knowledge, no logocentrist finalism. A

sense of self-reflexivity sleekly attends every statement holding an apparent conviction in Stoppard's characters. It would also mean that he could "see the other side" instantly like "a terrible hedger" (ibid 108). In other words, Derrida's erasure and differance as subversive techniques have appropriate uses for the self-conscious discursivity in Stoppard's plays like *Travesties*. And a critical approach he adopts in order to forcefully advance his viewpoint is close to the Socratic method of dialectic free from privileging the one and the dominant. Stoppard's 'no conviction' emerges from the premises of self-contradictory half-truths posed as essential truths. The long established and much hyped disparagement between speech and writing for a pre-eminent origin has finally turned in Derrida into a dialogue between the existing contenders for the same space. The same space is not a fixed spatial location; rather the dialogue in process creates and uncreates it. It is Derrida who says in *Of Grammatology* commenting on traditional assumptions about language how "writing in the metaphoric sense, natural, divine, and living writing, is venerated; it is equal in dignity to the origin of value, to the voice of conscience as divine law, to the heart, to sentiment and so forth. (Derrida, O.G. 17) Therefore, speech (phonocentrism) alone to objectify the 'presence' and 'origin' is unconvincing and lacking in logical force. Stoppard's Dogg language, which seems close to the absurdist notion of Beckett's speech, would premise that otherness of a centripetally "homogenizing" or "hierarchizing force" of the internally differentiated individual consciousness as well as social life. The pluralism and plurivocality as the denormalizing, decentralizing tendencies of language would posit that the trace of the other is inevitably apparent in making meaning possible (Paschalis 20). Overall, Stoppard's predilection for a neologism could be akin to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. This kind of neologism serves, what Bakhtin would imply, the "centrifugal," that is de-normalizing conception of language. Holquist explains in *Dialogism*:

In dialogism, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on otherness. This otherness is not merely a dialectical alienation on its way to a sublation that will endow it with a unifying identity in higher consciousness. On the contrary, in dialogism consciousness is otherness. More accurately, it is the differential relation between a center and all that is not that center. (17)

Further, the contest between center and periphery may be brought to light, for example, in *Travesties* (85), when Lenin harangues with great force and ferocity:

Your talk about absolute freedom is sheer hypocrisy. There can be no real and effective freedom in a society based on the power of money.... The freedom of bourgeois writer, artist or actor is simply disguised dependence on the money-bag, on corruption, on prostitution.

Further, Carr would challenge accusing Tzara of bourgeois pretension and artistic nothing (ibid 83). The above citations illustrate a range of provocations touching on the humanist positions of each ideologue in the play. What is relevant here is the nature of dialogue which is essentially

social, and its paramount dialogism that incorporates all difficult and contesting ideas and ideals. This reflects the Stoppardian art of jigsaw involving various perceptions and avowed ideologies in society in play. The very nature of dialogism is intertextual, which flows dialogically with the dialectic participation among different views and consciousnesses. There seems no value for man to be permanently consistent about, which may clearly be perceived from the character Moon in the novel *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*, who sounds like Stoppard saying he cannot commit himself to either side of the question, for by attaching oneself to one or the other one disappears into it:

How can one be consistent about anything, since all the absolutes discredit one another? ... I take both parts ... leapfrogging myself along the great moral issues, refuting myself and rebutting the refutation towards a truth that must be a compound of two opposite half-truths. And you never reach it because there is always something more to say. (48)

There may be many and self-contradictory half-truths in life rather than a single absolute meaning, the fact of which Stoppard's intertextualism consistently spins out. Further in his conversations Stoppard has a similar belief to advocate, "I write plays because writing dialogue is the only respectable way of contradicting yourself." He continues, "none of us is tidy; none of us is classifiable. Even the facility to perceive and define two ideas such as the classical and the romantic in opposition to each other indicates that one shares a little bit of each." (Delaney 263) The important import to Stoppard and to the reader is that there is no end to the dialogic process of such interbreeds of opposites, no singularity of privileging one value and dismissing the other value. Thus Stoppard's dramatic texts are steeped in dialogic premises which can be lighted by the Bakhtinian sociolinguistics. In dialogic discourse, as Bakhtin perceives, "(t)he direct word" that is monologic and elitist encounters for its signification "the fundamental and richly varied opposition of another's word." (Emerson & Holquist 94) And this would reinvigorate the Saussurean insight into the meaning made by differences and Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence by difference (Derrida, W.D. 352-3). Similarly, the poststructuralists and critics have employed the term intertextuality "to disrupt notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation." (Allen 3) This idea can also be validated with Stoppard's example from *Jumpers* (35-36).

Dotty: That was the year of 'The Concept of Knowledge', your masterpiece, and the last decent title left after Ryle bagged 'The Concept of Mind' and Archie bagged 'The Problem of Mind' and Ayer bagged 'The Problem of Knowledge'—and 'The Concept of Knowledge' might have made you if you had written it, but we were still on the carpet when an American with an Italian name working in Melbourne bagged it for a rather bad book which sold four copies in London, three to unknown purchasers and the fourth to yourself.

The above lines would explain Stoppard parodying the postulates of

knowledge firmly held by George; and George's coming late in completing the project shows others in the world of philosophy are not belated achievers and never without similar or equal intellectual capacities. Stoppard's Dogg language would remind us contrastively of Beckett's automatic speech unarrested by meaning or logic, and how Derrida critiques Austin's performative language in *The Margins of Philosophy* observing, "One will no longer be able to exclude ... the 'non-serious,' the *oratio obliqua* from 'ordinary' language". Further, the effects of ordinary language "do not exclude what is ordinarily opposed to them term by term (i.e. relative specificity of the effects of consciousness), on the contrary, presuppose it... as the general space of their possibility." (Derrida, M.P.326-7) To him as to the postmodernists, "the pure singularity of (any) event" is a misnomer, split within, and hence, language is haunted by its ironic, parasitic, perverse, menacing intent intrinsic to itself (ibid). This squarely critiques the 'felicitous' performative of Austin, which, to Austin, must be uttered by a fully conscious ego in complete possession of its wits and its intentions. Even Stoppard's paraxis would indicate appropriation of Wittgenstein's thesis enforcing the inadequacy of language to represent truth about the world, and this would form a background work for his *Dogg's Hamlet, and Cahoot's Macbeth*. Far from leading to objective reality, language, as Wittgenstein understands, is "a *projection* of the mind rather than a picture of the world, in a sense (it) *creates* reality." (Brassell 235/6). In other words, language can be semiotically significant embedded with differences and without metaphysical essences. The Stoppardian play enacts a postmodern situation where an acknowledgement of the undecidable, however incoherently comprehended, is met with realistic, identifiable men but with witty measures of parody, inscribed with an enlivening sense of playfulness. In this, Stoppard aims to self-discursively move beyond the limits of the absurd. Cahn has aptly suggested: "Stoppard confronted absurdity head-on and at the same time takes the initial steps towards moving beyond absurdity." (35) Stoppard in going beyond absurdism, which stripped man of his humanist assurances and metaphysical certainties, has made his plays including *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* aim at moral and political values to invest. In the postmodern age, hence, metanarratives are apt to induce incredulity and elicit parodic intents. Further, Stoppard's sense of parody plays a counter discourse to the dominant monologic model. In this he seems close to Bakhtin who emphasizes laughter (parody) and heteroglossia (plurality of voice) two seminal aspects of the novelistic discourse, which constitutes an inter-generic and multi-voiced world. Bakhtin holds that "laughter and criticism" become corrective to "all existing straightforward genres" (Emerson & Holquist 94). Parody unsettles, the way Beckett and Pinter did, the assumed "sanctity of the individual which naturalism so resolutely upholds" (Brassell 33). Parody closely resembles deconstruction, especially as Derrida practices the variety of deconstruction. The basic premise of deconstruction is in believing that

there is nothing outside texts or language. Phiddian would use an apt metaphor such as the cuckoo-crow paradigm to recapture the self-reflexive economy of text and write:

(Deconstruction) nests in the structure of the texts and ideas it criticizes, as a cuckoo infiltrates and takes over the nests of other birds. It operates from inside the arguments of metaphysical texts and systems such as structuralism and phenomenology, showing how they cannot totalize the visions they proclaim, and precisely where they double and collapse. It is ... always "borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure." and this is precisely what parody does too. It is preeminently a genre-bricoleur, living off the energies and inadequacies of previous writings, "borrowing them structurally" and transforming them with a critical eye. Don quixote is in a deconstructive economy with romance, just as surely as grammatology is in a deconstructive economy with Rousseau's theory of language; and in many similar ways. (681)

Postmodern parody characteristically elicits free play. In Stoppard as in Derrida the idea of play postulates that the relationship between the world and things is one of intimacy, but not fusion. This would be a close echo from Heidegger who understands it as a relationship in which the entities-world and thing- penetrate each other, divide and remain separated: "The intimacy of world and thing is present in the separation of the between; it is present in the dif-ference" (Leitch 1129). According to Derrida, "*Différance* is literally neither a word nor a concept." Differance signifies rather opposites that are already united; they depend on each other integrally, thus, no presence without absence (Derrida, M.P.3). This has significant bearings on Stoppard who like any postmodernist sounds radically political in plays like *Travesties*, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor* and *Professional foul*, where he comes up with his subversive pronouncements on many subjects such as modern art, Marxist revolution, human rights issues, capitalist and colonial imperatives, etc. For such radical purposes, he seems to have adopted the dialectics of ideas and discourses, which is supported by the familiar Socratic method of dialogue. Socrates's contribution to philosophy and science was not to establish, prove or advance any specific system of views. Rather, his significant contribution is marked in a method of dialectics originated for evaluating any set of views about the nature of the world, morality, or ourselves. Stoppard has most imbibed the spirit of this Socratic Method in his plays, an example of which can be extracted from *Jumpers* (47):

Bones: You have a funny way of going about things. Are you trying to prepare the ground for a plea of insanity?

George: I don't understand you. I didn't give my name because I could hardly register a complaint about the noise issuing from my own flat. So I pretended to be a neighbor who couldn't sleep.

George Moore contradicts himself and states that he was the "mystery caller", strengthening his own viewpoint. George Moore becomes aware of the complaint he made against his wife is all along against himself. He

rather realizes through the questioning and answering with Inspector Bones that he was to blame for the whole situation about the murder of Duncan Mc Fee, "I'm perfectly willing to take the blame." (ibid 47) The Socratic method searches for commonly held truths that shape opinion, and scrutinizes them to determine their consistency in the face of other beliefs. Stoppard's ludic sympathies would correspond to what Lauren Langman states, in the context of medieval culture : to parody, to mock, to stick out a tongue, butt or a finger to authority is to give one a sense of power over authority. Fleeting, perhaps, momentary, but so is life and in the medieval era, especially so. Langman observes that the typical patterns of hierarchy, deference, and demeanor were ignored, indeed repudiated in favor of what usually was forbidden. "Even the 'sacrosanct' elites of Church and State were typically parodied, mocked, hectored and ridiculed." The transgression of moral boundaries between the political to the erotic was alluring at several levels that are closely intertwined (Brown 68). Stoppard gets free of presumptions, is more radical and postmodern, as in the Carnavalesque realism, which connives with the folk or life as it normally moves, since the monologic structures life, suppresses the living freedom, and prefixes notions and categories. To the playwright, life is more important in its playful and delightful modes than being constricted in power seat; and hence the need for his critically political posturing to unseat the power structures in any domains. Thus in Stoppard, one misses rarely abundant parody entwined with an inescapable sense of play. Stoppard reveals that he is "a man of no convictions," and believes that one should have the courage of no convictions. This amply reveals the playwright's moral of no convictions explored through interplay of convictions and counter-convictions; in other words, he interrogates and subverts established beliefs under dominant traditions that drive his dramatic characters and situations which ignore or oppress the other silent and suppressed ones. As he sees, self-contradiction is a dialogue between contending dimensions within, thus constituting a dialectical strength. To hold to an ideal with rigorous consistency often produces "a kind of atrophy of spirits." (Whitaker 4) His plays demonstrate a space of contentions. In *Travesties*, Stoppard primarily dramatizes the complex relationship between art and revolution without working out a consistent resolution. The central characters are presented as committed to their avowed ideals, such as Lenin as a Marxist radical committed to absolute action, Joyce to his modern experimental art with a religious passion, Zara zealously committed to pleasure principle, bent on pulling down outworn gods of the Victorian world; whereas Carr is the anchor of discussions, himself a contradictory spokesman for the truth. (Brassell 140-41) The moral that emerges out of the heated debates is that no ideal or philosophy is sacrosanct; on the other hand, each character contradictorily and parodically reveals some lurking shortcoming in another. One remembers, historical materialists such as Marxists based the ideal of progress on dialectical conflict of class consciousnesses, or even philosophers of dialectical Enlightenment including Kant

advocating progress by reason as the answer to all doubts. (Porter 2) Mankind has gone through all forms of dogmatism; but after over million centuries, still the ideal evades us, still humanity suffers infinite problems. This would at least present the human situation remaining as complicated as ever before. However, postmodernism has brought to light the bitterest questions and nagging doubts once suppressed or invalidated by some claiming authority, superiority, or pure vision. In postmodern times, dogmatic assurances or adherences are exposed of the limitedness of all isolated approaches to the whole complex of truth. It appears in this regard that postmodernism in holding no moral standard as singularly universal has come round close to the Sophists (Protagoras) who upheld that all rational enquiry as of epistemic relativism would reveal no truth about the world. (Nahm 220-29). As his plays reflect, Stoppard has conceived his moral dialectic to evolve out of internally contentious perspectives with no final word on the truth to arbitrate, whatsoever.

In the 1974 interview, Stoppard claims as regards *Jumpers*, "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." (Hudson 8) He reveals, "*Jumpers* is a serious play dealt with in the farcical terms," and further asserts, "*Jumpers* obviously is not a political act, nor is it a play about politics, nor is it a play about ideology.... On the other hand, the play reflects my belief that all political acts have a moral basis to them and are meaningless without it." (ibid 10) So his Professor in *Professional Foul* would not remain a detached observer when in a different political environment human rights are violated with impunity. *Jumpers* is a serious statement about traditional humanism in its failings. Art or literature, to Stoppard, as a form of political act, does espouse a moral, but the morale of it all is never to conform to the singularity of religiously sanctified or humanistic assumptions; rather it is to question and radically unsettle the entrenched notions or beliefs. The moral in Stoppard is to enter the silenced other into dialogue with the entrenched one. In this sense, the possibility of dialogue is a condition of subversion, critiquing the pre-eminent seat of power or self-authenticating ideology. Stoppard enforces in his plays a high degree of responsibility and moral action, without which any action turns heartless and immoral. The important issue is not whether God exists or does not exist as regards ethical behavior; but human actions if motivated, as the playwright believes, by hard practicability and logical inferences alone, would produce a demented absolute. To him, a wholly rational society is like a machine, a merciless performer of presupposed objectives. Stoppard would endorse a more humane space for the repressed and legitimate other in the world and in man. George Moore states in *Jumpers* (40):

The irrational, the emotional, the whimsical...these are the stamp of humanity which makes reason a civilizing force. In a wholly rational society the moralist will be a variety of crank, haranguing the bus queue with the demented certitude of one blessed with privileged information-'Good and Evil are metaphysical absolutes!'

George presents the necessity of reason, but is not presented as a crank moralist, or a self-confirmed philosopher haranguing on his absolute beliefs. He puts up a counterpoint to the Logical Positivism held as the only truth by Archie, a radical-liberal, a believer in Leninist Marxism. Perhaps modeled after Stoppard himself, George presents an idealistic priggishness to be overcome by reality or compromise. Stoppard has aimed at a middle course between privileged discourse and counter discourse. Thus, his plays including *Jumpers* evidence what he in the afore-mentioned interview said, i.e., contriving the perfect marriage of serious ideas with high comedy. This relativist view may profitably bring into contest the absolutes of society, religion, culture, politics and economics of the everyday life. Stoppard induces this post-structuralist retribution through morality and contests the absolutes of life and living. In plays, *Jumpers*, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Enter a Free Man*, Stoppard juggles the ideas and morals as a juggler would with different color balls off his hands. He investigates the premised truths in a comic way travestying the very notion of life and belief, further giving audience the freedom to form their own views. This fairly suggests that the playwright is not complacent about any ideal dealt with as final, or about his achieved truth. Moreover, his gestation in other texts points to his intellectual search for existing philosophies, concepts and convictions of the tradition, which invite his critical reflections. Stoppard's works are philosophical parodies of his predecessors. His play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* moves between fate and free will, and interwoven with this, there is an exploration of reality versus illusion. He uses Ros and Guil, visibly as Shakespeare did, that is, as undeveloped flat characters, with roles largely ignorant of the events, and whose deaths pass almost unnoticed. Their role in *Hamlet* is in fact similar to the role of the absurdist's anti-hero in the universe, and this, with an obvious debt to *Waiting for Godot*. Having no credible existence outside the plot of *Hamlet*, Ros and Guil have no memory of their lives beyond being summoned by a court messenger. All they know is that they were born, they have been called in to play a predetermined role, and that they will die. However, Stoppard has attempted to complicate the simple clowns into growing up as self-conscious yet helpless tramps wondering why it is they in the entire world, called for death. The inevitability of death is the most disturbing fact about their existence. They try to comprehend it as a reality but are unable to battle through the illusions thrown up by the mind to account for the unknown. It is to the credit of a mature playwright that they are not transformed into tragically senile men. The conviction of 'no conviction' endorses an attitude as of treating the self free from all kinds of embedded conventions and conceptions, of liberating man from illusionary metanarratives, democratizing institutions with moral responsibilities in addressing life's other, and an attitude to life richly nurtured with play and delight. The postulates of play and delight are traditionally the domain also of high philosophy and religious ethics. But Stoppard would interest us more in little narratives of the phenomenal life-world than in

transcendental realms, in order that the richly diverse life is more tolerated and better lived than stately structured and discriminated or deeply denied. As playwright he deeply appreciates carnivalization of voices and world views without attributing primacy to privileged discourses. Paradoxes deeply entrenched in life are to be acknowledged, not to be suppressed beneath the wiles of rationalism in the name of containing the anarchic. This would better explain his later shift from serious plays of consistent ideas toward more playfully entertaining farces in his long theatrical career. Modernists hunted for paradoxes to resolve and transcend; Stoppard like postmodernists would acknowledge paradoxes in order for the originary difference to celebrate.

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