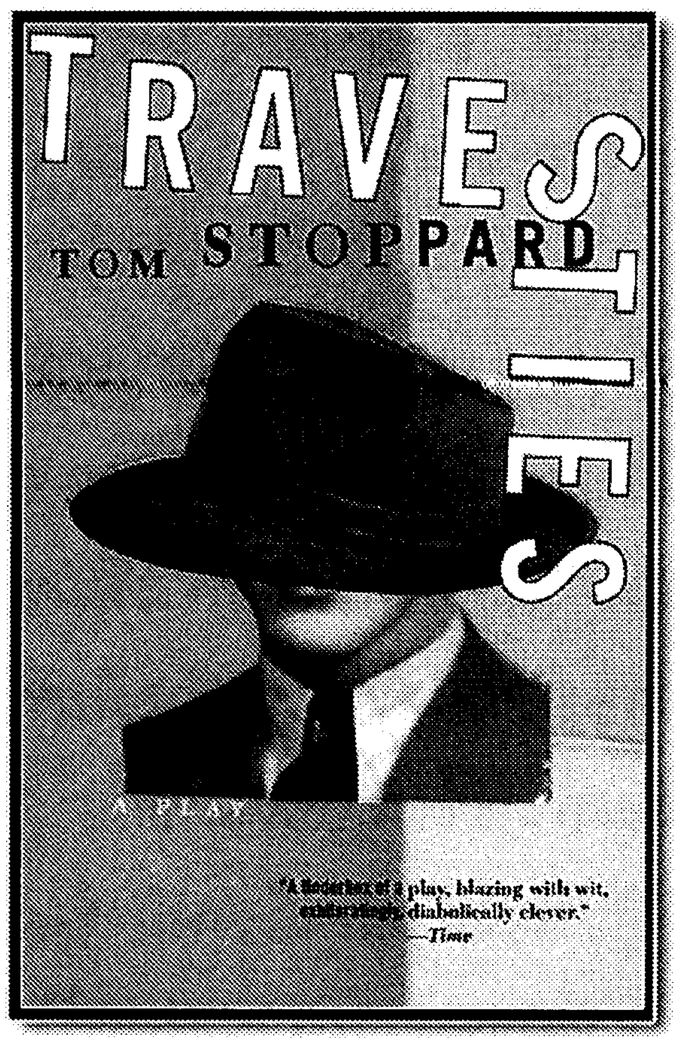
บทวิจารณ์หนังสือ

Book Review



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Stoppard, T. (1991). ***Travesties.*** New York: Grove Weidenfeld, pp99. $ 13

Many of Tom Stoppard's works are brain-teasers, full of speculations on what could have or might have happened. For example, his first full-length play *(Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead 1966)* asks what would *Hamlet* be like if it were told from the point of view of two courtiers; one of his more recent works (*The Invention of Love* 1997) imagines eminent Victorians Benjamin Jowett, John Ruskin and Walter Pater debating which era (ancient Greece, the Middle Ages, Renaissance Florence) should be most prized, while the scholar/poet A.E. Housman offers advice to his younger self. Stoppard's name is probably most familiar as the screenwriter of the 1998 Academy award winner, *Shakespeare in Love,* in which he fictionally ponders what might have been the process by which Shakespeare composed *Romeo and Juliet* and his inspiration for *The Tempest. Travesties* is one of these "what if" plays. If James Joyce, a giant of modern literature, had met a Dadaist founder, how would

he have defended art's for art's sake to him? What would happen if Lenin, James Joyce and Tristan Tzara gathered in the same room? Tom Stoppard holds universal appeal to his readers in this play because at one time or another everybody must have wondered what people who had never met in real life would have said to each other: what kind of comments would William Shakespeare have bestowed upon Samuel Beckett for *Waiting for Godot*? Would Shakespeare be able to understand an absurd play?

In *Travesties* Stoppard upholds his reputation as one of the most intellectual of playwrights, a reputation which deters some readers from reading or attending his works. He does however use his knowledge and wit in the service of comedy, which can be enjoyed on different levels and often appreciated without recognizing all the puns and allusions. Stoppard's selection of Oscar Wilde's *The Important of Being Earnest* as the frame of *Travesties* is used as the basis for humor which can be enjoyed by all admirers of this famous comedy (and even by those who are unfamiliar with Wilde's work), but -- as is often true for Stoppard -- one element serves double or triple purposes. For readers with more literary background, Wilde is famous not only as the author of plays featuring witty dialogue and farcical plot development but as the leading spokesman for the "aesthetic" movement, the champion of the doctrine "art for art's sake." Questions about what art is, what it is for, who it benefits, are at the heart of *Travesties*.

Travesties is narrated through the reminiscence of Henry Carr, an English consular official who lived in Zurich, a neutral city, during the First World War. Carr's point of view represents the English bourgeois's view on art, a view which has not changed much since

Alexander Pope defined art (especially poetry) as "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed"[1]: art is when particularly talented people put a particular shine on ordinary thoughts which ordinary people can comprehend and enjoy. Carr's appreciative but basically conventional views of art and artists is shown colliding with radical 20th-century perspectives, a collision Stoppard engineers by *combining* historical facts with fiction. The historical figures James Joyce, who revolutionized the world of modern fiction by publishing *Ulysses,* Tristan Tzara, the founder of the anti-art "Dadaist" movement, and V. I. Lenin, who established the first communist state, did in fact all live in Zurich during the Great War, at the time the historical Henry Carr was British counsel there, and Carr actually did encounter Joyce: he played the role of Algernon in a Zurich production of *The Important of Being Earnest* for which Joyce was the business manager. (The production ended in a fiasco: Carr sued Joyce for the reimbursement of the cost of trousers he wore during the performance, and in return Joyce sued Carr for slander and the price of the five tickets that Carr had sold. Joyce took literary revenge on Carr by making him a foolish minor character in *Ulysses*.)

Though there is no record that Carr ever met Lenin or Tzara, (or that Lenin or Tzara met Joyce), and they might not even have been in Switzerland at exactly the same period of time, Stoppard uses poetic license to gather them together to debate the nature and the function of art, the heart of the matter of the play. In a more fantastic use of that license, Stoppard brings the purely fictional female characters from *The Important of Being Earnest,* Gwendolen and Cecily, on stage to interact with the historic figures, and to provide the love interest and mistaken identity motif which makes up what little plot the drama

contains. As the farcical plot mechanism (and the title of the play) indicates, all the revolutionary characters are travestied: Joyce delivers his speech in limerick form and always wears mismatched suits; Tzara behaves like a comically petulant child; even the formidable Lenin describes a plot to disguise himself as a Swedish deaf mute in order to avoid detection. Stoppard attempts to push the envelope of triviality further by opening *Travesties* with cacophony that will catch the audience off guard:

Tzara: Eel ate enormous appletzara
Key dairy chef's hat he'lllearn comparah!

Then

Joyce: Hoopsa,boyaboy,hoopsa!
Gwen: Hoopsa,boyaboy,hoopsa!
Joyce: Hoopsa,boyaboy,hoopsa!...

Then

Lenin: Shto takoya?
Nadya: Bronski prishol. On s'kazal shto v'Peterburge....(18).

Tzara's seemingly nonsensical speech turns out to be a limerick which makes a fair amount of sense: in French.[2] Joyce's unintelligible nonsense incantation is in fact excerpted from the opening page of "The Oxen of the Sun" chapter from *Ulysses*. The conversation between Lenin and his wife in Russian of course does have significance, if we understand Russian. The opening of the play threatens to become a two edged sword: it may discourage the readers into thinking that they can never understand Stoppard or it may arouse the interest of those who are looking for a solution to the initial puzzle, or more broadly for anything innovative. The prologue also stands as a kind of shorthand summary of the play's themes and workings: how apparent nonsense may hold sense and significance once we put it into proper context, and particularly how art and invention may contain some raison d'être underneath its frivolity.

The allusion to "The Oxen and the Sun" provides the central motif in the composition of *Travesties*. In this chapter of *Ulysses* the action takes place in National Maternity Hospital in Dublin where Mrs. Purefoy has just passed her third full day in labor. The birth of the child may be regarded symbolically as the birth of the work. More significantly, Joyce's chapter is composed in an anthology of various styles of English literature from the old English of Beowulf through Dickens and Gothic literature of the nineteenth century. Almost certainly, one of Stoppard's intentions in himself composing *Travesties* out of a compilation or pastiche of various styles and genres -- bits and pieces from Shakespeare's plays[3] and sonnets, from *The Important of Being Earnest*, from Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, limericks and music-hall songs and even Lenin's lectures and memoirs -- is to pay tribute to Joyce.

The pastiche motif also acts in a subtle way to to play off and perhaps undermine Dadaist ideas (in which art is as meaningless and random as the rest of life) and replace them with the image of the artist as a magician. Tzara cuts up Shakespeare's Sonnet Number Eighteen ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day..."), putting pieces of paper in a hat, scrambling them and then rearranging the sonnet to demonstrate Dada in action. As a result, Tzara's new compilation does not make sense; symbolically it represents chaos. But the reader still remembers the Shakespearian sonnet as it is; Shakespeare has already immortalized it beyond the power of Tzara's slight-of-hand to eliminate it completely. By contrast, the Shakespearian and Wildean pastiches that Stoppard rearranges become integral parts of the play. Stoppard demonstrates to his audience that unlike a Dadaist who creates new art by dismembering traditional art, an artist can

render order and art out of chaos[4]: Joyce composes *Ulysses* out of pieces of notes and quotations that he gathers in his pockets, and Stoppard likewise uses intertextuality and pastiches from different works to compose *Travesties*. Once the allusions are recognized they immortalize the works that the allusions are drawn from. The artist's ability to create and transform is reinforced by the image of Joyce as a magician, conjuring a paper carnation out of the pieces of sonnet cut up by Tzara.

Even though *Travesties* contains discussions of the function and role of the artist, the discussion are never carried through to any definitive conclusion. Stoppard tries to avoid being as didactic as Lenin is when he delivers his lecture in act II. Stoppard gives the name "time slips" to a technique he invented for *Travesties* to keep the play of opposing ideas going. The way "time slips" works is that when his characters reach a point in their debates where the heat of argument overwhelms any further productive discussion, they simply stop and return to some earlier place in the dialogue. Supposedly, this represents the process of Henry Carr becoming confused and dissatisfied with the way he has "remembered" these discussions, and going back to try improving it. As a result, Stoppard can deliver more than three points of view on art because sometimes when the discussions restart the characters assume different points of view. Interestingly, Lenin does not join in any discussions; instead his portrayal is delivered through Cecily's lecture at the beginning of act two. Stoppard may design this to have the form reflect the content. Since the lecture is delivered formally, Lenin represents formality and inflexibility; there is no point to "dialogue" about art, from the Leninist perspective, since the Party already

possesses objectively determined truth. Arts in Russia have to conform to the party policies.

> Lenin: Today, literature must become party literature. Down with non-partisan literature! Down with literary supermen! Literature must become a part of the common cause of the proletariat, a cog in the social machine(85).

Stoppard goes further to undermine Lenin's uncompromising character by revealing the effect of art on him. Lenin is not immune to the power of art; he would like to see *The Lower Depths* and he likes Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. He is moved by Beethoven's Appassionata.

> Lenin:...Amazing, superhuman music. It always makes me feel, perhaps naively, it makes me feel proud of the miracles that human being can perform. But I can't listen to music often. It affects my nerves, makes me want to say nice stupid things and pat the heads of those people who while living in vile hell can create such beauty. Nowadays, we can't pat heads or we will get our hands bitten off (89).

Implicitly, both Tzara and Lenin suffer from a kind of inferiority complex towards art. Of the three historical greats in the play Joyce is the (real-life) figure most admired by (the real-life) Stoppard, and so we might expect the fictionalized Joyce's position to be the privileged viewpoint in *Travesties*. However, Stoppard does not appoint Joyce as his official spokesperson or have any character win the discussion decisively; he intends for his readers to discover any partiality on their own. He sets the discussions or repartees of the first act to contrast the freedom of the artist in Switzerland with that in Russia. The readers have to be alert both to the content and the form of the play to get the full benefit of a Stoppard play. *Travesties* is like dazzling fireworks that explode into different directions at the same time. The play can be enjoyed through the

witty repartee without some of the literary allusions. But knowing them makes the readers appreciate Stoppard's genius and ingenuity much more. *Travesties* can be regarded as a compilation of comments on arts, such as :

> Tzara: Nowadays, an artist is someone who makes art mean the thing he does. A man may be an artist by exhibiting his hindquarters... In fact some of my best poems have been drawn out of my hat...(38).
> Tzara: When the strongest began to fight for the tribe, the fastest to hunt, it was the artist who became the priest-guardian of the magic that conjured the intelligence out of the appetites. Without him, man would be a coffee mill (47).
> Carr: The easiest way of knowing whether good has triumphed over evil is to examine the freedom of the artist (39).
> Joyce: What now of the Trojan War[5] if it had been passed over by the artist's touch? Dust...A minor redistribution of broken pots. But it is we who stand enriched, by a tales of heroes, of a golden apple, a wooden horse, a face that launched a thousand ships[6] - and above all , of Ulysses,...And yet I with my Dublin Odyssey[7] will double that immortality,...(62).

The readers have to decide whether they would like to be on the side of coffee mills or Homer.

Note

[1] From Pope's *Essay on Criticism*

[2] For example the first line can be transcribed in French as "Il est un homme, s'appelle Tzara" (There is a man called Tzara).

[3] Including *Hamlet, Othello, Much Ado about Nothing* and *As You Like It.*

[4] The cacophony of the opening can be considered chaos that is made understandable.

[5] Homer's *Iliad.*

[6] Description of Helen of Troy from Christopher Marlow's *Dr. Faustus*: "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships, / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium? / Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss! / Her lips suck forth my soul: see, where it flies!". In addition, Homer has inspired other famous poets such as Virgil, Milton and Tennyson.

[7] James Joyce's *Ulysses.*