WORDS on PLAYS
INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Real Thing

BY TOM STOPPARD
DIRECTED BY CAREY PERLOFF
GEARY THEATER
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WORDS ON PLAYS PREPARED BY
ELIZABETH BRODERSEN
PUBLICATIONS EDITOR
JESSICA WERNER
ASSOCIATE PUBLICATIONS EDITOR
PAUL WALSH
RESIDENT DRAMATURG
WILLIAM H. CRITZMAN
MARGOT MELCON
PUBLICATIONS AND LITERARY INTERNS

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SYNOPSIS, CHARACTERS, AND CAST OF
THE REAL THING

The Real Thing premiered at the Strand Theatre (London) on November 16, 1982. The original Broadway production of The Real Thing opened at the Plymouth Theatre (New York) on January 5, 1984.

CHARACTERS AND CAST

**Henry**  Marco Barricelli
A playwright, married first to Charlotte and then to Annie. “Henry is amiable but can take care of himself” (character descriptions from The Real Thing).

**Charlotte**  Diana LaMar
An actor, married to Henry. “Charlotte is less amiable and can take even better care of herself. . . . [She] doesn’t have to be especially attractive, but you instantly want her for a friend.”

**Max**  Stephen Caffrey
An actor, married to Annie. “Max doesn’t have to be physically impressive, but you wouldn’t want him for an enemy. . . . [He] is nice, seldom assertive, conciliatory.”

**Annie**  René Augesen
An actor, married first to Max and then to Henry. “Annie is very much the woman who Charlotte has ceased to be.”

**Billy**  Andy Butterfield
A young actor with whom Annie has an affair: “How can I need someone I spend half my time telling to grow up?”

**Debbie**  Allison Jean White
Charlotte and Henry’s daughter, who “goes riding on Barnes Common looking like the Last of the Mohicans.”

**Brodie**  Clayton B. Hodges
A young soldier from Scotland who is arrested at an anti-missile demonstration for “a stupid piece of bravado and a punch-up.”
SYNOPSIS

A CT 1. SCENE 1. Max is at home waiting for his wife, Charlotte, to return from a business trip to Switzerland. An architect, Max is attempting to build a viaduct with a pack of playing cards on the living room table. Charlotte enters in topcoat with suitcase and duty free bag; Max asks about her trip. As Max’s questions become increasingly hostile and agitated, Charlotte becomes annoyed, until Max reveals that he has found her passport at home—obviously she couldn’t have left the country. Assuming Charlotte has been with a lover, Max cloaks his pain with sarcasm. Hurt by the coldness of his attack, Charlotte exits, neither confirming nor denying his allegation.

SCENE 2. In a living room crowded with Sunday newspapers and record sleeves, Henry is searching for a particular piece of music as Charlotte, still in a morning daze, enters from the bedroom wearing Henry’s bathrobe. Henry is trying to come up with a list of favorite songs for the BBC radio show “Desert Island Discs.” As Henry and Charlotte discuss his choices, it becomes clear that Henry is a playwright. Charlotte, who is his wife, has been performing in his latest play, House of Cards. Henry tells Charlotte that he has phoned Max—who is her costar in Henry’s play—and that Max is on his way over for a visit.

When Max arrives, Charlotte complains about Henry’s play—closing night can’t come soon enough for her—and toasts to the “collapse of House of Cards.” Charlotte’s dramatics upset her husband and make Max visibly uncomfortable. As Max tries to change the subject to talk about Henry and Charlotte’s daughter, Debbie, Charlotte continues to dig into Henry, leading to Max’s suggestion that he should leave. Charlotte and Henry won’t hear of it. The doorbell rings.

Enter Annie, Max’s wife, with a bag of fresh vegetables. Charlotte’s tone immediately changes and, with irony lost on the newest arrival, welcomes Annie and offers to take the unusual present into the kitchen to make a dip. When Charlotte returns, Max offers to help chop vegetables and both exit to finish the crudités, closing the kitchen door behind them and leaving Annie and Henry alone in the living room. We immediately realize that it is in fact Annie and Henry who are having an affair.

In between frequent interruptions by Max and Charlotte, the two lovers continue an intimate dialogue, speaking in double entendres lost on their unsuspecting spouses. Annie, also an actress, is caught up in a campaign to free political prisoner Billy Brodie, a young Scottish soldier arrested at an anti-missile demonstration. The conversation twists and turns as Henry and Annie discuss their schedules for the rest of the day and arrange a rendezvous while Henry is supposed to be picking up daughter Debbie from a riding lesson.

SCENE 3. In a scene reminiscent of the first scene in the play, Max is again sitting alone in a living room waiting for his wife’s return. When Annie enters, Max questions her about
her whereabouts and produces proof of her affair with Henry. Rather than denying the affair, Annie apologizes to her husband, but declares her love for Henry.

**Scene 4.** Alone among the boxes of a recently-moved-into living room, Henry writes. Annie enters wearing Henry's robe—the same one worn by Charlotte in Scene 2—and tries to seduce him away from his work. The ensuing pas de deux reveals both the couple's immense love for each other as well as the idiosyncrasies of two independent people learning to live together. Annie's continuing devotion to Brodie is a nuisance to Henry, while his refusal to be jealous annoys Annie. The scene, and the act, end happily enough as Henry leaves to collect his daughter.

**Act 2. Scene 5.** Two years later, Henry and Annie have settled into a life together in a different house. The passing years are evident in the way these two look and act. An opera plays on the stereo; Annie interrupts Henry to quiz his musical training, but the conversation quickly turns to a discussion of the script Henry is reading. At Annie's request, Brodie has written his story into a television script, which she hopes Henry will help shape into a producable text. Henry, however, is appalled by Brodie's inability to write; this offends Annie, who calls Henry a "literary snob" and claims that Brodie's story is more worthy a work of art than a well-written piece that has nothing important to say. Henry argues that writers like Brodie abuse language; words themselves are sacred and deserve respect: "If you get the right ones in the right order, you can nudge the world a little or make a poem which children will speak for you when you're dead."

To this remark, Annie pulls a piece of paper out of Henry's typewriter and reads a passage from his most recent project aloud. In order to support his life with Annie and his alimony to Charlotte, Henry is no longer writing "the real stuff" and is now writing science fiction movies. Annie's disapproval wounds Henry and she insists on his help in getting Brodie's script off the ground as a favor to her. Exasperated and finally jealous, Henry wants to know whether Annie "fancies" Brodie. Too late he realizes his mistake. Annie leaves.

**Scene 6.** Annie is seated in a first-class compartment on a train to Glasgow, where she will be performing in the 17th-century classic tragedy *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore*. Billy, her costar, enters and flirts with Annie, who has asked Billy to read Brodie's script. Their conversation covers such topics as Brodie's writing ability (Billy agrees with Henry that Brodie hasn't any), the class system (Annie claims there is none), and the mounting sexual tension (both can feel it) as they quote passionate lines from *'Tis Pity*.

**Scene 7.** Henry is back in his old living room with Charlotte for the send-off of their 17-year-old daughter, Debbie. Henry's love for his daughter and her affection for him become clear as Henry questions Debbie's smoking habit, her frankly active sex life, and
her impending road trip with a new boyfriend. When Charlotte leaves to take a bath, the
discussion turns to questions of love and fidelity. The doorbell rings, and Debbie leaves.

Alone again, Charlotte and Henry now speak with the intimacy of former lovers.
Charlotte admits that she had nine lovers while they were married and talks about the
affair that ended her most recent relationship. In the face of the cynicism of his daughter
and former wife, Henry remains committed to the notion of romantic love.

**Scene 8.** Billy and Annie rehearse a love scene from *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore.* Annie's
feelings for Billy are now fully evident. She returns his kiss with passion.

**Scene 9.** Alone in their living room, Henry awaits Annie's return from Glasgow. He sus-
ppects that she is having an affair with Billy and tries to question her when she arrives. Unlike
the spousal confrontations in the previous scene, this one has a different resonance. There is
love here, and pain. Annie can only tell Henry, “It's you I love.” With one final question,
Henry asks what Billy thought of Brodie's play. Annie responds: “He says he can't write.”

**Scene 10.** Annie is again sitting on a train as Billy approaches. They play out the now-
familiar dialogue of the opening to Brodie's script. When Billy fumbles a line, we learn that
they are on a television set. Brodie's script is being made into a movie, starring Annie and Billy.

**Scene 11.** Annie rushes into the living room before leaving for the final day of shooting.
Annie asks Henry if he'd like to come with her, but Henry declines—it's too difficult for
him to see her with Billy, with whom Annie is now having a full-fledged affair. Annie says
she'll stop seeing Billy, but Henry says he doesn't want to be the one who forces her to. He
tells Annie he loves her. Annie's feelings are more complicated and she tells Henry that
while she loves Henry and is sorry she hurt him, she has also felt a kind of love for Billy.
Although she's ready to end the affair, she isn't willing to just drop him, because he needs
her. “I have to choose who I hurt and I choose you because I'm yours,” she tells Henry.

**Scene 12.** Henry enters as Brodie, who has been released from prison, finishes watching a
tape of his television movie. Not impressed with Henry's edits, which he believes simply
made his personal, gut-wrenching story “clever,” Brodie turns out to be less of a hero than
everyone had thought. He is a brutish lout who committed the act of protest that sent him
to prison merely to impress Annie, and not out of noble political conviction. Annie, who has
espoused Brodie's cause because she felt responsible for his imprisonment, finally sees him
for what he is and with one final gesture, she rid herself of the Brodie cause. Brodie leaves.

The phone rings. Henry answers: it's Max announcing his engagement to a new love.
While Henry is on the phone, Annie leans into him, asking him to “look after” her. He
tells her, “Don't worry. I'm your chap.” The play ends with Annie turning off all the lights
and disappearing into their bedroom as Henry turns up the radio. The Monkees sing “I'm a
Believer.”
THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE
An Interview with Director Carey Perloff

BY WILLIAM H. CRITZMAN

For theater audiences today, familiar with the trajectory of Tom Stoppard’s playwriting career over the last two decades, the pre-1980s criticism often lobbed at Stoppard’s early work, that his plays displayed a “brilliant heartlessness,” now seems surprising, even ludicrous. In such intellectually rigorous and emotionally intricate dramas as Arcadia (1993), Indian Ink (1995), and The Invention of Love (1997)—all directed at A.C.T. by Artistic Director Carey Perloff in close collaboration with the playwright—as well as the Academy Award–winning film Shakespeare in Love (1998), Stoppard has ventured headlong into the thorny terrain of love (requited or otherwise), marriage, and betrayal, among many other far-flung subjects. Yet, just as his plays of the late seventies were seen as harbingers of a newly politicized Stoppard, following the absurdist structures of Jumpers (1972) and Travesties (1974), and the very early Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1966), the 1982 premiere of The Real Thing in London prompted such headlines as “Stoppard As We Never Knew He Could Be,” and “Kind Heart and Prickly Mind,” with the unavoidable (and overdue) admission that Stoppard could in fact write, movingly, about love.

When Mel Gussow interviewed Stoppard for the New York Times about The Real Thing in 1983, Gussow described the play, considered its author’s most autobiographical, as “definably Stoppardian in its shifting patterns of truth and illusion, past and present . . . the opening sets the tone for an evening in which life imitates art. The characters are
bonded in conjugality, infidelity, and theater. Because the protagonist is a playwright, a great deal of the commentary deals with the use and the abuse of words. It was [also Stoppard’s] first romantic comedy and an answer to all those critics who thought his previous plays were several steps removed from life as we know it.”

As Perloff prepared to stage her fifth Stoppard production for A.C.T., she spoke to us about her own love affair with the playwright’s work and his abiding “reverence for what language can do to keep us human.”

WILLIAM H. CRITZMAN: WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE OFT-CITED CLAIM THAT THE REAL THING IS THE FIRST PLAY IN WHICH STOPPARD DISPLAYS REAL EMOTION?
CAREY PERLOFF: Many people considered this play a wild left turn for him. I find this rather annoying, because each time he displays “heart” in his writing, people respond as if it were the first time they’ve seen it. This happened with Arcadia, and Indian Ink, and The Invention of Love, and again when Shakespeare in Love came out. If you’ve ever met this man, you realize very quickly that there is nobody who has more heart, more romance, more nostalgia, more emotion than Tom Stoppard. It also happens that he marries those qualities to great intellect and wit, and therefore we believe those qualities are predominant in his work. But don’t believe it.

The Real Thing was an attempt after his structurally wild, linguistically dexterous early plays to write a play about love. After he wrote it, Stoppard said, “Okay, that’s it. I’m never doing that again.” He said you only ever have one of those plays in you. Like Henry, the playwright in The Real Thing, Stoppard is a writer who has incredible reverence for the spoken word, for what language can do to keep us human. He loathes cliché and easy solutions to complicated feelings. For him, love is an unbelievably complicated set of emotions. It doesn’t render itself well in language.

And Stoppard himself would say that in his early years, he hid his heart behind his wit. I think, however, if you actually go back Marco Barricelli (Henry) and René Augesen (Annie) in rehearsal for The Real Thing at A.C.T. (photo by Ryan Montgomery)
and look at the early plays—like *Jumpers*, for example, which I recently saw revived in London—his emotional range is undeniable, although it’s less exposed than in his more recent work. I think what can happen as one grows older, and Stoppard has in fact said this about himself, is that one becomes less interested in spending energy on masking one’s interior landscape. That process [of unmasking] may have actually begun with *The Real Thing*.

**DO YOU THINK *THE REAL THING* IS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL?**

Although Stoppard always says that his plays aren’t about himself, of course they’re very autobiographical. *The Real Thing* was written for actress Felicity Kendal [for whom Stoppard created the role of Annie], with whom he was living when he wrote it, and from whom he split not long after the original production. Interestingly, the play is dedicated to Miriam, his first wife and the mother of two of his sons, and to whom he’s still very close, but whom he’d left by the time the play was produced. Stoppard has clearly experienced his share of tumultuous breakups and regret. So I do think he has profound questions about what the “real thing” is in terms of love—is there such a thing, and is it sustainable, particularly among artists? So yes, I think to some degree, I’m sure this is a very autobiographical play.

**LET’S TALK ABOUT THESE EMOTIONALLY CHARGED CHARACTERS. ARE WE SUPPOSED TO SYMPATHIZE WITH HENRY? ANNIE?**

It’s Henry’s play. But what’s sort of wonderful about the play is that nobody’s right, nobody’s wrong, except maybe Brodie—by the end you think, What a pig he is. But otherwise, I’m enormously drawn to all of them. I adore Charlotte and I think, in some ways, she is the most suited to Henry: she’s the wittiest, she knows how to send him up, she’s on to him very quickly. If she were the harridan wife whom he leaves for the beautiful young thing, it would be too easy. But in fact, these are all people you’re drawn to in some way. You also see all their foibles. You think, Oh, what a nightmare it would be to be involved with this person, but on the other hand you realize how attractive they are. And that’s true of all of them. So, probably you see the story develop through Henry’s eyes because he’s the most dominant character, but I think it’s pretty evenly distributed. It’s a great ensemble play.

**IT’S INTERESTING TO HEAR YOU TALK ABOUT CHARLOTTE THAT WAY. IN STOPPARD’S STAGE DIRECTIONS, ANNIE IS DESCRIBED AS BEING “VERY MUCH THE WOMAN WHO CHARLOTTE HAS CEASED TO BE.” WHAT WAS HENRY LIKE BEFORE?**

A little less caustic, probably, and a little less sure of himself. That’s why Charlotte tells him, “You’ve still got one [virginity] to lose.” He’s obviously a guy who hides behind his
intellect, and Annie’s on to him right away about that, as is Charlotte. But probably in his earlier days, Henry was less over the top about it because he was less successful at it. At the beginning of the play, he’s almost a parody of himself. He is the guy on “Desert Island Discs” who pretends that *Ulysses* is his favorite book, even though he’s never read it, and he has to have intellectual music, even though he really just likes “da-doo-ron-ron” rock music and the Crystals.

I think early in the first act you see a portrait of a marriage gone very wrong through neglect, but not really through anybody’s fault. One of my favorite speeches in the play, which I think anybody who’s been married a long time would absolutely understand, is when Charlotte says to Henry late in Act II, “You think commitment is it. Finish. You think it sets like a concrete platform and it’ll take any strain you want to put on it.” But, she says, “There are no commitments, only bargains. And they have to be made again every day.” Henry has utterly failed at that; he’s been terrible to Charlotte and in turn she’s become terrible to him. But it’s not her fault, or his fault, particularly—it’s just fallen apart.

**BY THE END OF THE PLAY, WHO IS HENRY BETTER SUITED FOR: ANNIE OR CHARLOTTE?**

That’s a very good question. I don’t think it’s answerable, but I think this is a great play because it asks that question. What is agonizing about the play is that, even when Annie and Henry are most in love at the end of Act I and they’re living out of boxes in that makeshift loft, the seeds of their problems have already been planted. She is not a verbal person; he’s a completely verbal person and tries to finish every sentence for her. She wants a certain kind of romance; he wants a certain kind of wit. She’s very naïve politically; he’s very cynical politically. There are a lot of differences there. On the other hand, perhaps one could say that the meaning of the “real thing” is that it’s completely chemical and inexplicable and that despite all the differences you never know who’s going to end up together.

And that’s partly true in this case. By Act II, Henry’s very fond of Charlotte, and I think Charlotte has evolved. And Stephen Caffrey (Max) and Diana LaMar (Charlotte) in rehearsal for *The Real Thing* at A.C.T. (photo by Ryan Montgomery)
who knows if there’s regret in there, but that’s why this is such an interesting play. It’s very ambivalent. I don’t know that there’s a fixed answer to the very end of the play when Henry says, “Yes, I’m still here.” I think what that’s meant to tell us is that he’s still there, Annie’s still there, they’re still in the marriage, he’s still fighting for it. But is that marriage destined to survive? I’d give it a 50/50 shot, really.

ONE HAS THE SENSE IN THIS PLAY THAT EXTRAMARITAL AFFAIRS ARE EXTREMELY COMMON AND THERE’S NOTHING WE CAN DO TO STOP THEM.

DOES THE PLAY SUGGEST THAT AFFAIRS ARE INEVITABLE IN THIS WORLD?

Well, probably yes, but I think this is a play particularly about artists and their relationships, which is why it’s so interesting. One of the great challenges of being involved with artists is that they are by definition solipsistic people, particularly writers. The life of a writer is a very solitary and self-involved life, and the world revolves around one’s own imagination, which is somewhat true for actors, as well. Actors have to protect that part of themselves that is always available for the next deeply felt emotional experience, so it’s no wonder that the line between real romance and stage romance frequently blurs. The theater is your family, and it’s sometimes difficult to have another one.

AND THAT LINE MUST BE EVEN MORE BLURRY WHEN A PLAYWRIGHT IS WRITING FOR HIS OR HER PARTNER, AN ACTOR WHO’S ABOUT TO PERFORM IN THE PRODUCTION.

Oh, I can’t even imagine. Felicity Kendal wrote Tom all these letters when she was on the road touring with The Real Thing. The letters are collected at the Ransom Center [at the University of Texas at Austin]; I went down there to look at the file. It’s fantastic. It has all the different editions of this play, as well as her letters. She writes to say things like, “I don’t understand this. If Annie loves Henry, why is she hanging on to Billy? Why is she tormenting him, how can this be? I don’t know how to play this character. It doesn’t make any sense to me.” And he’d write back and say, “I know it doesn’t make any sense, but that’s who Annie is. She’d rather hurt the person she really loves than hurt the person she’s just picked up. Maybe it doesn’t make sense, but that’s who she is.” So they tussled it out.


I think of The Real Thing as very much like a set of Chinese boxes. It’s filled with plays–within–plays–within–plays and doubling of every kind. The reason that it isn’t just about
clever structure, however, is that it is threaded by the deep emotions of this group of characters who are profoundly entwined in each other’s lives. Because they are theater people—and you know how over the top we are—it’s very hard to tell where theatrical emotion turns into real emotion. The theater is a field of continual emotional exposure, and that line is often a blurry one; scenes that look like rehearsed scenes in the frame of a play become real love scenes. The question this play keeps asking, which goes back to its title, is, How do you know what is emotionally real? And how do you express it, when it’s so difficult to render in language? How do you talk about the things that are emotionally real, how do you hold on to them, and what makes them real? Is it their longevity, is it their inarticulateness? Sometimes I think the least articulate moments in this play are the moments when something “real” is actually happening. In any relationship it’s often in the silences that things really happen.

’Tis Pity is a stunningly beautiful play, and one I’d love to do at A.C.T. Whatever you might think about the Jacobeans, there is never any question whether the characters are experiencing the “real thing,” which is probably why we’re so drawn to the drama of that period. So when Billy and Annie are performing their ‘Tis Pity scene together, their own feelings combine with the feelings of Giovanni and Annabella. It’s very difficult for us watching the scene, and for Henry listening to or imagining them performing it, to know whether they are just rehearsing ‘Tis Pity, or if in fact Billy and Annie’s own emotions have taken over. It’s the same thing between Max and Charlotte in the scene from Henry’s play House of Cards. Stoppard is brilliant at weaving together layers of metatheatricality and waking us up to those blurred lines. He never lets us get comfortable with any particular point of view but constantly forces us to question what we’re seeing.

I’D LIKE TO GO BACK TO ANNIE AND HER RELATIONSHIPS WITH THESE YOUNGER MEN, BRODIE AND BILLY. WHAT’S THAT ABOUT?

I think Annie’s very insecure, as many actors are. I think she’s a woman who has performed in a lot of complex plays but doesn’t feel intellectually strong enough. She’s one of those people who has always doubted her own intellect and maybe been surrounded by very smart men. And she has no children. We don’t know why that is. So there’s something about being with younger men that makes Annie feel more mature; she says it herself—she feels grown up; she feels, in some way, in control. I think because she’s someone who surrounds herself with smart men and then feels wildly out of control, there’s something incredibly gratifying about being with these young guys, and she keeps ending up being drawn to them. They move her.
THE ISSUE OF CHILDREN IS INTERESTING. AMONG ALL THESE ADULTS, THERE’S ONLY ONE CHILD—A TEENAGER. WHY DO YOU THINK DEBBIE COMES INTO THE STORY JUST AS SHE’S LEAVING HOME TO BECOME AN ADULT? ARE ANY OF THESE FOUR CHARACTERS CAPABLE OF BEING PARENTS?

I don’t know, but I do think that Debbie is the real thing. Henry worships her, the way my husband feels about our teenage daughter. That’s a very interesting relationship, between a father and a daughter. Yet Henry has failed her. And he knows he’s failed her. The wonderful thing is how wise Debbie is: she’s already jaded; she’s already f---ed everybody, including her Latin teacher. What she exposes about her father is what a hopeless romantic he really is and how he’s never figured out how to live his life. He wants to be her parent, but in that scene, she’s the one who teaches him.

And Henry doesn’t know how to reconcile having a teenage daughter and this beautiful new wife. I think that’s an important casualty of modern relationships, and Stoppard himself has lived through that. When people cavalierly move on from one person to the other, which it does affects the children deeply. That’s a huge question in my mind: Why do people divorce so easily when it’s so terrible for the children? I think partly that’s why Debbie is there.

You also see her trying to chart her own course. The sad thing for Debbie is that she thought sex was going to be the real thing, but then she had sex and realized it was just biology. So she’s another one longing for love. Stoppard wrestled with the Henry–Debbie relationship endlessly. If you look at the drafts of the play, Tom rewrote and rewrote and rewrote that relationship. There’s a scene in the first draft in which Henry actually goes to her flat to see her. Then there was a scene when he tries to get her back into school (she’s dropped out and this is very upsetting to him because he cares so much about education). So he clearly cared about Henry’s bond with Debbie and it’s significant that Annie doesn’t have children.

IS BILLY ALSO THE REAL THING? IS BILLY A HOPELESS ROMANTIC WHO’S FALLEN FOR THIS OLDER WOMAN?

I think Billy really does fall in love with Annie. But I’m not sure, it’s hard to tell; Billy’s on the make. It’s not surprising that he plays Brodie [in the television movie within the play], and in the original draft of the play Billy and Brodie were played by the same actor. When Billy and Brodie enter Henry’s life, they enter in very much the same way. Another thing I find ironic and wonderful about the play is that the second generation is much more cynical than the first. Billy is not a naïve person. He gets on that train; he figures out a way to
follow her; he figures out a way to worm himself into her heart. He wants her. He knows she's married.

**WHAT ABOUT MAX? IS HE “POOR MAX”?**

He is poor Max. [Laughs] He’s hilarious and kind of pathetic. He doesn’t see it coming. He is very naïve. It’s hilarious that he plays Henry’s most verbally dexterous character, because he has no verbal dexterity himself. That’s one of the jokes of the play; you can’t believe the Max of Scene 1 [performing in Henry’s play *House of Cards*] and the Max of Scene 2 [Stoppard’s Max] are the same character. He gets one of the best speeches in the play, the digital watch speech in the first scene, and then he comes in as himself and he’s just hopeless. And then he finally falls in love again. There’s something wonderful when Annie says, “Nobody ever writes about the unrequiting.” Max just can’t let go of her; his reaction to her betrayal is messy and unattractive, but he really does love her. In some ways, Max appreciates Annie much more than Henry does. So it’s not so easy to say, Oh it’s a good thing they split up.

**WHY STAGE THE REAL THING NOW?**

I’ve done so much of Stoppard’s work, and recently I’ve gone back to some of his earlier plays [including *Night and Day*, a hit at A.C.T. in 2002]. I went back to *The Real Thing* for a couple of reasons. One is that it’s one of his most glorious plays and one of the few I haven’t directed. And it was at the top of A.C.T. core acting company members Marco [Barricelli] and René [Augesen]’s lists. Marco and René have worked with Stoppard through his involvement in our prior productions, and he adores them and their work. You get such a fantastic head start when you have a company of actors who have a relationship with the playwright: they know how the language works, they know the world of it.

I was also interested in exploring a love story about older people—not a 20-something love story, but a 40-something love story—about how difficult that is. And why it’s so hard to write about love today. I just couldn’t think of a kind of grown-up, contemporary play that was also this romantic. I don’t know why that is. Maybe we’re just feeling very cynical these days. Among our major writers today, it’s very difficult to find somebody writing about adults wrestling with love and why it’s so hard. I also wanted to do this play because it has great roles for young actors and this class [the A.C.T. Master of Fine Arts Program class of 2005, which graduates in May] is spectacular. I knew we had the young actors to do those three roles [Debbie, Billy, and Brodie].
With respect to the casting, this is a real A.C.T. family production, isn’t it?

It absolutely is. With Stoppard, you can’t just go out into the marketplace and go shopping for actors; the language is too difficult. You need people who have incredible dexterity with language on the Geary stage, and also people who can bring great emotional resonance to the play, and that is incredibly hard to find. So I went to some of my favorite actors. I went to Steve [Caffrey] immediately, who I think was born to play Max. He has the helplessness and the charm and the wit and the sex appeal. Diana [LaMar], who’s playing Charlotte, I had just worked with last summer on my own play [Luminescence Dating] at New York Stage and Film; she’s fantastic. Allison [Jean White] and Andy [Butterfield] and Clayton [B. Hodges], who are playing Debbie, Billy, and Brodie, I had directed last season in a conservatory project—I always work with the second-years—and I just knew they belonged in this play. I auditioned them and they were wonderful. And then, of course, there’s Marco and René. I’ve been longing to see Marco do this kind of role, and the same with René. So I feel like we’re going to walk into that rehearsal room as a family. This is truly an ensemble, and that’s such a great gift.

When you were considering this play for the season, what else were you reading? What else was coming into your mind? What else should we be thinking about when watching this play?

Well, oddly enough, I’ve always wanted to do ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, and when I reread it a few weeks ago, I thought, Oh I wish we had the resources to do ‘Tis Pity and The Real Thing in rep together, because they’re both such great plays. It sent me back to [John] Ford and the Jacobean. I’d love to go back to those plays. You know, I always read hundreds of things for a given season. Particularly for Marco and René, the other relationship plays we’d love to do are Pinter’s Betrayal and Homecoming. So they’ll be on the list at some point. Because I know them so well, there are certain things that are always in the front of my mind for both of them. We’re developing a Racine [Phédre] for them right now, for example. That’s part of the pleasure of having an acting company; there are also always plays circling that I’ve thought about and wanted to do for a long time that I keep in mind for actors I work with a lot. But they just land when they land. Different things happen at different moments depending on the needs of the theater and the overall balance of the season. In planning this season, I was thinking a lot about The Black Rider, which I knew was going to be an incredible visual and musical feast; I wanted to follow that with a real character play, something very language based and emotionally accessible. We always think about what the journey throughout the season will be, and this seemed like a good mix to me. Also, this is a
Stoppard town. San Franciscans have adopted him as their own. They just get his work—they hunger for it; they come out of the woodwork to see it. So it’s always fun.

**SOME FINAL THOUGHTS. IS THERE REGRET IN *THE REAL THING*? IF SO, WHERE IS IT, AND FOR WHOM DO WE FEEL IT?**

For me, this play is about the fact that life is a very complex ongoing journey that never ends. That’s why there’s no way to tell whether an experience is the “real thing” or whether you’ve actually achieved anything—be it success in your love life or success in your creative life. The river keeps moving; things keep revealing themselves. Just when you think you’ve landed or you’ve figured something out, everything turns on its head. I think this is particularly true for artists, because an artist is always searching for the next experience, so nothing is ever settled. Artists don’t accept reality in any given way; there’s always a kind of reevaluation going on.

When you get to the end of this play, and the characters have all come through the crisis, I don’t think you get the sense that it’s the last crisis this relationship will survive. Annie doesn’t apologize for what’s happened with Billy and Brodie; it’s probably going to happen again. And Henry’s in a creative crisis—he can’t write the play that Stoppard succeeded in writing; he can’t write about love. The worst thing a writer can face is the blank page. And so one hopes that coming through this crisis will unleash something in Henry.

**THIS PLAY IS REALLY ABOUT BEGINNINGS, ISN’T IT?**

I think the end of the play is a beginning, which is kind of wonderful. But the beginning of what? We don’t really know. In fact, every scene in this play is to some degree a new beginning.

**EVEN THE REPRISALS?**

Yes. This play keeps waking you up with each turn of the puzzle. You can’t pass judgment or feel confident that you’ve solved it. I think the gift of Stoppard’s work is that you experience it in the moment, which is exhilarating for an audience. It doesn’t feel canned; it’s very present tense and feels like something that’s being reinvented as you go.

That is true about real relationships, as well. I think one of the things that Stoppard has figured out, which is so moving, is that any relationship is in a constant state of flux. You never quite see where this play is going, you just can’t predict where these relationships are going to come out. I think that’s why this play is such a gift for actors, because it will even change night to night how these relationships evolve. The tipping point is different all the time. It’s a fascinating journey.
DESIGNING *THE REAL THING*
A Series of E-Mail Interviews with the Designers of the A.C.T. Production

BY MARGOT MELCON

SCENIC DESIGN: J. B. WILSON

MARGOT MELCON: HOW DID YOU APPROACH THE DESIGN FOR THIS PLAY?

JOHN WILSON: [Director] Carey [Perloff]’s impetus was to strip away many of the traditional assumptions about “realism” that had been part of previous productions of the play. She and I had explored minimalism once before, with *Waiting for Godot*, and I continued this line of thinking as I developed the initial working model of the set. I was also strongly influenced by the paintings of Mark Rothko, and as our ideas evolved, his work became a large factor in the design. In addition, we shared a desire to decrease or “mask in” the large visual field of the Geary stage so as to help focus the attention of the audience on the action of this intimate play.
The design of a setting for this work can be approached from many points of view. It was our choice to come at it from a focus on the characters and their relationships (in a way, working from the inside out) rather than focusing on the details of a realistic environment. Stylistically, our approach could be said to be a combination of modernism and minimalism. It really isn't a play about the acquisition of “things,” so why should the setting be so?

**HOW DID THE SCRIPT'S SPECIFICITY OF TIME AND PLACE (LONDON IN 1982) INFLUENCE YOUR DESIGN?**

Again, with the departure from “realism” that we adopted early on, the specificity of time and place was logically less important to the design of the setting. Instead, we relied on the references in Stoppard’s text to carry the sense of “period,” while stepping back from using an overbearing prop-heavy approach to underline that aspect of the story. In this way the characters and their relationships are allowed to become a bit more timeless, as relevant to our own time as to that of 20-odd years ago.


That's the essential puzzle of the play. The audience isn't immediately aware of what is “real” and what is “performance.” Stoppard plays with this ambiguity, and with the notion of what you might call a crosscontamination between the world of the theater and the world of everyday life. Often the true nature of a scene isn’t revealed until its end. In such a case, the introduction of a simple visual element and/or a change of lighting give the audience a final clue.

**THE PEOPLE OF THIS PLAY LIVE IN A WORLD OF ARTIFICE; THEY ARE ALL ACTORS OR PLAYWRIGHTS, FABRICATORS OF OTHER REALITIES. DOES YOUR DESIGN REFLECT THAT QUALITY OF ARTIFICE IN THE CHARACTERS?**

The design is highly theatrical in its departure from traditional assumptions about realism. Ultimately I think it remains a setting on a stage, a few steps away from everyday life. It is a container for the action, but perhaps doesn't function actively as a character in the drama.
As scenes are repeated in the play, how do you distinguish among them? What is the significance of repeating the slightly altered situations again and again?

The repetition of the “slightly altered situations” of the characters is echoed by the repetition of the slightly altered configuration of the scenic elements for each location.

Is the play dated? How do you deal with the challenge of doing a play set in the relatively recent past without it seeming dated or like a period piece?

The play isn’t really “dated” at this point in time, other than in some fairly insignificant references to digital watches, record players, and so forth. The truth is that many of us still have these items in our lives, or at least in recent enough memory to understand what they are. So the play isn’t really a “period piece,” at least not yet. The best drama will tend to transcend its historical period.

You have designed for A.C.T. in the past, most recently for last year’s Waiting for Godot. How is your personal style reflected in the productions you design? Is there a consistent style or theme to your work? What is it like to design for the same space repeatedly? How do you manipulate the space for each show?

The collaboration I have with each director is unique. If my work can be said to have a “style,” it is really more a reflection of a director’s point of view and our collaboration, rather than mine alone. If I have the privilege of developing an ongoing creative relationship with a director, a style that is particular to our interaction may evolve. I always try to respond to a specific stage and theater if the building has any character to it. In this case the great golden Geary proscenium arch plays an important role in my set designs for both Waiting for Godot and The Real Thing.

Costume Design: Fumiko Bielefeldt

How did the script’s specificity of time and place (London, 1982) influence your design? How do you deal with the challenge of designing for a “period piece” that isn’t that far in the past?

Fumiko Bielefeldt: At our first meeting, [director] Carey [Perloff] told me she was not particularly interested in presenting the play in costumes specific to the early 1980s. Frankly, I was relieved by her decision. I find it’s sometimes awkward to costume shows
in the styles of the eighties and nineties; perhaps because those styles are so familiar, the audience can have trouble seeing them as “period” costumes, rather than as just oddly out of date. (And just imagine Annie in a Farah Fawcett hairdo!) So I decided to go with a vaguely contemporary look, but without anything currently trendy.

Especially in this case, I think the play in essence deals with fairly universal, timeless themes, rather than with material especially relevant to the eighties. It’s about love, commitment, infidelity, betrayal, disappointment—themes that transcend time and place. Of course, Carey and I worried that there were some references in the script to the period (especially to pop music), but in the end we decided that these could work with contemporary costumes. I did, however, want to avoid making the characters look too American.

It’s increasingly difficult to make anyone young not look American, thanks to the mighty American fashion dominance through media. I remember the reply I got when I asked a playwright how people in Northern Ireland dress: they all dress like characters from the tv series “Friends.” How depressing. I think the British dress a little less casually than Americans, or at least Californians, especially the adults. I find they tend to dress in darker clothes, at least that’s how they appear in movies and tv. I can’t use dark colors in this show, however, due to the set color. So I’m struggling to make them look a little more formal, even in light colors.

**There is a lot of discussion in this show about politics, status, and the changing social climate of England in the 1980s. How do you manifest the social/economic/political position of the characters through costume? What does the costuming for this show say about the characters?**

Out of seven characters, six seem to belong to very similar social classes: four of them (Max, Charlotte, Annie, and Billy) are theater actors, one is a playwright, and one is the daughter of an actor and a playwright. Only
Brodie, a Scottish soldier or exsoldier, now in jail, comes from a different social world. Brodie’s political stance must have developed gradually during his incarceration, since he “started a fire on a war memorial using the wreath to the Unknown Soldier” primarily to impress Annie, rather than out of any political conviction.

So I focused first on costumes that would reflect each character’s temperament or characteristics (impulsive, practical, hopeful, cynical, helpless, clueless, etc.) and then tried to incorporate subtle signs of their slightly different economic status, as well as their differences in age.

**CAN YOU CITE A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE OF A CHARACTER FROM THE PLAY, WHAT YOU PERCEIVE THEIR TEMPERAMENT TO BE, AND HOW YOU DRESSED THEM TO EVOKE THAT?**

How to express “temperament” in the costumes is a difficult question. If a person is practical, I assume she or he tends to wear clothes that are simple and not fussy, not layering a lot or putting on a lot of accessories. Impulsive people might put on clothes according to whim, so that they don’t necessarily match perfectly—though this does not mean they’re sloppy dressers. I consider Charlotte practical and also cynical, while Annie seems impulsive and wild (at least in Act i). Max is probably sloppy and clueless (e.g., in Scene 3 he looks rather pathetic in an old, shapeless cardigan), and Henry always dresses as he pleases. Brodie has no style. People may also change throughout the play, sometimes hopeful and optimistic and at other times depressed. These moods may need to be reflected in their clothing.

**AS TIME PASSES IN THE SHOW, HOW DO THE CHARACTERS CHANGE AND EVOLVE? HOW IS THAT REFLECTED IN THEIR COSTUMING?**

It’s interesting to note that some of the characters appear only in Act i, some only in Act ii, and some only once in the entire play. Only Annie and Henry are seen throughout the play.
Annie goes from the heady intoxication of her love affair in Act i to the more settled relationship of her marriage to Henry in Act ii. I've tried to reflect something of this transition in her costumes.

She's in jeans and a sweater in scene two, scarf nonchalantly wrapped around her neck, maybe a "Justice for Brodie" pin on the sweater. Then, in her next scene, a colorful raincoat and rain boots, emphasizing her more bohemian outlook, in contrast to Charlotte's more establishment style in scene one. At the end of Act i, she's in Henry's robe, feeling hopeful and romantic, looking forward to their new life together. I hope there will be some different feel or look when Charlotte appears in the very same robe in Scene 2: here I want to give the impression that she just grabbed Henry's robe out of a habit, not from romantic reasons.

For Act ii, I have changed her hairstyle, to indicate both the passage of time and her movement to a less carefree and bohemian life. Similarly, her costumes reflect this change by her skirts, more expensive coats, and finally a dress. In the middle of Act ii, I'm planning another hairstyle change.

Henry undergoes less change in his dressing style throughout the play. I've made him very idiosyncratic in his choice of clothes, e.g., wearing linen regardless of the season. This approach to Henry comes in part from the image I have of Tom Stoppard's own personal style. As you know, this is the most autobiographical of his plays; so naturally I tended to see Henry as a reflection of the playwright.

How do you approach costuming for the plays-within-the-play, since most of the time you only have a bit of dialogue or a scene to work with? Did you make stylistically different choices between the primary play and the plays-within? Why?

I didn't want the costumes to give away the fact that the first scene is a play-within-a-play. We want the audience to think they are watching the "real" play and only afterwards realize that Max and Charlotte were acting out
characters in one of Henry’s plays. The only design choices I made in this scene were to use gray-toned costumes and expensive-looking, professional clothing. I wanted the costumes in the TV scene to be a dramatic representation of Brodie, rather than an accurate reflection of his character; hence, I gave him a quasimilitary look. Finally, the rehearsal scene of ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore is played with both Billy and Annie partially dressed in period rehearsal costumes.

**WHAT INFLUENCED YOU AND YOUR IDEAS ABOUT THE SHOW WHEN CREATING THE DESIGN?**

Not having seen any prior production of the play gave me, in some sense, more freedom to follow my own and Carey’s interpretation of the play. My ideas were influenced of course by my reading of background materials, critical essays, biographical material on Tom Stoppard, and so on.

Apart of course from trying to get the characters right in each scene, I’ve focused from the beginning on the problems posed by the numerous fast changes throughout the course of the play. For example, Annie is onstage from Scene 8 to Scene 12, without any break, each time in a different time frame and sometimes in different locales. So the costume changes between these scenes inevitably influenced what we could do with the designs.

**YOUR RESUME STATES THAT YOU HAVE WORKED ALL OVER THE BAY AREA. WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR FAVORITE SHOWS THAT YOU HAVE DONE, AND WHY? WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT WORKING AT A.C.T. FOR THE FIRST TIME?**

My favorite shows, I realize, tend to be productions designed beyond the limits of time and locale, like the Medea I did for Cal Shakes. I incorporated motifs that ranged from ancient Greece to contemporary Japanese designer Issei Miyake and other fashion designers. Probably my favorite design was the musical The Triumph of Love, in which I costumed characters from across the 17th to late-20th centuries. The costume
choices were made to reflect the characters, not so much the period in which the play was originally written. I had a great time designing outrageous costumes for outrageous characters, like the Baron de Fromage Blue, in a blue cheese hat and codpiece, and a princess’s maid in the final scene who appeared in a skirt made out of plastic bubble wrap.

I’m very excited about working for A.C.T. My costume design career started really as an intern at A.C.T. So I feel that in some sense I’m coming home. So far I’ve found everyone I encountered at A.C.T. to be very welcoming and encouraging.

SOUND DESIGN: A.C.T. RESIDENT SOUND DESIGNER GARTH HEMPHILL

HOW DID YOU APPROACH THE DESIGN FOR THIS PLAY?

GARTH HEMPHILL: As with any play, I start with the script and read it several times, each time looking at different aspects. First I just read it to read it. No ideas allowed! Then I go back and think about what it might need from a practical standpoint. Then it’s time to meet with [director] Carey [Perloff], and talk about which direction she feels she needs to go in.

STOPPARD IS SO SPECIFIC ABOUT MANY OF THE SONGS USED IN THE REAL THING. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THOSE SONGS AND, TAKING THOSE SONGS AS A JUMPING-OFF POINT, HOW YOU DECIDED WHAT OTHER MUSIC TO INCLUDE IN THE SCORE FOR THE SHOW?

It is very unusual for Stoppard to be as specific [about music] as he is in this play. These songs have deep meaning to him personally, I imagine, so indeed, using these songs as a jumping-off point, I am finding other pieces that are thematically similar and from the same period, and by the artists he mentions, as well.

HOW IS MUSIC USED IN THIS PRODUCTION? IN OTHER WORDS, HOW DOES IT DEFINE THE
CHARACTERS, AS IN THE CASE OF HENRY, AND HELP TO ESTABLISH MOOD, TIME, AND PLACE?
In this play, most of the music is Henry’s music, and the music that isn’t his is music Henry dislikes. It is very focused around his character. The trick with defining mood, time, and place with music, in any play—especially mood—is that it is very easy to hit it too right on. You don’t want to tell the audience what to feel, but maybe a suggestion is ok. And at times it is far more effective to play against the mood, or counterpoint it with the music. It is always a balancing act. Time and place are often easier to establish with music.

THOUGH THE SCRIPT IS VERY SPECIFIC AS TO TIME AND PLACE (LONDON, 1982), THE MUSIC IS DRAWN FROM MANY PERIODS. IS THE MUSIC NOSTALGIC? ARE THEY SPECIFICALLY BRITISH? OR DOES POP MUSIC TRANSCEND TIME AND PLACE?
Those are questions Mr. Stoppard could probably answer better than I, but . . . I do think they are nostalgic songs, for Henry. They aren’t particularly British . . . many are American. I think that some pop music, like any other form of music, can transcend time and place. I think good music [of any genre] does that. I have a lot of favorite pieces of music, but they tend to come from many different genres.

THERE ARE ALSO OTHER SOUNDS THAT ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE SHOW, SPECIFICALLY THE REPEATED DOOR SLAMS AND TRAIN NOISES. WHAT KIND OF IMPACT DOES SOUND HAVE IN A SHOW? WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE THE AUDIENCE TO BE AWARE OF ABOUT THE WORK OF A SOUND DESIGNER?
The best sounds, I believe, are sounds that rhythmically and sonically fit into the show, so in the best of all worlds they are “musical.” I think sound can have a terrific impact in a show. There are an almost infinite number of variables in sound that you can use to change the feel of a sound. A train can be many things, for example. So you have to decide: What is the sound of this train, and why do I want it to sound this way? Is there a need for it to be historically accurate, or can I play with the feel of it to make it work in some specific way in this moment of the play? Is it close by? Are we inside it? Is it “real” or imagined? There are so many ways to tweak that sound and give it whatever emphasis you think it might need.

I think the best thing an audience member can say about the sound of a production is that they don’t really remember what there was about it, but that it felt right or it affected them. It should be unintrusive and subliminal in its effect on people . . . most of the time. There are times when it can be bold and up front, but that is rare.
You have designed for many shows for A.C.T. in the past. How is your personal style reflected in the shows you design? Is there a consistent style or theme to your work?

Yes indeed. This is my eighth year here as the resident sound designer, and I shudder to think what that means in terms of numbers of shows or numbers of individual sound cues. Better not to count probably! I honestly don’t know about personal style. I guess there are things I believe a good sound design does for a production, but really it isn’t about what my style is. It is much more about what the play calls for and what that production of that play, with that director and those actors, calls for. I have done several productions of Brian Friel’s Dancing at Lughnasa, for example, and they were each unique and individual. I hope that there is not a consistent style or theme in my work. I would be a bad judge of that though. That is hard to see from the inside sometimes.

Describe your working relationship with [director] Carey Perloff. How do you arrive at and refine ideas together?

I think Carey and I work together really well. I love working with her because we have similar tastes—most of the time—and we have done enough productions together that we can have an entire conversation in the theater about a sound cue without saying a word. A series of looks and faces and gestures across the room and I know what to do (or at least not to do!). It is a truly wonderful thing to have that kind of understanding between collaborators. I also know that I never have to guess about how she feels about a cue. She is very up-front and vocal about her likes and dislikes, and I find that so refreshing, that level of honesty and knowledge that she isn’t going to hurt my feelings if she doesn’t like a sound cue.

As far as arriving at ideas and refining them . . . we talk about [the play] before rehearsal starts and we get a starting point. Through rehearsals we try things and change things, sometimes many times, until we are feeling pretty good about it. Then we get to the theater and that process continues, and often the work we have done before stops making sense in the theater and we change it again. It is a continual process, and that includes during previews, as well. We learn a lot from the preview audiences and sometimes we get surprised and realize we need to change things yet again. I think as a designer you have to be willing to fight for a cue you believe in quite passionately, and then with equal passion and conviction, throw it out the window and find something new that really works. That is the process, and that is what I really love about theater. It is a collaboration and a process.
A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TOM STOPPARD

TOM STOPPARD worked as a freelance journalist while writing radio plays, a novel (Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon), and the first of his plays to be staged in England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, winner of the 1968 Tony Award for best play. His subsequent plays include The Real Inspector Hound, After Magritte, Jumpers, Travesties (Tony Award), Every Good Boy Deserves Favour (with André Previn), Night and Day, The Real Thing (Tony Award), Hapgood, Arcadia (Olivier Award, New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, and Tony Award nomination; directed by Carey Perloff at a.c.t. in 1995), Indian Ink (directed in its American premiere by Perloff at a.c.t. in 1999), The Invention of Love (directed in its American premiere by Perloff at a.c.t. in 2000), and his most recent plays, the trilogy The Coast of Utopia, which opened at London’s National Theatre in August 2002.

His translations and adaptations include Lorca’s House of Bernarda Alba, Schnitzler’s Undiscovered Country and Dalliance, Nestroy’s On the Razzle, Vaclav Havel’s Largo Desolato, and Rough Crossing (based on Ferenc Molnar’s Play in the Castle). He has written screenplays for Despair, The Romantic Englishwoman (coauthor), The Human Factor, Brazil (coauthor), Empire of the Sun, The Russia House, Billy Bathgate, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (which he also directed and which won the Prix d’Or for best film at the 1990 Venice Film Festival), Shakespeare in Love (Golden Globe and Academy awards with coauthor Marc Norman), and Enigma. Stoppard received a knighthood in 1997.

Above: Photo of Tom Stoppard in 1978 © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis
TOM STOPPARD: KIND HEART AND PRICKLY MIND

JOAN JULIET BUCK (1984)

If the plays of the late 1970s were seen as harbingers of a newly politicized Stoppard, the opening in London of The Real Thing in November 1982 prompted such headlines as “Stoppard As We Never Knew He Could Be” with the discovery that Stoppard could write, movingly, about love. With the London production in its second cast (of an eventual four), The Real Thing opened on Broadway in January 1984 to greater acclaim than any of his plays since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Three days before the New York premiere, Stoppard encountered an interviewer who wanted to “ask him how one writes about love.” After a summary of earlier plays and biographical information (omitted here), the interviewer summoned the courage to ask her question and was rewarded with one of the clearest statements Stoppard has ever made about how he sees the relationship of Henry and Annie in the play.

Amanda: Have you known her long?
Elyot: About four months, we met at a house party in Norfolk.
Amanda: Very flat, Norfolk.

—Noël Coward, Private Lives, Act 1

Henry: You have a cottage in . . . ?
Annie: Norfolk.
Henry: Norfolk! What, up in the hills there?
Annie: What hills? Norfolk is absolutely—
Charlotte: Oh, very funny. Stop it, Henry.

—Tom Stoppard, The Real Thing, Act 1

The subtext of Tom Stoppard’s plays used to be hunt-the-allusion. While his plays unfolded like Bach fugues or palindromes—symmetrical, precise, elaborately patterned repeating sets of repeating events—the audience could further divert itself within the texture of that dialogue by picking out references. Tom Stoppard says it’s not that different from a movie audience’s getting off on references to, say, Sandra Dee in, say, a fifties pastiche beach movie; but of course his frames of reference seem to be somewhat larger than the high-school memories that animate popular American culture. Up until The Real Thing, which is playing on Broadway now to rapturous acclaim, Tom Stoppard’s plays
provided a glassy surface of erudition that reflected the audience’s education back at them, magnified, and sent them out whistling the puns. . . .

Now, with *The Real Thing*, Tom Stoppard has written about love. He still plays with allusion—the first scene of the real play contains the exchange quoted above. But the hero is a playwright and both the women he marries are actresses, so that the game of reference is part of the play. A few lines on in the Coward *Private Lives* comes the seminal “Strange how potent cheap music is,” which Stoppard doesn’t quote actively, but subliminally: much of his hero’s character is expressed in his preference for the Ronettes, the Crystals, the Hollies, popular music of 20 years ago over acceptably highbrow classics. The hero’s first big laugh line is “I was taken once to Covent Garden to hear a woman called Callas in a sort of foreign musical with no dancing,” but the telling giveaway follows just after: “My illness at the time,” he says, “took the form of believing that the Righteous Brothers’ recording of ‘You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling’ on the London label was possibly the most haunting, the most deeply moving noise ever produced by the human spirit.”

In *The Real Thing*, Stoppard writing about love is Stoppard trying to find out how to be potent without being cheap. And the compromise his hero forces upon himself involves abandoning all his intellectual and moral superiority, living though the unattractively universal pain of jealousy, standing by though his wife’s infidelity—suffering for love, without once falling into melodrama or cliché. He goes through the agony of romantic love, but it’s to save his marriage. Until *The Real Thing*, there was little indication in his work of the grace, the kindness, the enormous generosity of the man. The walls of *Flashdance* words were hiding an open heart. Daunted by the plays I’d studied in college, I would never have approached him. With this play, I saw a breach. Good, I thought, I’ll ask him how one writes about love. . . .

His suite at the hotel is all blue; he takes care of the coffee, notices that it’s getting cold, places the club sandwiches on the table, is hospitable and worried that he has already told the *New York Times* everything there is to know. He’s got on an oversized shirt, the kind heroes wear for duels in pirate movies, beige trousers, black leather slippers. Smokes Silk Cut cigarettes, English low tar, one after the other. We have friends in common, people from the past. It would be far nicer to gossip than ask personal questions. . . .

The kindness is overwhelming, and it works as a good defense; the coarser questions, such as “how did you write this play about love in this way,” keep getting blown away by his attention to my general condition. Still, I try:

What brought you to write this play?

He gives different reasons, so plentiful they begin to resemble excuses. “One has to write plays if one is a playwright.” He doesn’t write often, only every three or four years; he’d
written a bit about love and sexual attraction in Night and Day, but that was a minor strand, this is a play to finish writing about the subject; he’d had an idea about a play where the same situation is repeated twice, three times, and each time the reaction is different; he wanted to do a play where the first scene is the work of the person in the second scene, which means the hero has to be a playwright; he wanted to explore “public postures having the configuration of private derangement.”

“One of the things about The Real Thing is that it’s a play about a playwright despite itself, because I’m not comfortable with the idea of having a playwright protagonist. It’s not central to what I’m trying to write about, I’m stuck with it.”

Because of the biographical implication?

“Exactly. To me it suggested that I was at the end of the rope, because you start writing about a guy trying to write a play, where have you got to go after that?

“It’s not only true,” he goes on, “that plays are the end product of certain ideas. It’s also true that certain ideas are the end product of the play.”

So, I ask, you write to find out?

“Not even that. You have certain things to start with, and you start writing a play. And then you get lost in the play a bit, and the play starts doing things which means you’re finding things out, but you don’t know whether that’s the purpose of the play. It’s just the play is difficult to write, and some of the solutions to some of the problems take the play in directions which you couldn’t have written down on a note pad before you started because they just weren’t there to write down. When you’re writing, the problem is the next line.”

I wanted, I say, to ask what you found out about love in writing this play.

“I don’t know that I have found anything out about love. I haven’t. I mean I don’t think so. To be fair, one does feel quite emotional in getting those pages right. Because if you don’t get emotional, you don’t know if they are right; writing a play in one sense consists of hearing the noise the play makes. So you can’t be detached from it. But you know, like all these things it’s an exercise of the imagination. If the story you’ve written has got you correctly to that point, it shouldn’t be too hard to speak for the character at that moment. I wasn’t conscious of learning anything. It was kind of using what you knew, or thought you knew.”

He’s at the desk now, phoning to find out where the milk is that we’ve been waiting for for two hours. I still want my answer.

“There’s something wrong with the question,” he says. “I don’t mean that rudely; but there must be some false premise in it, and it’s probably to do with your understanding of the mechanical level of writing a play. Do you mean how autobiographical is it?”

Well, yes.
“It’s a kind of game. You write about a parallel world. You write truthfully about a parallel possibility. That’s the game: This is how it might be if it would be.”

In the New York production, Jeremy Irons [Henry] and Glenn Close [Annie] seem, throughout the second act, to be at the very edge of splitting apart. Is the fragility of the relationship deliberate, I ask?

“No, that’s subjective. Some people think that their relationship suggests that fundamentally everything is okay. That the right two people found each other and will sort of survive.”

What do you think?

“The latter.”

Fated love, destiny?

“It’s not that I believe in it as an idea, it’s just that in the case of the two characters in the play, it’s possibly true. There’s always a precipice, but some couples know it’s there. It’s just what keeps them together is stronger than what tends to separate them.”

What keeps them together?

“Love. They’re right for each other. They love each other.”

Then did he make the first wife very witty and sharp to show that it isn’t intellectual understanding that keeps a couple together?

“There isn’t that much calculation in these things. Schematically, he leaves a woman who is pretty much his equal at the stuff which doesn’t matter. The second wife, Annie, doesn’t have the smart remarks. She’s actually wiser than he is. He’s cleverer, but she’s wiser.

“But,” he adds, patting my back because all this talk about love has brought on a coughing fit, “there’s no superior truth in my description of the play.”

“The main trouble with the premise,” he says, “is that none of these thoughts is a consideration while writing a play. It’s all kind of fake, and the interview makes you fake by allowing retrospective ideas to masquerade as some form of intention. One of the problems is that writers, as a whole, don’t think about their work in that external way.”

The play opened three days later. The reviews were raves, such raves that the audience, which had delighted in every nuance during previews, became shy in the presence of such a certified hit and was afraid to laugh at the jokes. Frank Rich in the New York Times was incoherent with approval; Clive Barnes in the New York Post pointed out that one doesn’t make a buck’s fizz with Dom Perignon, and the Daily News’s Douglas Watt called Jeremy Irons “a new matinee idol—the real thing.” All responses are subjective in real life: It takes a great playwright to keep them so onstage.

Excerpted from Vogue magazine (March 1984).
CRITICAL RESPONSE TO *THE REAL THING*

It was harder to imagine [Stoppard] creating characters who could feel despair, weep salt tears, or even hurt very much. Or, for that matter, denounce capitalism, fight the class system, crusade against nuclear war and do all those other things that characters are inclined to do in British plays these days. The principal complaints against Mr. Stoppard’s work were two: it lacked social and political clout; and it lacked emotional power.

*The Real Thing* faces each accusation. Indeed, it brings both together in a single theme, or at least under a single heading: commitment. To what can we, should we, commit ourselves, privately and publicly? What has substance and value? What, if anything, is “the real thing” in love, in politics, in writing? The play answers these questions with different degrees of plausibility, but always with marvelous panache and often with something more.

... Note the many attempts to define love: to Henry’s daughter, it is either an unimportant biological drive or a form of “colonization”; to Henry himself, “happiness expressed in banality and lust” then “knowledge of each other, the real him, the real her,” and finally “mess, tears, self-abasement, loss of self-respect, nakedness.” The testimony mounts, provoking us, too, to ask what this thing is that alternately gives joy and (a recurrent image) impels respectable married people to rummage through each other’s drawers in frantic search of incriminating sexual evidence. . . .

Whether one looks at the play’s subsidiary subjects, like this, or at its major themes, one finds the same pattern of thesis and antithesis, argument and rebuttal and counter-rebuttal. And, amazingly, there is no loss of fun. Mr. Stoppard has mastered the art of simultaneously being complex, even difficult, and entertaining, even hilarious. So it is when he treats love in *The Real Thing*.


For many of his critics as well as his admirers, Tom Stoppard in his new play will seem at last to have found *The Real Thing*. The foremost verbal magician of the contemporary theater has been accused of heartlessness, of being a linguistic Houdini who could make meaning disappear because it was never really there. Some critics will say, “Finally, Stoppard has embraced reality. He has shown he can write about real people, real relationships and not merely play dazzling games with words. Ah love, it’s wonderful, it’s the real thing and Tom Stoppard has found it.”
Such an attitude patronizes and misconstrues Stoppard. His plays have always dealt with the realist thing there is—the search for meaning in a world simmering with deception, falsehood, and ambiguity. For Stoppard, the most human urgency is the need to know, and the highest comedy is the breakdown of this process in an epic bewilderment. *The Real Thing* is indeed about love, but love for Stoppard is simply the most crucial form of knowing. And when this process breaks down, the bewilderment is the funniest and saddest there is.


Few playwrights can equal Stoppard in dramatising the silent fissures within a marriage, or in marking out the inner no man’s land where the intimate exasperations that come from habit change into the destructive impatience that comes from maladjustment. Here the tension is palpable but at first unclear. Who is watching whom and why? Who is pretending not to be watching whom and why? Soon the crosscurrents of attention become identifiable, and the explosion that follows is, like all such explosions, painful, embarrassing, humiliating. Stoppard’s own play, too, is, among other things, about infidelity.

The first two scenes are full of surprises, for both characters and audience. Stoppard is a master of the moment when a single phrase, its tip poisoned with wit, reverses a situation or causes a person’s belief to collapse like a house of cards. But he is much more than a psychological showman, and his revelations, which should be the envy of the most sophisticated technicians of the theatre, are not mere fireworks. The coup de théâtre is also a moment of desolation and pain. Such moments are at the heart of Stoppard’s play and they trap you in its central dilemmas. Is there anything you can believe in; anything rock solid, the real thing? In any case, what is more real: your own life, the life of these theatre professionals who are Stoppard’s characters, or the life of the characters they create when they are working? The system of relativities called life enmeshes you in its net of dangers and possibilities. Do you love somebody because you are in love with them? Or is being in love the sum total of loving?

One of Stoppard’s points is that art has the same imperatives, uncertainties and relativities. This is not because his central character is a writer: Stoppard is not in the post-Romantic business of writing about the dilemmas of an artist as representative Man. No, it is because he knows that experiencing art is as real as experiencing love, weather conditions or career problems. Writing plays and acting in them pays the mortgage, and involves your inner life in thrilling and invidious ways. Art, like love, is a question of quality, not just commitment. For example, Annie wants to help Brodie, a young Scotsman who was arrested for having set fire to a wreath at the Cenotaph, either as a political gesture or to
impress her. Either way, he has written a dreadful, cliché-soaked play about a belligerent young Scotsman spouting slogans about oppression. Of course, Henry observes, Brodie can't write. But will his play be better if Henry touches it up a bit? It will not be the same play: but does that solve the question of commitment, quality, and values? What are the values in writing, and who adjudicates? Do you write because you are a writer, or are you a writer because writing is what you do? Which is the real thing?

This is a big play, big with ideas and passions. It is also a great play. Written 15 years ago, it re-emerges . . . as a classic, increasing its stature as time endows it with greater and greater resonance. Stoppard’s writing glows and prickles with intelligence, but it is intelligence with a heart. The dialogue glitters with a ruthless, dangerous, punctilious wit; underneath, a sense of hurt and heartbreak gathers and swells. The more sparkling the wit, the greater the desolation: in this sense, Stoppard’s style is a function of pain. He has no equal today as the cartographer of loss and a sense of inner betrayal. Henry says that writers are not sacred but words are; I think he knows, too, that marriage is not sacred but love is. Love is Arcadia; you too have been there, and when it is tarnished the loss is unbearable.

In the end, The Real Thing bears public witness to private values. Your value judgments should be no less rigorous for being subjective. Stoppard’s intellectual gymnastics and his glittering jokes are a cover for hard thinking. If, like Henry, you think, or pretend to think, that Bach pinched one of his most famous themes from Procol Harum, you will still have to decide which of them is the real thing for you. Perhaps they both are. In the end, only you know whether this piece of music, this love, this marriage, this person, this play, is the real thing. This is the true relativity theory of life and values. The only certainty is that you cannot stay in Arcadia for ever and that one of the ways you can identify the real thing is the fact that it has its price and its perils: it hurts what it doth love, as the fellow says. Also, its price is one which you very much want to pay. Which is why you leave this wonderful play feeling thrilled, insecure, and provisionally hopeful.

HAPPINESS IS EQUILIBRIUM. SHIFT YOUR WEIGHT.
An Interview with Tom Stoppard

BY MEL GUSSOW (1983)

In the fall of 1982, The Real Thing opened in the West End, in a production starring Roger Rees and Felicity Kendal. The play was definably Steppardian in its shifting patterns of truth and illusion, past and present, while also dealing more directly with matters of love, marriage, and betrayal. It was in fact his first romantic comedy and an answer to those critics who thought his previous plays were several steps removed from life as we know it. The play begins with a scene of marital discord, as brittle as anything written by Noël Coward. It is, as we soon learn, fictional, not The Real Thing, but a scene in a play written by a playwright whom we meet in the second scene. The opening sets the tone for an evening in which life imitates art. The characters are bonded in conjugal, infidelity, and theater. Because the protagonist is a playwright, a great deal of the commentary deals with the use and the abuse of words.

One warm afternoon in July 1983, Stoppard and I met for tea. ... We began talking about The Real Thing.

MEL GUSSOW: IN ONE OF OUR PREVIOUS CONVERSATIONS, YOU SAID THAT YOUR PLAYS START WITH AN IMAGE, USUALLY VISUAL. WAS THAT TRUE WITH THE REAL THING?
TOM STOPPARD: I wanted to write a play in which the first scene was written by a character in the second scene.

WAS IT ALWAYS GOING TO BE A PLAY ABOUT A PLAYWRIGHT?
No, on the contrary, I put off writing it because I didn’t want to write a play about a playwright. That seemed to be the end of the rope: you write a play about someone who’s trying to write a play. The genesis of the play was a thing I came across in W. H. Auden’s chapbook. In the play, Henry [the playwright] says that public postures have the configuration of private derangement. That’s a version of a sentence I read in this Auden chapbook. The idea is that you have a man onstage going through a situation. It turns out he’s written it. Then you have the actor in the scene going through the same situation, except he reacts differently. Then you have the guy who wrote it going through the exact situation and he reacts differently too. It’s quite a schematic idea. When I was writing the stage directions, I took pains to make sure the geography of doors and furniture remained consistent so that
you didn’t miss the point. That turned out to be quite unnecessary; you didn’t have to worry too much about it.

**READING THE TEXT IT IS QUITE DIFFICULT TO VISUALIZE IT ONSTAGE.**

I didn’t visualize it either. . . . Writing a play about a playwright is like a painter drawing a picture of someone painting.

**PEOPLE WILL THINK IT’S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL.**

I don’t know if it’s autobiographical, but a lot of it is auto something. Henry sounds off on the subject of writing in exactly the same way the reporters in *Night and Day* said what I wanted to say about journalism.

**THEY’RE YOUR SPOKESMEN?**

It’s not their function in either play. The play doesn’t exist in order to make those points. I think *Night and Day* is different. There were certain things I wanted to say about journalism. This play wasn’t written in order to say certain things about writing. It was written because I liked the idea of the game, the device of having the same thing happen two or three times.

**BUT IT DOES DEAL MORE DIRECTLY WITH THEATER THAN YOUR OTHER PLAYS.**

Yes. But once you’re stuck with him being a playwright who wrote the first scene, whatever narrative you invent would be about his life.

**HE DOESN’T HAVE TO BE MARRIED TO TWO ACTRESSES.**

He does, you see.

**NOT ALL PLAYWRIGHTS ARE.**

I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about my scheme, my idiotic game, a play where it turns out a woman is married to the man who wrote the first scene. If the writer’s wife has got to be in both situations, she’s got to be an actress. It’s determined by the playful idea of having people repeat their situation in fiction. For instance, the Felicity Kendal part, there’s a love scene with a person who becomes her lover except in fact they’re in *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*. As soon as you decide that’s what’s going to happen, the woman in the rail scene has got to be an actress because she ends up acting in *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*. That’s where the horse is, and that’s where the cart is.
REALITY IMITATES ART AS WELL AS ART IMITATING REALITY?
I really didn’t want to write about actresses or writers, given the choice. Very recently, I was
asked to write a Backstage Drama for three different actresses, about being actresses. It’s
an idea which has no appeal to me of any kind.

THE REAL THING DOESN’T DEAL VERY MUCH WITH ACTRESSES, BUT IT DOES
DEAL WITH THE CREATIVE PROCESS AND WITH THEATER AS IT DOES OR
DOES NOT IMITATE LIFE.
I can’t remember how much of the play was preplanned, how much of it was built into the
original idea, or whether it just developed that way. I remember, before I began writing
anything, I thought the play would be a joke about set design. You could have a scene
taking place that is recognizable to the audience as being a real place, and that would turn
out to be fake. Then you could have a scene, sort of abstract black, which would be in the
conventional theater. But the whole thing got too complicated. One of the things we had
to do when we started previewing was put more information in at the beginning of Scene
2 because they found the first scene completely acceptable. Some people didn’t catch on.

AND THEY WONDERED WHERE THEY WERE IN THE SECOND SCENE?
Exactly. They assume that’s the man she ran off with; you’re supposed to think that. And
the other man came back. By the time the audience caught on, they rather resented it.
Strange really, because there are very naked lines near the beginning of the scene which
give it away even more than we want to. There’s a line there that makes me wince every
time I hear it. He spells it out for children, talking about “my wife playing with your
husband six times a week and twice on Saturdays.”

DO YOU NEED IT?
We found in previews that we really did need it, which was so disappointing. . . .

HOW IMPORTANT WAS NOEL COWARD TO YOU IN YOUR WRITING OF THE
PLAY? I WAS THINKING OF THE FIRST SCENE AND THE NORFOLK REMARK.
The first scene was not intended to be a pastiche. I can see there’s a resemblance to
Coward, but it’s not that close. The idiom of acting makes it seem a bit Cowardish. . . .
OF ALL THE MEDIA YOU WORK IN, DO YOU ENJOY THE STAGE THE MOST?
It's a kind of snobbery. I think of the stage as being real playwriting. It's completely irrational. Radio is probably more real playwriting because you just have the actor's voice and the words you wrote. Onstage you have the director to control the images.

IN THE REAL THING, YOU TALK ABOUT “DESERT ISLAND DISCS.” COULD YOU TALK ABOUT DESERT ISLAND BOOKS, PLAYS, PEOPLE? WHAT PLAY WOULD YOU TAKE TO A DESERT ISLAND?
Just to read?

IT COULD BE STAGED.
When you do the program you're given a long time to think about it. It's a very important question. The trouble is almost everything seems not quite enough.

AND DESERT ISLAND BOOKS?
I'd be tempted to say Finnegans Wake, just to pass the time, but I'm not sure if I would really like to.

HAVE YOU READ IT?
No, I've just scratched the surface.

I MIGHT TAKE PROUST.
That's a good idea. I took it on holiday once and got through one and a half volumes. The holiday ended and that was the end of Proust. Tell the truth, I might take a reference book. I love reference books. . . .

IN THE REAL THING, THE PLAYWRIGHT MAKES A STATEMENT ABOUT NOT BEING ABLE TO WRITE ABOUT LOVE. IS THAT YOU TALKING ABOUT YOURSELF?
It was me talking about myself before writing The Real Thing. The play contains self-reference jokes. Henry says when he tries to write a play about love, it comes out “embarrassing, childish, or rude.” The love story, as I wrote it, tries to avoid banality while suggesting it. Henry says in the same scene, “It makes me nervous to see three-quarters of a page and no writing on it. I talk better than this.” That's self-reference.
THAT’S THE CLOSEST YOU’VE COME TO WRITING ABOUT LOVE?
Yes. As far as I’m concerned, this is all I’ll do. For better or worse, that’s it—the love play!
Since then, one or two people have asked me to get involved in writing things about love,
“because he did it in The Real Thing.” But it’s not like that. You’ve done that. You can’t do it again. I think love is the only area that might be private to a writer.

YOU’VE WRITTEN ABOUT SEX. JUMPERS, DIRTY LINEN HAVE EROTIC MOMENTS.
I suppose so, but none of it’s private. Its all theater sex, theater lust, witty, articulate sex. Love is a very interesting subject to write about. I’ve been aware of the process that’s lasted 25 years, of shedding inhibition about self-revelation. I wouldn’t have dreamed of writing about it ten years ago, but as you get older, you think, who cares?

In 1994, Gussow again asked Stoppard about The Real Thing:


ARE YOU A HAPPY MAN?
Yes. I’m just looking at the word happy for a moment. Mike was always tremendously pleased by the definition of happiness in that play. “Happiness is equilibrium. Shift your weight.” Attaining your happiness, if you’re talking about me, is learning that lesson. You try not to stand in the way of the onrushing train, to change the metaphor. But in fact I suppose what you’re remembering is that happiness seems to imply a turning away from whatever might compromise your happiness. One is exposed naked in the winds of the world, and everybody around you has got problems. Some are acute, some are less serious than others. You live in the little world of your family and the larger world of your colleagues and the huge world of newspaper and television news. So happiness is not really a very adequate word. When I said I felt blessed by good fortune, that’s generally the truth. Clearly your life and everyone’s life is full of things that make you unhappy from time to time. You just deal with them.
THAT REMINDS ME AGAIN OF THE BOY IN YOUR PLAY WHERE ARE THEY NOW?
That indeed is the play where that character says happiness is a passing shift of emphasis. I do have an idyllic vision of life. Whether one has a right to live it is another matter. It’s to do with self-reliance. It’s cultivating your garden without being pulled, without having one’s sleeve tugged by what’s happening outside the wall.

Excerpted from Conversations with Stoppard, by Mel Gussow, © 1995 Mel Gussow (Grove Press).

Carnal knowledge. It’s what lovers trust each other with. Knowledge of each other, not of the flesh but through the flesh, knowledge of self, the real him, the real her, in extremis, the mask slipped from the face.

—Henry in The Real Thing

Love is a very interesting subject to write about. I’ve been aware of the process that’s lasted 25 years, of shedding inhibition about self-revelation. I wouldn’t have dreamed of writing about it 10 years ago, but as you get older, you think, who cares?

—Tom Stoppard (to Mel Gussow), 1983

I love love. I love having a lover and being one. The insularity of passion. I love it. I love the way it blurs the distinction between everyone who isn’t one’s lover. Only two kinds of presence in the world. There’s you and there’s them.

—Henry in The Real Thing
STOFPARD STARTS TO PLAY STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

BY CHRISTOPHER BOWEN (1999)

Does Tom Stoppard have a heart? I only ask because that's a question which has fairly fascinated theater critics ever since the curtain fell on the first performance of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in 1967. From that audacious overnight success at the age of 29, Stoppard has thrilled audiences with the dazzlingly playful verbal gymnastics of texts like *Jumpers*, *Travesties*, *The Real Thing*, and *Hapgood*. Turning deeply unpromising subjects (minor characters in *Hamlet*, analytical philosophy, a trivial lawsuit involving James Joyce) into popular classics, Stoppard has also crafted a body of work that is as instructive as it is entertaining. Buy a ticket for a Stoppard play and you may well end up with a crash course in landscape gardening, quantum mechanics, journalistic ethics or Marxist theory. But will you learn much about the condition of the human heart? Or, for that matter, Tom Stoppard? Probably not.

"The events of my life are not in my work," he told one interviewer earlier this year. "I simply don't use my life. *The Real Thing* was about a playwright, but the playwright was not me. My opinions may filter through, but never my life."

It is a subject which crops up in conversation when we met in a hotel close to Stoppard's Chelsea Harbour home last month. Stubbing out a cigarette after only a few puffs he ruminates on the notion that writers are expected to plunder their life experience. "I am puzzled by the scale of values here," he says. "Why is that better? Nobody said 'War and Peace' is great, but it would have been better if Tolstoy had written about his own life."

Yet it could be argued that faint glimmers of Stoppard's life (and heart) have lately begun to illuminate his work. Take *Indian Ink*, which had its u.s. premiere at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater in 1999. . . . Somewhat surprisingly, given that he is generally regarded as the greatest English-language playwright since Pinter, Stoppard has a few reservations about *Indian Ink* being performed in the United States. "Americans don't have that colonialist background—the British Empire thing," he says. "All they've had is a few hours of TV—*The Jewel in the Crown*, and that's it. Will they get it? The answer one hopes carries most of the truth is that *Indian Ink* is not about India, it's about love."

As it happens, there is a path in Stoppard's life which led to India. He was born in Czechoslovakia as Tomas Straussler, the son of a Jewish physician in Zlin. The family
moved to Singapore in 1939, when he was two, to escape the Nazis. When the Japanese took Singapore two years later he and his mother and brother were evacuated to India, but his father died at the hands of the invaders. Stoppard, who adopted his stepfather’s name when his mother remarried, then spent five years of his childhood in Darjeeling.

It is also interesting that the role of the poet in Indian Ink was written for actress Felicity Kendal, with whom he shared an eight-year-long relationship. Kendal was born and raised in India and her traveling theatrical family was the subject of the Merchant-Ivory film Shakespeare Wallab. So much for Stoppard not using his life experience. . . .

He and Kendal were always coy about their relationship. Their close association—friends said that, though they did not live together they could not bear to be apart for long—became tabloid fodder.

When it ended, rumors were rife that although noone else was involved, the pair were no longer speaking to each other. But if there was animosity then, Stoppard will now only say, in a charmingly chivalrous manner, that: “She was my girlfriend.”

As a statement about his love life it is typically close-mouthed. There was a similar reticence about the end of his 20-year marriage to Dr. Miriam Stoppard in 1991. Indeed, Stoppard’s routine silence on matters of the heart has served to make the subject all the more fascinating to those intent on analyzing the emotional content of his work.

Which brings us to the most revealing development in Stoppard’s recent works. Love. A classical education may be as important as having a credit card when buying tickets for The Invention of Love, but that doesn’t negate the play’s emotional impact. Similarly, the multi-award-winning work Arcadia has had audiences weeping at the tragic fate of Thomasina, its 18th-century mathematical prodigy, despite the glittering thesis on the breakdown of Newtonian order Stoppard presents.

“Yes, they are warming up a bit,” he dryly observes when this current trend is pointed out. Is this, one wonders, because he’s getting on a bit? “That’s one way of putting it. As you get older you get less defensive, you lose your shyness. Don’t forget, I was brought up in middle-class suburbia, educated at a minor English public school—all very buttoned up. It was slightly embarrassing to come out as an emotional person. I don’t think I am an emotional person anyway. I am a romantic.”

Millions of cinemagoers would surely agree, to judge by the response to the Gwyneth Paltrow / Joseph Fiennes Elizabethan romp, Shakespeare in Love. Stoppard might regard excursions to Hollywood as his holiday job (“I may be punished for this in the end, but I still think of theater as being the difficult one”) but his screenplay for this great, lush, blissfully funny film has already earned him a Golden Globe and pundits are anticipating an Oscar nomination will follow next week. . . .
But all this talk of the heart (or lack of it) in his work seems to irk the affable author. “The premise of this question is that warm is better. Where do you get that from?”

Not surprisingly, the critics who have found Stoppard’s works “cool” are the same ones who regularly accuse Stephen Sondheim of being too clever by half. “How can you be too clever?” remarks an exasperated Stoppard. “It’s like saying someone is too generous. But I know what they mean. Stephen has this cerebral objectivity, he manipulates language. I do as well. But is that necessarily a bad thing?”

Clearly not, or Stoppard and Sondheim wouldn’t be the preeminent artists they so obviously are. Still, Stoppard can’t resist answering his own question. “Theatre can be—and is—many things. It can do without some of them more easily than others. It can less easily do without the sense of capturing the heart. It is a storytelling art form, above all, and I think stories that engage you on an emotional level are better stories—they last longer with you.”

Why the change of heart? “I can see where this equation comes from. But I have also had the experience of people telling me: ‘I saw your play and laughed a lot.’ Now I get: ‘I saw your play and wept a bit.’ There is something very empirical about the way I am pleased about that. I think there is a case to be made for warm being better.”

If this new-found warmth in Stoppard’s work has found him success in Hollywood, he is unlikely to be giving up the day job anytime soon. “I wouldn’t write any films if I had enough plays in me. I’m just not prolific enough. If I had an idea that I genuinely thought would be better for a film, I’d write it as a film. I’d have a different sort of problem, which is finding something to write about in the first place.”

Excerpted from an article originally published in the Scotsman, February 6, 1999 (Edinburgh, Scotland). © 1999 Scotsman Publications Ltd.
A REAL THING GLOSSARY

BY PAUL WALSH

“It’s a kind of frame. . . . You write truthfully about a parallel possibility. That’s the game: This is how it might be if it would be.”
—Tom Stoppard

“I WAS RIGHT ABOUT THE SKATEBOARD, I WAS RIGHT ABOUT NOUVEAU CUISINE, AND I’LL BE PROVED RIGHT ABOUT THE DIGITAL WATCH.”

From our position in the 21st century, we are better able to judge the resiliency of such fads as skateboarding, nouvelle cuisine, and the digital watch than the characters in The Real Thing were when the play opened in 1982. Certainly fads come and go, but skateboards—like mobile phones—will be with us for a long time to come.

Skateboarding got its start in the 1950s, when southern California surfers decided to take their passion to the streets, attaching roller skate wheels to pieces of wood. Things took a turn in early 1975, when a slalom and freestyle skateboarding contest was held at the Ocean Festival in Del Mar, California. From there it was a short step to Tony Hawk, who pretty much invented the sport of competitive skateboarding. While skateboarding suffered a decline in the early 1990s, it is more popular today than ever.

Like the skateboard, nouvelle cuisine came to prominence in the 1970s, though the hubris with which it was promoted destined it from the start to ridicule. Chefs like Paul Bocuse, former president of the French Society for Nouvelle Cuisine, though now publicly skeptical of notions of the new, became famous as much for their outrageous statements about the “new style” of cooking in the 1970s as for the food they served. Fernand Point—chef of the famous Restaurant de la Pyramide in Vienne, France, until his death in 1955—is generally considered the father of nouvelle cuisine, though it wasn’t until the early 1970s that his emphasis on replacing heavier, more complicated preparations with light and simple menus featuring local ingredients was labeled a new culinary creed. Food conserva-tives dismissed nouvelle cuisine with indigent condescension while the popular press portrayed it as a pretentious display of ludicrously miniscule portions of meat or fish served with a slice of exotic fruit or a sprig of watercress on an oversized white plate. While the term may be passé today, the proponents of nouvelle cuisine changed how we think about cooking forever.
In the introduction to that seminal interactive novel/computer game *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1984), Douglas Adams wrote that humans are “so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.” In fact, by 1982, the digital watch fad that had started in the 1960s with the idea of combining electricity and quartz movement in the creation of timepieces was already beginning to wane.

The first digital watch, a Pulsar prototype produced in 1970, was developed jointly by Hamilton Watch Company and Electro-Data. A retail version was put on sale in 1972. You needed two hands to operate it: one to wear the watch and the other to push a button to activate the light-emitting diode (LED) display. LED displays were soon superseded by liquid crystal displays (LCDs), which used less battery power. Seiko marketed the first LC watch with a six-digit display in 1973. Texas Instruments brought the digital watch to the masses in 1975, producing an LED watch that sold for $20. A year later the price was half that. This was a far step from the Seiko 35SQ Astron Watch, the world’s first quartz wrist-watch, which was unveiled in Tokyo on Christmas Day, 1969, at $1,250. Digital watches never did replace analogue watches (watches with hands), despite their greater reliability and lower cost. In fact, as digital watches became cheaper, analogue watches, especially those made by great Swiss or German watch companies like Rolex or A. Lange & Söhne, became sought-after status symbols.

“**DO YOU SAY ‘BASEL’? I SAY BA’L . . . ‘LET’S CALL THE WHOLE THING OFF . . . ’**”

The city and canton of Basel (also spelled Basle), which lies in the north of Switzerland bordering France and Germany, is pronounced both [ba’zul] and [bAl]. Not only is a distinct dialect of *Schweizerdeutsch* (Swiss German) spoken in Basel, but also *Hochdeutsch* (High German, imported from Germany) and French. This reference by Max’s character in *House of Cards*—the play-within-a-play that begins *The Real Thing*—calls to mind the Ira and George Gershwin tune “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off” (1937) from the movie *Shall We Dance*?

“**I THOUGHT YOU LIKE ME SHOWING AN INTEREST IN YOUR WORK. MY SHOWING. SAVE THE GERUND AND SCREW THE WHALE.**”

Max’s character in *House of Cards*, like Henry, that character’s author, has a fondness for such grammatical niceties as the often-misunderstood gerund, which he implies is on the verge of extinction. Friends of the Earth had launched their international “Save the Whales” campaign in 1971 and by 1982 had succeeded in having whaling banned internationally, though Japanese whalers have reportedly continued to violate the ban into this century. “Save the Whales” soon became a rallying call for compassion toward all nature,
turning the tide of sentiment in favor of animals that had been blithely hunted to near extinction. Henry, it seems, would like similar attention given to obscurities of the English language that are likewise near extinction. A gerund is a verb ending in “–ing” and functioning as a noun (as subject, direct object, indirect object, or object of prepositions). In “Parting is such sweet sorrow,” for example, a gerund (parting) serves as subject. Gerunds are not to be confused with present participles, which also end in “–ing,” but complete progressive verbs or act as modifiers. Later Henry corrects Max’s “if you don’t mind me saying so.” Because “saying” is a gerund it should be modified by a possessive adjective: “My saying, Max.”

“MY WIFE WORKS FOR SOTHEBY’S OR CHRISTIE’S, I FORGET WHICH. . . . HOW’S OLD CHRISTIE, BY THE WAY? THERE I GO. HOW’S OLD SOOTHERS, BY THE WAY?”

Sotheby’s and Christie’s are the two most famous auction houses in the world. Both date from the 18th century. While Sotheby’s originally specialized in books and art and Christie’s in furniture and other moveables, both firms have expanded into handling everything from rare wines to real estate in recent years.

Samuel Baker, founder of Sotheby’s, held his first auction in 1744. The auction of the library of the Rt. Hon. Sir John Stanley, Bart., brought in a few hundred pounds, and for more than a century the auction house of Sotheby’s focused exclusively on the auction of books and libraries. When Baker died in 1778, his estate was divided between his partner, George Leigh, and his nephew, John Sotheby. For the next 80 years, the Sotheby family dominated the firm and eventually expanded into such related areas as prints, medals, and coins. Today Sotheby’s is one of the most recognized fine art auctioneers in the world, and also the largest.

Since James Christie conducted his first auction in 1766, the auction house of Christie’s has gained a reputation for selling huge swaths of Britain’s national heritage on behalf of members of the British aristocracy and royal family. It was Christie, for example, who negotiated the sale of Sir Robert Walpole’s collection of paintings to Catherine the Great of Russia. This later formed the base of the Hermitage Museum collection in St. Petersburg. At his death in 1803, Christie left his auction house to his son. In 1973, Christie’s became a public company listed on the London Stock Exchange.

“HAVE YOU GOT A FAVOURITE BOOK? / FINNEGANS WAKE.”

It is not surprising that Henry has chosen James Joyce’s notoriously unreadable novel as his desert island light reading. It is a choice that is sure to boost his credibility with
listeners, as it is often considered the most important unread novel of the 20th century. Joyce proclaimed his baffling barrage of dizzying multilingual puns, arcane allusions, and esoteric digressions “a history of the world,” and it is complex enough to live up to that description. In fact, it has tempted, scolded, and demoralized graduate students for decades.

“DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN WE WERE IN SOME PLACE LIKE BOURNEMOUTH OR DEAUVILLE?”
Actually, we learn that Henry and Charlotte were neither at the English seaside resort of Bournemouth, “the gem on the South Coast,” nor across the channel at the equally sedate Deauville, “lady of the French coast and gateway to Calvados,” but at the decidedly more elegant and upscale Swiss ski resort, St. Moritz, a jet-set destination since before there were jets. The line is reminiscent of something a Noël Coward character might say.

“I WAS WRITING MY SARTRE PLAY.”
In his “Sartre play,” which he later calls Jean-Paul Is Up the Wall, Henry says he claimed that French philosopher, littérateur, and Nobel laureate Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80) was “essentially superficial.” Considered one of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century, Sartre wrote dozens of volumes of philosophical treatises, essays, recollections, observations, fiction, and plays, including such famous plays as No Exit (1943) and The Flies (1943).

“THE CRYSTALS. (SCORNFULLY) THE RONETTES.”
The Crystals, a legendary crossover rhythm-and-blues group from Brooklyn that was discovered and produced by Phil Spector, had six songs in the top 20 in 1962 and 1963, including “There’s No Other (Like My Baby),” “Uptown,” and their 1963 hit “Da Doo Ron Ron (When He Walked Me Home),” which featured LaLa Brooks. The Ronettes was another sixties girl group produced by Phil Spector. In fact Spector later married lead singer Veronica “Ronnie” Bennet. Ronnie started the group with her sister Estelle and their cousin Nedra Talley in the late fifties, and in the early sixties they sang at the famed Peppermint Lounge under the name the Dolly Sisters. The success of their 1962 single “Silhouettes” was soon surpassed by such tunes as “Baby I Love You” (1963), “Walking in the Rain,” (1964) and “Be My Baby” (1963).

“BUCK’S FIZZ ALL ROUND”
First served in London’s Buck’s Club in 1921, the Buck’s fizz is a combination of champagne, orange juice, and grenadine. Today the grenadine is often omitted, making it
the same as what Americans call a mimosa. Mr. McGarry, the barman at the Buck's Club who invented the drink, insisted that it should have a ratio of one-third orange to two-thirds champagne and be served in a frosted wine glass.

“I’M NEXT WEEK’S CASTAWAY ON ‘DESKET ISLAND DISCS.’”

On the air for more than 60 years, “Desert Island Discs” is still a popular show on BBC Radio 4. Celebrities are asked which eight recordings (originally 78 rpm records) they would take with them into exile on a desert island. The idea is that as the celebrities explain their musical choices they also reveal their lives. Though 78s are a distant memory today, “Desert Island Discs” continues on the air as the third-longest-running radio program in the world, accompanied by its unforgettable signature tune, Eric Coates’s “By the Sleepy Lagoon.” When host Roy Plomley passed away, his mantle went first to Michael Parkinson and then to Sue Lawley.

According to the BBC, top classical music choices over the years have included:

1. The last movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, “Ode to Joy”
2. Schubert’s Quintet in C, second movement, Adagio
3. Mozart’s trio “Soave sia il vento” from Cosi fan tutte
4. Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony, Pastoral
5. Richard Strauss’s Four Last Songs, “Beim Schlafengehen”

“BADINAGE. YOU KNOW, DIALOGUE.”

The word “badinage” comes from the French word badiner, “to trifle or joke” (from badin, “playful, jocular”) and means “light, playful talk; banter.”

“CRUDITÉS! PERFECT TITLE FOR A PORNOGRAPHIC REVUE.”

Vaudevilles and burlesque shows were often called “gaieties,” a term that derives from the French word for “merriment” or “cheerfulness.” Henry wittily suggests that “crudités” (raw vegetables cut into bite-sized pieces and served with dip) might be a more appropriate title for less appropriate entertainment.

“The trouble is I don’t like the pop music which it’s all right to like. You can have a bit of Pink Floyd shoved in between your symphonies and your Dame Janet Baker—. . . but I like Wayne
**FONTANA AND THE MINDBENDERS DOING “UM UM UM UM UM UM.” . . . I LIKE NEIL SEDAKA.”**

After releasing their large-scale concept album *The Wall* (1979), Pink Floyd began to be taken seriously as other than pop musicians. Their 1969 release *Ummagumma* is still considered one of the most adventurous mainstream rock outings of all time. Henry might also have mentioned the 1967 Chad and Jeremy concept album *Of Cabbages and Kings*, especially considering that Jeremy Clyde played Max in the 1982 London premiere of the *The Real Thing*.

British mezzo-soprano Dame Janet Baker attracted international fame in the 1960s and 1970s, but her career remained centered mostly in Britain, making her a popular local favorite on Desert Island Discs.

Wayne Fontana founded his band the Mindbenders in 1962, and over the next five years they released such hit singles as “Stop Look And Listen” (1964), “Um, Um, Um, Um, Um,” (1964), “The Game of Love” (1965), and “A Groovy Kind of Love” (1966). In 1967 the original band broke up, but Wayne Fontana continues to perform.


“I’M NOT VERY UP TO DATE. I LIKE HERMAN’S HERMITS, AND THE HOLLIES, AND THE EVERLY BROTHERS, AND BRENDA LEE, AND THE SUPREMES.”

Henry’s musical taste is as eclectic as Stoppard’s own and spans the fifties and sixties. But, as he says, “I don’t like artists. I like singles,” recalling a time when you could purchase a 45 RPM single (actually two songs, one on either side of the record), rather than albums of a dozen or more songs. In an interview, Stoppard admitted: “Of course I am perfectly well aware of how fatuous and inane nearly all the lyrics are. . . . I just like the noise.”

Herman’s Hermits, led by Peter Noone, were part of the “British invasion” of the mid 1960s. Even then they were considered a bit lightweight. But they did have 11 top-ten hits between 1964 and 1967, including “Mrs. Brown You’ve Got a Lovely Daughter” (1965), music hall star Harry Champion’s 1911 song “Henry viii” (1965), and their mega-hit “I’m into Something Good” (1965). Herman’s Hermits may have been considered lightweight, but they sold 40 million records in their heyday between 1964 and when Noone left the band to go solo in 1971.
The British quintet the Hollies were formed in 1962 and named after the late Buddy Holly. Graham Nash played guitar for the group until he left in 1968 to form Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. “Bus Stop” (1966) and “Carrie Ann” (1967) were probably their greatest hits, though others might argue for “Just One Look” (1964), “Stop, Stop, Stop” (1966), or “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother” (1969) with Elton John on piano.

Don and Phil Everly far surpassed their father, country singer Ike Everly, in fame and fortune. With the help of their musical mentor Chet Atkins, the Everly Brothers became overnight stars when they recorded “Bye Bye Love” in 1957. Their mix of country-style close harmonies, acoustic guitars, and a rock-and-roll beat brought new vigor to Nashville. “Bye Bye Love” not only reached number one on the country charts, it crossed over to reach number two on the pop charts as well. Their next two recordings, “Wake Up Little Susie” (1957) and “All I Have to Do Is Dream” (1958), did nearly as well and all three are considered rock-and-roll classics today. In 1960, the brothers recorded “Be Bop A-Lula,” and the following year, while serving in the Marine Corps Reserves, released “Crying in the Rain.” By 1969, the brothers had broken up, but by then musical tastes had changed.

When Diana Ross was promoted to lead singer of the Supremes in 1965, the group was catapulted to international success as the Queens of Motown. They were the first all-girl group to reach number one in England with “Baby Love” (1964). By 1967, when the group changed its name to Diana Ross and the Supremes, they had scored an amazing 12 number-one hits on the Billboard pop charts, including such continuing favorites as “Stop! In the Name of Love” (1965), “Back in My Arms Again” (1965), “I Hear a Symphony” (1965), and “You Keep Me Hangin’ On” (1966).

“I WAS TAKEN ONCE TO COVENT GARDEN TO HEAR A WOMAN CALLED CALLAS IN A SORT OF FOREIGN MUSICAL WITH NO DANCING.”

Maria Callas (1927–77), the Greek-American operatic soprano and preeminent prima donna of her day, remembered as “La Divina,” was known for reviving coloratura bel canto roles in long unperformed operas, including the roles of Norma and Lucia di Lammermoor. Praised for the distinctive color of her voice, her dramatic presence, and her careful musicianship, she sang principally at La Scala, the Rome and Paris operas, Covent Garden in London, and the Metropolitan Opera in New York City.
“THE IDEA WAS THAT I WOULD BE CURED OF MY STRANGE DISABILITY. AS THOUGH THE PLACE WERE A KIND OF LOURDES, FOR THE MUSICALLY DISADVANTAGED.”

Since the mid-19th century, the simple grotto at Lourdes, in the French Pyrenees, has been a place of religious pilgrimage. Between February and July 1858, the Blessed Virgin, Mother of Jesus, was said to have appeared 18 times to a poor, 14-year-old girl, Bernadette Soubiroux. About a million pilgrims a year travel to pray at Lourdes and more than 4,000 cures have been recorded there.

“My illness at the time took the form of believing that the Righteous Brothers’ recording of ‘You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feelin’” on the London label was possibly the most haunting, the most deeply moving noise ever produced by the human spirit.”

Others apparently agree with Henry on this as the Righteous Brothers’ “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling” (1965) is the most-played song in radio history. It is estimated that it has been played more than eight million times to date. Unlike their predecessors the Everly Brothers, the Righteous Brothers were not actually brothers, nor were Bill Medley and Bobby Hatfield particularly righteous, in the biblical sense. But such tunes as “Unchained Melody” (1965) and “(You’re My) Soul and Inspiration” (1966) moved a generation with their righteous blend of pop, white soul, and rhythm and blues. The duo put five top-ten songs on the charts in the mid sixties and recorded a song that defined a generation.

“It’s easy. Like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid jumping off the cliff.”


“Some people have daughters who go punk. We’ve got one who goes riding on Barnes Common looking like the Last of the Mohicans.”

Debbie seems to enjoy the air of freedom afforded her when horseback riding on the commons in the London borough of Richmond-upon-Thames (SW13), near where Charlotte and Henry apparently live. The reference is of course to James Fenimore Cooper’s 1826 novel, The Last of the Mohicans.
“YOU THINK I’M KIDDING, BUT I’M NOT. PUBLIC POSTURES HAVE THE
CONFIGURATION OF PRIVATE DERANGEMENT.”
According to Stoppard biographer Ira Nadel, this idea came to Stoppard from
w. h. Auden’s *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (1970), in which Auden quotes the
philosopher Ortega Y Gasset: “During periods of crisis, positions which are false or
feigned are very common. Entire generations falsify themselves to themselves; that is to
say, they wrap themselves up in artistic styles, in doctrines, in political movements that are
insincere and which fill the lack of genuine commitment.”

“AN INTERESTING MORAL DILEMMA. I WONDER WHAT SAINT AUGUSTINE
WOULD HAVE DONE?”
Henry refers somewhat snidely to the great early Christian moral philosopher, St.
Augustine of Hippo (354–430 c.e.), whose famous *Confessions* are considered the first auto-
biography. In the *Confessions*, Augustine ponders various actions he took in his sinful youth
and analyzes various decisions he made prior to his conversion to Christianity at age 32. In
the process he traces the moral education of a Christian soul. Augustine advocated balance
between faith and good works and also between living an active Christian life of social
involvement and the contemplative life of prayer.

“*JULIE, MISS JULIE. STRINDBERG’S MISS JULIE. MISS JULIE BY AUGUST STRINDBERG,
HOW IS SHE?”
Max here refers to Swedish playwright August Strindberg’s most famous play, *Fröken Julie*,
which Annie is currently rehearsing. This erotic “pas de deux” of seduction and remorse
was considered a scandalous tour de force of the modern naturalistic drama when it
premiered in 1889. In the next scene Henry will help Annie rehearse a scene from the play
in which the young and dashing valet Jean seduces the somewhat older daughter of the
count, Julie, in a masterful scene of role playing and frank confession.

“FIFTEEN DAYS AND FUCKLESS TO BYE-BYES.”
When speaking to young children, the English use the term “bye-byes” to mean “go to
sleep” much as we might say “beddie-bye.” Thus, “It’s getting late—it’s time for you to go
to bye-byes.”
“THERE HE IS, POOR BUGGER, PICKING UP THE ODD CRUMB OF EAR WAX FROM THE RICH MAN’S TABLE.”

Henry’s point of reference is the story of Lazarus (Luke 16:21) who desired “to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table.”

“WOULD I BE SURE TO WATCH HER THIS WEEK IN TROTSKY PLAYHOUSE OR WHATEVER THEY CALL IT.”

This is undoubtedly Henry’s private editorializing on the leftist bent of serious British television drama. After the death of Lenin, Leon Trotsky, a major participant in the October 1917 Russian revolution, was expelled from the Communist party for insisting that communism can only succeed through worldwide revolution, rather than through piecemeal national revolutions like that in Russia. His ideas gained new prominence among the counterculturists of the 1960s.

“How can it be Strauss? It’s in Italian.”

Annie’s attempt to provide Henry with an education in serious classical music apparently includes occasional quizzes. Here Henry first attributes the opera Annie is playing to the German composer Richard Strauss (1864–1949), whose musical influence continues to reverberate into the 21st century. From Don Juan to the scherzolike Till Eulenspiegel, from Also Sprach Zarathustra (recognized by some as the theme from 2001: A Space Odyssey) to the autobiographical Ein Heldenleben (in his Hero’s Life Strauss portrayed himself as the hero opposing an adversarial group of music critics), Strauss painted precise landscapes of sound that called for unprecedented texture and color from the ever-expanding orchestra. Annie points out that the opera is in Italian and Henry quickly guesses that it is by the great Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1911), whose 28 operas dominate the world of Italian opera from Nabucco (1842), Macbeth (1847), Il Trovatore (1853), La Traviata (1853), Don Carlos (1867), and Aida (1871) to his final Shakespearean operas, Otello (1887) and Falstaff (1893). When Annie asks him which Verdi opera it is, Henry wildly guesses Madame Butterfly (by Puccini).

“You can’t tell the difference between the Everly Brothers and the Andrews Sisters.”

Like the Everly Brothers, the Andrews Sisters, “America’s Wartime Sweethearts,” were also a sibling singing act, though of an earlier generation and a different repertoire. The three sisters from Minnesota, LaVerne, Maxine, and Patty, took their distinctive harmonies on the road and across the radio airwaves recording over 700 songs, 46 of which reached the top ten on the Billboard charts, including “Beer Barrel Polka (Roll out the Barrel),”
“Bei Mir Bist Du Schön (Means that You’re Grand),” “Don’t Fence Me In,” and “Winter Wonderland.”

**THE BIG BOPPER DIED IN THE SAME PLANE CRASH THAT KILLED BUDDY HOLLY AND RICHIE VALENS, YOU KNOW.**

J. P. Richardson, who called himself the “Big Bopper,” recorded “Chantilly Lace” in 1957 and it became the third-most-played song of 1958. He was on tour with the “Winter Dance Party of 1959” when he caught the flu on the tour bus. Singing sensation Buddy Holly, fresh off his number one hit with “That’ll Be the Day,” was also on the tour. Holly decided to charter a plane to the next gig. The Bopper convinced Holly’s bass player, Waylon Jennings, to give him his seat on the plane. The plane went down killing the Bopper, Holly, and the 17-year-old Latino sensation Ritchie Valens (who had just recorded “La Bamba” a month before). Don McLean in his 1971 song “American Pie” memorialized February 3, 1959, as “the day the music died.” The Big Bopper was 28, Holly was 22, and Valens was only 17.

“**WELL, THEN. THREE SISTERS IS DEFINITELY OFF.**”

Chekhov’s 1901 drama about the Prozorov sisters living out their tired existence in a small provincial garrison town would undoubtedly be a different experience if two of the actors playing the sisters were pregnant. I doubt that, as Henry sarcastically suggests, even “half a dozen new lines could take care of that.”

“**IT’S CLASSY STUFF, WEBSTER. I LOVE ALL THAT JACOBEAN SEX AND VIOLENCE. / IT’S FORD, NOT WEBSTER.**”

With Three Sisters on hold, Annie is considering the role of Annabella in John Ford’s lascivious Jacobean moral classic of judgment and retribution, *Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (first published in 1638). It is a play of violence, intrigue, and incest that remains surprisingly resilient on the modern stage. Annabella has a long, protracted, and very sexual relationship with her brother, Giovanni. When she is eventually forced to marry one of her suitors, Giovanni goes mad with rage and jealousy, leading to the bloody ending so enjoyed by Jacobean audiences. John Webster (1580–1635) also wrote bloody and controversial plays during the Jacobean period, including his masterpieces *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. In a later scene of *The Real Thing*, Annie and Billy joke intimately with each other using lines drawn directly from the first scene between Annabella and her brother in Ford’s play (1.ii.175–211).
“BECAUSE IT’S HALF AS LONG AS DAS KAPITAL AND ONLY TWICE AS FUNNY.”
Karl Marx’s seminal work of economic analysis was his three-volume study of capital based on his critique of such classical political economists as Adam Smith and David Ricardo. Marx focused on questions of labor and the value of labor in his analysis of the origin and sustenance of capital. Marx died before he could finish the second and third volumes of his masterwork, which was edited and published posthumously by Marx’s colleague, Friedrich Engels. The work included a three-volume appendix. The first English edition of Das Kapital (1867), Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, also edited by Engels, was published in 1887.

“THIS ISN’T BETTER BECAUSE SOMEONE SAYS IT’S BETTER, OR BECAUSE THERE’S A CONSPIRACY BY THE MCC TO KEEP CUDGELS OFF THE FIELD.”
Even before the Marylebone Cricket Club (mcc) was founded in 1787 and began playing at Lord’s Field, the game of cricket, like shooting and fox hunting, was considered a manly sport for the elite. Today the mcc is universally recognized as the final arbiter and guardian of both the laws and the spirit of cricket. In fact, the “Code of Laws” established by the club in the late 18th century continues to govern the game of cricket today. Many excellent Web sites explain how cricket bats are made, including the site for bat maker Laver & Wood (www.laverwood.co.nz), but none do so as poetically as this rightly famous passage.

“CUT IT AND SHAPE IT. HENRY OF MAYFAIR.”
Henry suggests that Annie is reducing him to a kind of literary tailor working in the posh Mayfair area of London, home to the old-school English tailors of Savile Row.

“ANNOUNCING EVERY STALE REVELATION OF THE NEWLY ENLIGHTENED LIKE STOUT CORTEZ COMING UPON THE PACIFIC.”
Henry is saying that Brodie reacts to every stale revelation like Keats’s Cortez did on first seeing the Pacific Ocean. What’s old news to everyone else is a shocking revelation to Brodie. Henry’s reference is to John Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.” Of course, it wasn’t Cortez but Balboa whose eagle eyes first sighted the Pacific:

Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet never did I breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold.
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

"IT WAS ALSO SO THAT SHE'D SPEAK ENGLISH. VIRGO SYNTACTA."
Henry substitutes the fanciful "syntacta" (presumably from syntax, the part of grammar that governs the arrangement of the parts of a sentence) for the Latin "intacta" to suggest that he sent his daughter to the best schools not only so that her virginity would remain intact ("virgo intacta"), but that she also would learn to speak properly.

"HOW'RE THE EVERLYS GETTING ON? AND THE SEARCHERS. HOW'S OLD ELVIS?"
The Searchers were the other sixties band from Liverpool. Despite hits like “Needles and Pins” (1964) and “Love Potion Number Nine” (1965) they never reached the heights of some of the other bands of the British Invasion. Being such a purist, it’s not surprising that Henry doesn’t really care for the later Elvis Presley. His last good song, Henry says, was the Blackwell/Presley tune “All Shook Up,” which Presley recorded in 1957. Elvis died in August 1977.

"YOU COULD PUT A 'WHAT' ON THE END OF IT, LIKE BERTIE WOOSTER."
Bertie Wooster was the gentleman lucky enough to have Jeeves as his “gentleman’s man” in the series of humorous stories and novels by English comic novelist p. g. Wodehouse (1881–1975). In novel after novel the wealthy, foppish Bertie Wooster would get into a pickle and his unflappable valet would step in to save the day.

"HAPPY! LIKE A WARM PUPPY."
Charles Schultz’s 1970 Peanuts book, Happiness Is . . . a Warm Puppy, became an overnight cliché, marketing ploy, and butt of satiric and sometimes obscene retorts.
“DID SHE OR DIDN’T SHE. BY HENRY IBSEN. WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO MAKE IT SUCH A CRISIS?”

Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) was the great 19th-century Norwegian author of such contemporary problem plays of debate as A Doll’s House (1879), Ghosts (1881), and Hedda Gabler (1890). The scene we see from Henry’s House of Cards (the opening scene of The Real Thing) does have a strangely Ibsenite quality in retrospect: the accusing husband reveals how small he really is, much like Torvald (played at a.c.t. by Stephen Caffrey, who plays Max in this production of The Real Thing) does in the final act of A Doll’s House, and Charlotte discovers that her husband isn’t anyone she knows, just as Nora (played at a.c.t. by René Augesen, who plays Annie in The Real Thing) discovers that all these years she has been married to a stranger.

“THIS WAS NONE OF YOUR AMO, AMAS, AMAT, THIS WAS A FLASH FROM THE FORBIDDEN PLANET.”

“Amo, amas, amat” (“I love, you love, he she or it loves”) is the first verb conjugation that students of Latin learn. When what is rudimentary is learned by rote, as this conjugation is routinely recited, students soon lose all connection to the meaning of the words, and the mystery of “I love, you love,” disappears.

“CARNAL KNOWLEDGE.”

Henry’s distinction between knowledge “of the flesh” and knowledge “through the flesh” is startling in its depth and precision. The 1971 Mike Nichols film Carnal Knowledge (MGM video), written by Jules Feiffer and starring Jack Nicholson, Ann-Margret, and Candice Bergen, gave a humorous face to this expression.

“THERE; MY BLESSINGS WITH THEE. AND THESE FEW PRECEPTS IN THY MEMORY . . .”

Henry begins Polonius’s famous advice speech to Laertes on his departure to Paris in Shakespeare’s Hamlet (i.iii. 157–58).

“How’s your lover today, Amanda?” “In the pink, Charles. How’s yours?”

Henry is mimicking lines from the world of Noël Coward (though Amanda is from Private Lives and Charles from Blythe Spirit).
“NOTE FOR NOTE. PRACTICALLY A STRAIGHT LIFT FROM PROCUL HARUM.”

Henry is not the first to notice the similarities between Procul Harum’s 1967 progressive rock megahit, “A Whiter Shade of Pale,” and Bach’s “Air on a g-String,” though he may be the first to accuse Bach of plagiarism. With “A Whiter Shade of Pale,” a monster hit from the get-go, the band evolved from a studio band put together for this one recording into a successful if sometimes pretentious live act. Singer/pianist Gary Brooker and lyricist Keith Reid provided the band’s repertory, which mixed electric blues riffs with classical themes. “Whiter Shade of Pale” not only topped the charts in 1967, the famous Summer of Love, but in 2004 was proclaimed the most played record in the United Kingdom, beating Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” in second place.

“I’M . . . —WHAT’S A PETARD? I’VE OFTEN WONDERED. . . . SOMETHING YOU HOIST, IS IT, PIECE OF ROPE?”

Annie begins to say that she is “hoist with her own petard,” paraphrasing Hamlet (iii. iv. 209), only to realize that she, like most people, has no idea what a petard is. Assuming it is something one is hoist with, she suggests it may be a rope. In fact a petard (from the Old French word for “fart”) is a small explosive device used to break through the fortified gates or walls of a castle during a siege. Thus, “the engineer / Hoist with his own petard” is blown into the air by his own explosive device.
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why do you think Tom Stoppard begins *The Real Thing* with a scene from Henry's play *House of Cards*? At what point do you realize that, in the first scene, Max and Charlotte are playing characters in a “fictitious” play within the primary play? How does this affect your perception of the primary play, in terms of “real” events and fictitious ones?

2. What is the significance of the repetition of scenes? What is Stoppard saying by having different characters enact essentially the same scene, each time with a different result? How does Max's scripted reaction to the discovery of his fictitious wife’s affair in *House of Cards* (which are actually Henry's words) compare to his true reaction when he discovers Annie's relationship with Henry? How does Max's reaction compare to Henry's reaction when he finds out about Annie's betrayal with Billy later in the play?

3. How is music used in this production? What does it tell you about the characters and the development of the story? Why is Henry embarrassed about his affinity for popular music? How does *The Real Thing* explore the relationship between pop culture and “serious” art?

4. Do you think *The Real Thing* represents a realistic view of modern marriage and divorce? What position does the play take with regard to infidelity? What is your opinion of infidelity?

5. What do you think is the cause of each character's infidelity? Are they searching for love, romance, excitement, security, or something else with their indiscretions?

6. What is each character's perspective on love? How do they differ?

7. What do the younger characters in the play (Debbie, Billy, Brodie) offer in contrast to the four adults? What point of view does each of them represent?

8. What purpose does the character Brodie serve in the play? How is his influence used to propel the plot? Does Stoppard use Brodie's character as a mouthpiece for a specific political point of view, or to express an opinion about politics in general? Why does Henry agree to rewrite Brodie's television movie?

9. Do any of the characters earn your sympathy? Are any of them above reproach? Who and why?

10. Is it necessary that the play specifically be set in London in 1982, or is it timeless and universal?
11. What does the future hold for Annie and Henry? Will they survive as a couple? If so, why? What makes Annie and Henry able to withstand the trials that their previous marriages could not? How might the end of the play be interpreted differently by the actors to give you a different view of their future?

12. Discuss the relationship between the main play and one or two of the other plays (e.g., *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, *Miss Julie*, *House of Cards*, Brodie's television drama) mentioned or excerpted in *The Real Thing*. What do these plays suggest to the audience about the relationships among the characters?

13. What is “the real thing”? Do any of the relationships portrayed in this play constitute “the real thing”?

14. What are Henry's beliefs about art and society? What are Annie's? With whom do you agree? What do you think is Stoppard's position on art, society, and the role of the media in effecting political change?
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION . . .

ON AND BY TOM STOPPARD . . .

ON LOVE, RELATIONSHIPS, MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, INFIDELITY . . .


**ON WORDS AND LANGUAGE . . .**


**WEB SITES OF INTEREST**


