

# TOM STOPPARD'S METATHEATRE

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**Abstract:** *The study focuses on several plays written by Tom Stoppard, which are excellent examples of the changing roles between reality and fiction or of the play with the levels of reality and literature. The plays discussed are significant in arguing loss or confusion in matters like identity, ethical issues, but also in dismantling theatrical conventions and enhancing Stoppard's metatheatrical approach; for him reality and truth are just a matter of perspective.*

**Keywords:** *commedia dell'arte, metatheatre, parody, theatre of the absurd, Tom Stoppard*

## 1. Introduction. "Andiam. Incominciante!" (Leoncavallo 1892)

The present paper discusses several plays by Tom Stoppard, a dramatist who constantly challenges theatrical conventions and patterns. The selected works (*The Real Inspector Hound*, *The Real Thing*, *Arcadia* or *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*) exemplify the "reality" and "fiction" changing roles or the boundary blur between these two facets or "two sides of the same coin" (Stoppard, in Sales 1988: 22). Moreover, they are significant in arguing loss or confusion of identity, ethical issues, but also in enhancing Stoppard's metatheatrical approach.

The first of the aforementioned plays is mainly connected to one of Agatha Christie's detective stories, *The Mousetrap* (1952), but Stoppard's text "targets" the whole "genre" (Sales 1988: 94) and "twists the tail of the whodunnit to make it absurd" (idem: 95). In 1961-1962, Stoppard begins writing *The Stand-Ins* (or *The Critics*, later revised as *The Real Inspector Hound*), while living in Bristol (Fleming 2001: 13). Thomas Whitaker (1983: 70) notes that: "'The one thing that *The Real Inspector Hound* isn't about...', he said in 'Ambushes for the Audience', 'is theatre critics. I originally conceived a play, exactly the same play, with simply two members of the audience getting involved in the play-within-the-play.'" From the beginning, the play undermines the dichotomy factual/fictional: "The first thing is that the audience appear to be confronted by their own reflection in a huge mirror. Impossible" (Stoppard 1998: 13). Two theatre critics, Moon and Birdboot, are watching the rehearsals of a "thriller", when they become caught up in the play they are reviewing. The play in a one-act farce, and the theatre instances are changed, triggered by "the ringing of a phone that when answered turns out to have a call for no-one among the *dramatis personae*" (Whitaker 1983: 71). This power of art and theatre to switch between roles and stages is typical of the *commedia dell'arte*. In Tom Stoppard's case, little has been argued about a possible association with or influence of the *commedia dell'arte*: in terms of experimenting with "levels of reality", this type of dramatic composition and the way the Italian Verismo stages the idea of reality and fiction are intermingled could be useful in identifying irony and a metatextual character in *The Real Inspector Hound*. Therefore, a line from the *Prologue* of *Pagliacci*, a play-within-a-play by Ruggero

Leoncavallo, could be appropriate to begin this study with: “Andiam. Incominciate! ‘On with the show! Begin!” (Leoncavallo, *Prologo/ Prologue*, 1892).

In Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci*, the “levels of reality” or fiction can be fairly easily separated and identified. Both the libretto and the performances are relevant, but watching certain versions (1961, Tokyo, with Mario del Monaco and Gabriella Tucci – probably the best; 1907, with Enrico Caruso, but without a video; Pavarotti’s acting can also be considered good enough) introduces the viewer to the elaborated, twofold artistic act. Leoncavallo composed two different types of music for the two levels: the *commedia dell’arte* (with Pagliaccio/Pierrot, Colombina, Taddeo, the servant, and Arlecchino, the lover) and the “real life” of the village (with Canio, Nedda, Tonio and Beppe and also some audience). Both are based on romantic entanglements and the entire play is set as a response to Pietro Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana* (Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti and Guido Menasci’s libretto). Consequently, the first act mirrors the *cavalleria rusticana*, placed in a Sicilian village of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the second one presents the *commedia dell’arte* (a form of popular theatre), while the ending brings a juxtaposition of both planes.

In the play-within-the-play, the *commedia dell’arte*, Colombina is married to Pagliaccio, but has an affair with Arlecchino. In the mock *cavalleria rusticana*, Nedda (the actress playing Colombina) cheats on Canio, her husband, (the actor playing Pagliaccio/Pierrot), having an affair with Silvio, not with Beppe (the actor playing Arlecchino). However, “the villagers” think that they are still in *commedia dell’arte*: they remark Pagliaccio’s (and Canio’s) jealousy, but do not prevent the tenor from murdering Nedda/Colombina and Beppe/Arlecchino, because they are not sure whether the crime and the lines are just in *commedia dell’arte*, or also in their life. The real audience – the spectators – has some signs – the music, also the actors’ attitude. But in Tom Stoppard’s play, *The Real Inspector Hound*, the blending of “reality” and fiction is more complex: “the levels of reality [are] piled so insanely on top of one another” (Esposito 2014: 38).

## 2. “Un tal gioco, credetemi, È meglio non giocarlo.”// ‘It’s better not to play/ such games, believe me.’ (Leoncavallo 1892)

The two critics from *The Real Inspector Hound* are not completely involved in reviewing, they also have other thoughts in mind. On the one hand, there is Moon, who keeps the seat “warm” for Higgs, the first-string critic, and has an inferiority complex:

It is as if we only existed one at a time, combining to achieve continuity. I keep space warm for Higgs. My presence defines his absence, his absence confirms my presence, his presence precludes mine. [...] When Higgs and I walk down this aisle together to claim our common seat, the oceans will fall into the sky and the trees will hang with fishes. (Stoppard 1998: 14)

This “game” makes him obsessed with Higgs’ death: “Sometimes I dream that I’ve killed him.” (Stoppard 1998: 35)

On the other hand, there is Birdboot, who is already married to Myrtle, but dates Felicity, one of the women involved in the play on stage, and is also interested in Lady Cynthia Muldoon (“She’s beautiful—a vision of eternal grace, a

poem...”, idem: 29). If Moon over-evaluates the play, gives it too many attributes and has high expectations, Birdboot is more interested in mundane subjects, like the relationships between characters, gossip, honour. He almost identifies himself with the character Simon and has remorse about his own feelings. The two can build the different sides of same coin: “If Birdboot targets popular audience, Moon aims at intellectual, elitist readers” (Jenkins 1989: 52). In spite of the fact that Stoppard stated that the play was not about reviewers, critics managed to put Birdboot and Moon in the context of the British public:

Moon belongs to the pseudo-intellectual school of theatre reviewers. He affects to be a man of letters rather than a man of the theatre. He searches for hidden symbolic or psychological meanings and also likes to show off his literary credentials. [...] Birdboot, on the other hand, is a man of the theatre who affects to know instinctively and intuitively the kind of rattling good show that the great British public really wants. (Sales 1988: 97)

As a consequence, Moon is the one who is more concerned about identity and tries to separate reality from fiction, even if he uses clichés:

MOON: Does it, I repeat, declare its affiliations? There are moments, and I would not begrudge it this, when the play, if we can call it that, and I think on balance we can, aligns itself uncompromisingly on the side of life. *Je suis*, it seems to be saying, *ergo sum*. But is that enough? I think we are entitled to ask. For what in fact is this play concerned with? It is my belief that here we are concerned with what I have referred to elsewhere as the nature of identity. I think we are entitled to ask – and here one is irresistibly reminded of Voltaire’s cry, “*Voilà!*” – I think we are entitled to ask – *Where is God?* (Stoppard 1998: 37)

Birdboot wants to figure out the plot of the “whodunnit”, he actually tries to follow a detective plot, because radio police messages permanently interrupt the actors, announcing that a madman is on the run in Essex. The cast’s debate about the madman interferes with the ordinary dialogue:

FELICITY: I hear there’s a dangerous madman on the loose.  
CYNTHIA: Simon?  
SIMON: Yes—yes—sorry. (Plays) (Stoppard 1998: 33)

There is a permanent presence of fear and death, a recurrent aspect in detective stories. First, there is a corpse on the stage, but nobody seems to see the body. Moreover, Cynthia threatens to kill Simon if she found out he “falsely” seduced her from her husband Albert or if he was unfaithful to Felicity (“If I find that you have been untrue to me – if I find that you have falsely seduced me from my dear husband Albert – I will kill you, Simon Gascoyne!”, Stoppard 1998: 34). Also, Felicity makes a remark that brings about mistrust among the characters: “FELICITY: Yes, there’s something foreboding in the air, it is as if one of *us*” (idem: 39). In the play, inspector Hound arrives at the mansion and asks about the “thing” (idem: 41), thinking that one of the characters is the real William Herbert McCoy, against whom the escaped madman seeks revenge. Finally, Hound finds and reveals the corpse. Felicity thinks the strange man is Simon Gascoyne, while Hound thinks the dead man is Cynthia’s husband, Albert, but the woman denies. Everybody searches for the killer and leaves the room, while Simon enters the

room, notices the corpse and is shot dead. As stated before, Birdboot tries to solve the mystery:

BIRDBOOT: Well, it seems open and shut to me, Moon – Magnus is not what he pretends to be and he's got his next victim marked down. (Stoppard 1998: 37)

The phone rings on the stage, and Moon has no patience anymore and answers it. The call is “for no-one among the *dramatis personae*” (Whitaker 1983: 71): it's Myrtle, Birdboot's wife, who wants to talk to her husband, because she found out about the dinner he had had with Felicity. This is the moment when the two levels of fiction interpose and Birdboot gets caught in the play within the play, he “gets entrapped in the performance as the actors re-enter the stage and start to interact with him” (Esposito 2014: 32). Felicity takes Birdboot for Simon and the critic cannot fight against her. The whole scene is nonsense for Moon:

MOON: What do you think you're doing? You're turning it into a complete farce! (Stoppard 1998: 57)

The first act is now replayed with few changes (like Canio says in the second act of *Pagliacci*: “Recitar! / Perform the play!”). At the end, Birdboot thinks he figured out the “whodunnit” and tries to tell Moon about the corpse, but he is shot, exactly like Simon was in the first part. Moon enters the play as Inspector Hound, and “SIMON and HOUND are occupying the critics' seats.” (idem: 59). The characters and the audience change places, breaking “the fourth wall”. As a result, “*The Real Inspector Hound* becomes a hyper-theatrical chamber of mirrors in which the reflections of alarmingly overlapping and indistinguishable planes of reality and fiction intersect” (Esposito 2014: 40).

### 3. “Il teatro e la vita non son la stessa cosa”// ‘The stage is one thing and life itself another’ (Leoncavallo 1892)

Moon has trouble in seeing what Leoncavallo's Canio says: “Il teatro e la vita non son la stessa cosa/ the stage is one thing and life itself another” (Leoncavallo, online). Moon is accused of murder and cannot completely deny: “MOON: But I didn't kill – I'm almost sure I” (Stoppard 1998: 62). Yet, nothing in this play has to be taken too seriously or for granted, as Magnus kills Moon and reveals that he is *both* Puckeridge, the real Inspector Hound, and Cynthia's husband, Albert: “Moon dies recognising Puckeridge playing Albert playing the *real* Inspector playing Magnus Muldoon” (Sammels 1988: 59). This is where Stoppard parodies the plot of *The Mousetrap* by Agatha Christie, where a policeman turns out to be the murderer. Stoppard's play can be seen as a mousetrap organized by Puckeridge: “This scheming killer has written a playlet, rented a theatre, ordered scenery, hired a cast, rehearsed it and, to complete the illusion of a play in progress, he has assembled an audience” (Durham 1988: 91). The “third-string critic Puckeridge has thus succeeded in eliminating both obstacles to his career: first-string Higgs and second-string Moon” (Esposito 2014: 32).

The blend between uncertainty and circular patterns is frequent in Stoppard's plays. For instance, Valentine from *Arcadia* explains how “nature creates itself”: “The unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is” (Stoppard 1993: 47). Moreover, a similar scheme is used in *Rosencrantz*

and *Guildestern are Dead*, where Shakespeare's two peripheral characters are again "two sides of the same coin" (Stoppard 1988: 22): "Rosencrantz is practical, prosaic and rather stupid, whereas Guildenstern is more emotional, poetic and intelligent" (Sales 1988: 15). Theatrical mechanics are disclosed from the beginning: "We transport you into a world of intrigue and illusion...[...] It costs little to watch, and little more if you happen to get caught up in the action" (Stoppard 1988: 22). Even though this play was debated in terms of affinities with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, an association with *The Real Inspector Hound* cannot be denied. Together with *The Real Thing* (where the ethical issue of adultery is depicted in a detailed manner), these works construct a hall of mirrors that reflect different angles, different perspectives about reality and imaginary, as their intersections are meant to question literary practices.

**4. Conclusion: "Till events have played themselves out. There's a logic at work... it's all done for you, don't worry. Enjoy it. Relax."** (Stoppard 1988: 50)

Closely situated to the theatre of absurd, Stoppard "demonstrates the unreality of *all* acting, and invites the audience to consider whether, in terms of another focus beyond their perception, they too are no more than actors in a play" and to beg "the inevitable, logical question: whose illusion is this?" (Brassel 1985: 96). Unlike the final line from Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, "La commedia è finita!", Stoppard's plays cannot end, because they show how fiction can seduce reality, but also the dangers of belief and of the power of words or discourse, that are central in both fiction and reality. "Stoppard creates a self-referential work" (Delaney 1990: 113) which articulates nonlinear structures of performance and show "the limitations of all theatrical innovation" (Turner 2007: 115).

## References

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