

Tom Stoppard's Plays as Playful Intertextuality

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Abstract: The article is an exploration of Tom Stoppard's plays examined in the light of the postmodernist view of intertextuality. Stoppard transcends the limits of subjectivity with his own inventiveness questioning radically notions of stability and rejecting modernist paradigms. The plays have been discussed touching on the Bakhtinian dialogic amidst different views and consciousnesses. Derrida's crucial reading of language and neologism or 'Dogg' language as invented by Stoppard incline towards the playfulness and ambiguous nature of life dethroning ideological biases, since signifiers no longer point at their accepted signifieds. The absence of final truth towards entity brings forth a blending and clashing of ideas and world views making the world and life more open and meaning more plural. All these notions of intertextuality supplemented by Stoppard in his plays have made humanity sympathies more expansive and life more tolerant.

Keywords: Postmodernist, Intertextuality, Paradigms, Dialogic, Consciousnesses, Parody, Travesty, Transposition, Centripetal, Centrifugal, Playful, Parody, Diversity, Discourse, Neologism, Presocial.

Intellectually provocative plays of Stoppard are philosophically postmodern. As works of literature these plays take on the pre-existent plays, texts or traditions, and attempt to diacritically respond to established notions of meaning, cultural codes and philosophical absolutes. The postmodern is designated by Lyotard as a rejection of the modernist "metadiscourse" signifying "some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working Subject, or the creation of wealth." He defines the spirit of the postmodern age as "incredulity towards metanarratives." (Lyotard XXIV) The post-World War-II situations expose scientific progress, the laissez faire and free market economies, Salvationist faith, socialist ideals and the nuclear family as illusory lullabies. The empty and illusory stabilities of these grand narratives do increasingly indicate the fact no text is uniquely placed to hold the absolute meaning. It is a fact that Stoppard's play is felt to be an intertext. The Stoppard reader feels thus obliged to consider the network of textual relations as well as their meaningful significances that arise out of such perspectives of intertextuality. As a poststructuralist thinker Julia Kristeva introduces the idea of intertextuality in her "*The Bounded Text*" as constructed out of already existing discourses. She has her conviction

that a text does not originate from the mind of an original author, but rather it is compiled from already pre-existing texts and discourses in society; and hence, to her, a text is “a permutation of texts,” utterances, and traces which “intersect and neutralize one another” and produce “an intertextuality in the space of a given text.” (Kristeva 36- 64) In “The Death of the Author” Roland Barthes too, without his use of the term intertextuality, has similarly conceived text as “made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation.” He has defined text to be “a tissue of quotations, drawn from innumerable centers of culture.” (Barthes 1469) Stoppard's plays *Dogg's Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (*Ros and Guil*, hence forward), *Travesties*, *Jumpers*, and *Arcadia* do elicit readings in the light of the above poststructuralist thought. For example, Stoppard's intertextuality may be perceived from *Arcadia*:

If knowledge isn't self-knowledge it isn't doing much, mate. Is the universe expanding? Is it contracting? Is it standing on one leg and singing 'When Father Painted the Parlour'? Leave me out. I can expand my universe without you. 'She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies, and all that's best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes.' There you are he wrote it after coming home from a party. (Stoppard 61)

Stoppard talks about knowledge and explores the nature of the world with questions that radically examine staple truths of science, religion and romanticism. He already premises that no being is superior to the other and that one is always connected with the other. Plurality of life and freedom of the perception is being shown. Intertextuality refers to far more than the 'influences' of writers on each other. Kristeva's intertextuality also includes, as Graham Allen observes, “(d)esire and the psychological drives of the split subject” who is “split between the conscious and the unconscious, reason and desire, the rational and the irrational, the social and the presocial, the communicable and the incommunicable.” (Hutcheon, 20) And in Stoppard's *Jumpers*, when Dotty looks at a dying jumper in surprise as he crawls up her body and she looks around 'in a bewildered way.' (Stoppard 21.) Later George shouts furiously at Dotty's scream '(h)elp-rescue-fire' as 'childish nonsense' (Stoppard 28-29) and prepares for his lecture on moral philosophy. In *Ros and Guil*, Stoppard's technique of extracting two minor characters from the famous Shakespeare play *Hamlet* enables the audience to gain unique and enlightening perspectives on the existential problems of the individual. Situated in a context that it is, the two characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to comprehend their own identities and thus their own individualities, which prevents them from conceiving their own free will. The lack of making choices and taking control of their lives, ultimately leads to them falling into the contrivances of fate, which let Stoppard question the stable Renaissance values and meaning of life. In the opening scene, they are conscious of a controlled world around them. Even if one argues that their existence is already contrived by their previous existence in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Stoppard deliberately chooses to explore the characters in their

subjugated and intertextual conditions. He also questions the possibilities of individual heroism in a world imposed not from above, but one of their own connivance. They remind accurately of Estragon and Vladimir in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Later, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Guildenstern says: "Life in a box is better than no life at all." The image of being trapped in a box becomes a metaphor for their existence, as if, without conditions life is impossible; if their "scripts are taken away, [they are] lost." They are no writers of their scripts:

Lawyer: Naturally- we didn't get paid, owing to circumstances ever so slightly beyond our control, and all the money we had lost betting on certainties. Life is a gamble, at terrible odds- if it was a bet you would not take it. Did you know that any number doubled is even ? (Stoppard 83).

Stoppard's intertextual domain offers the reader some ironic reflections on classic Renaissance verities and certainties in the Hamlet as a tragedy. In the Stoppardian play the laymen are presented not as heroes, but as victims having inadequate knowledge about life and circumstances, whose foolish questions and conversations produce occasions of tragic humor and travesty on humanity's absurdities and indeterminacies. Stoppard also parodies the source of language, whose *denoted* certainty the so-called philosophers of truth have claimed to have traced and hunted down, this can be seen in *Jumpers*:

Dotty: As I recall, you talked animatedly for some time about language being the aniseed trail that draws the hounds of heaven when the metaphysical fox has gone to earth; he must have thought you were barny. (Stoppard 31)

It may be recalled that Saussure has emphasized that language is a system which pre-exists the individual speaker. For structuralists and poststructuralists alike believe that our meanings are positioned by semiotic systems and most clearly by language. Contemporary theorists have referred to the subject as being *spoken by* language. Barthes also declares that 'it is language which speaks, not the author,' to write is to reach the point where only language acts, performs, and not the traditional author. (Barthes, 1977) When writers write they are also *written*. Furthermore, in conforming to any of the conventions of our medium, we act as a medium for perpetuating such conventions. The play *Travesties* has parodic relations with Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Dada and Lenin's political art have collapsed, the play reaffirms intertextuality against Wilde's aesthetic art advocating Victorian earnestness and art's responsibility only to itself. Likewise, in Stoppard's play characters communicate "a kind of beautiful nonsense- the language of high comedy, twisted into fantasy." (qtd. in Barnet, Berman, and Burto 140) Stoppard seems joking in 'earnest'; sometimes travestying and satirizing, while also pretending to be playful. The play appears both as a work of art divorced from reality and as a work of art that implicitly comments on life. Stoppard interacts with both sides of the problematic relationship between art, life, and politics. Fleming argues that his plays reflect both the 'uncertainty' of human life and the necessity of 'order'. He states further that 'the quality

of Stoppard's work allows him to cut across categories and to attract admirers from different critical, theoretical, and ideological backgrounds' (Fleming 257). In the heated argument about the function of art and the artist, *Travesties*, as a whole, seems to be echoing Algernon: 'The truth is rarely pure, and never simple.' (Fleming 257) It might seem to the audience of *Travesties* that Stoppard is teasing us with mischief in the play, which opens with silence later followed by a diverse and miscellaneous flow of languages. Tzara blabbers out his poem which happens to make sense in French, Joyce gabbles about from the earliest chapters of XIV of *Ulysses*, and Lenin's wife drops a scrap of paper which Joyce reads out for the audience in English which makes no sense. Hunter finds Stoppard dismissing the play's linear development towards fixed meanings or final philosophical truth, thereby signifying conflicting discourses to occupy the same space, by postulating three different revolutionaries: the political Lenin; the literary Joyce, and the Dadaist Tzara, artistically anarchist. (Jim Hunter 26) Stoppard's play *Dogg's Hamlet* is a metaplay where forth Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been enacted on a stage by school boys. The Shakespearean lines of a ruthlessly abbreviated *Hamlet* that English schoolboys are about to perform is juxtaposed against the 'Dogg' language they use to stage the performance; here the boys are busy testing the microphone and conversing in the 'Dogg' language:

Abel: (*into the microphone*) Breakfast, breakfast...sun - dock - trog... [***Testing, testing...one - two - three...**] (*he realizes the microphone is dead. He tries the switch a couple of times and then speaks again into the microphone.*) sun - dock - trog - pan - slack... [***one - two - three - four - five...**] (*The microphone is still dead. Abel calls to someone off-stage.*) Haddock priest! [***The mike is dead!**] (*Pause. Baker enters from the same direction. He is also a schoolboy similarly dressed.*) **Baker:** Eh? [***Eh?**]/ **Abel:** Haddock priest. / **Baker:** Haddock ?/ **Abel:** Priest. (*Baker goes to the microphone, drops satchel centre on the way.*) (Stoppard 15)

The apparently nonsensical dialogue here would not however provoke the other extreme that the sound of words is the content, or that the meaningful speech is the presence of truth privileged over the written language. Even without metaphor and other figures, as the above dialogue denotes, a neologism may project the subdued side of communication; in other words, life is not exhausted by language, nor is language by metaphorical expressions. 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 17) Stoppard dramatically presents what Derrida derides in the form of the conventionally ascribed the authentic meaning of language, perhaps divinely decreed. Hanna Scolnicov refers to the unintelligible language in *Dogg's Hamlet* thus: We are introduced into Dogg language playfully, without any kind of formal initiation or learning process. The readers, as well as the potential actor, are provided with an English translation in parentheses, at least at first. Not so the spectator, whose exposure to

Dogg language comes as a total surprise and who must pick it up, unaided, from the dramatic situation and tone of voice. (Hanna Scolnicov, n.p. web.) It may also imply absurdity and childhood are close, the shortcomings of speech to reveal truth; and it may also mean that there is no fixed meaning as the only truth other than significances as glossed out by signifiers and signifieds. Further, any language is meaningful when *supplemented* by gestures; gestures though silent speak meaning into the utterances. Stoppard thus states, "The appeal to me consisted in the possibility of writing a play which had to teach the audience the language the play was written in." (Stoppard 8.) An alien speech though incomprehensible is amenable to transcription or translation in some form –slab? (*okay?)- to aid understanding. Crucially, a situation beyond any individual's control points to the constructedness of language and its meaning through continuous use or performativity. Here Stoppard's performative language inspires playfulness and laughter. This kind of neologism serves, what Bakhtin would imply, the "centrifugal," that is "de-normalizing," conception of language. The 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. (Holquist n.p. web.) On the whole, Stoppard's predilection for a neologism could be akin to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. Holquist explains:

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. (Holquist 19; 32.)

For example, in *Travesties*, Lenin harangues with great force and ferocity:

You 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. (Stoppard 85)

Elsewhere, Carr would challenge Tzara:

All this dancing attendance on Marxism is sheer pretension. You're an amiable bourgeois with a chit from Matron and if the revolution came you wouldn't know what hit you. You're nothing. You are an artist. And a multi-coloured micturition is no trick to those boys, they will have you pissing blood. (Stoppard 83)

The above citations illustrate a range of provocations touching on the stereotypical 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 with playfulness. 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, and there is no absolute truth

which can be irrefutable. This may be clearly perceived from Stoppard's novel *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*:

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. (Jim Hunter, 20)

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. The important import to Stoppard and to the reader is there is no end to the dialogic process of such interbreeds of opposites, no singularity of privileging one value and dismissing the other. Thus Stoppard's dramatic texts are steeped in these premises which can be lighted by 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."²⁴(Bakhtin 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 108-9)The poststructuralists and critics have employed the term intertextuality "to disrupt notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation." (Graham Allen 3) This idea can also be validated with Stoppard's example.

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.(Stoppard 35-36)

The above lines would explain Stoppard parodying the postulates of knowledge firmly held by George. Further, Stoppard's sense of parody plays a counter model to the dominant monologic discourse. In this he seems close to Bakhtin who emphasizes laughter (parody) and heteroglossia as 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".(Bakhtin 94) Stoppard parodies his characters to the extent that finally they become travesties of what they historically represent. None of the characters manages to escape Stoppard's satiric twists played on the sincerity of their own creeds and convictions. In the second act, where Lenin is heard speaking in a paraphrase of Algernon and Lady Bracknell, the travestying reaches a climax; it is both devastatingly ironic and absurd. Stoppard's comedy, in *Travesties*, derives from the beauty of style and wit:

Lenin: Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example what on earth is the use of them?! They seem as a class to have absolutely no

sense of moral responsibility! To lose one revolution is unfortunate.

To lose two would look like carelessness!(Stoppard 58)

The ironic effect in Lenin's words develops from a travesty of Lady Bracknell, the Victorian upper-class matriarch, the ultimate embodiment of what the proletarian demagogue Lenin hates. Moreover, as Fleming aptly states, 'Lenin's sentiments on the lower classes are diametrically opposed to the words he seems to say'(Fleming 105). In a similar fashion, Stoppard offers his audience bits of self-contradiction in Tzara as well. In the first act, Tzara and Carr argue whether the meaning is objective or relative. Each sounds convincing in its forceful argument. After that they proceed in a heated argument over the politics of war (World War I). Carr says: "Wars are fought to make the world safe for artists," to defend "civilized ideals are all about." But 'modern art' demonstrates "the *ingratitude* of artists, indeed their hostility, not to mention the loss of nerve and failure of talent." In response, Tzara uncovers the political and colonial agendas: "Wars are fought for oil wells and coaling stations; for control of the Dardanelles or the Suez Canal; for colonial pickings to buy cheap in and conquered markets to sell dear in. War is capitalism...."(Stoppard 39) But Carr proudly says that going to war was his "*duty*, because (his) country needed (him), and that's *patriotism*," and that the less fortunate or the lazy are to be "defended from German militarism, and that's *love of freedom*." Tzara however rebuts referring to the internal problems of the Austro-Hungary royalty as sufficing the freedom.(Stoppard 40.) Fleming comments as pointing 'to a need to minimize the manipulation of language so that events can be seen as clearly as possible' not as suggesting 'anti-art and turning everything on its head'(Fleming 110) as Tzara and his Dadaism declared. In a much deeper sense, however, the conflation of Joyce's manuscript of *Ulysses* and Lenin's politics on art blurs the distinction between 'political art' and 'art for art's sake' providing one of the major parodic scenes. The play goes back to its initial postulation that in complicated matters as art, it is difficult to suggest any single solution. A much flexible and humorous perspective seems better than rigid views. In the argument about the function of art, which takes place between the four characters, Stoppard often felt, at least, closer to Joyce than Tzara. Also, by travestying all these revolutionaries, Stoppard reflects his dislike for hegemonic ideals and seriousness. 'He humorously undermines the earnestness of Lenin, Tzara, and Joyce.'(Orlich 373) The entire play *Travesties* has been a testimony to the intertextual premises of the postmodern as understood in Lyotard's term. Further, the play amounts to a playful autopsy of divergent ideologies and viewpoints that arise in the context of a post-war reality. Tzara's language is not born in the absence or innocent ignorance of other's discourses, and thus, no discourse arises in a void of history, politics, power or other ideologies. *Travesties* is a playful carnival of inter-discursive discourses. Thus, the playwright convinced of the absence of truth engages in parody and play, allowing space to differences and divergences as the better attitude to reality and life. This evidences, as the demagogues are ambivalent toward war, Stoppard's parody engages the reader in "the intertextual 'bouncing' between complicity and distance," (Hutcheon 32) to use Hutcheon's

terms. There is no final truth about life, no objectively verifiable absolute meaning anywhere. To recall Barthes's incisive criticism, postmodern text, as he declares, does "not release a single theological meaning (the message of the Author-God) but rather arranges and compiles the always already written, spoken and read into a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." (Stephen Heath 146) And this notion of intertextuality or 'transposition' of transformed views and positions of Kristeva (Allen, Graham 53) has been increasingly reinforced in Stoppard's parody- invigorated plays.

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