



THE REAL THING

BY TOM STOPPARD

TEACHERS' RESOURCE PACK
RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN BY
MITCHELL MORENO

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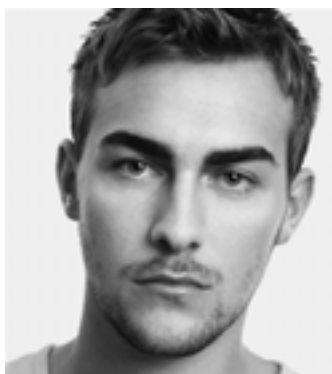
THE REAL THING AT THE OLD VIC

Director
Designer
Lighting

Anna Mackmin
Lez Brotherston
Hugh Vanstone

Sound
Casting

Simon Baker for
Autograph
Toby Whale



Tom Austen
Billy



Louise Calf
Debbie



Barnaby Kay
Max



Hattie Morahan
Annie



Toby Stephens
Henry



Fenella Woolgar
Charlotte



Jordan Young
Brodie



Jamie Partridge
Understudy: Brodie/Billy



Cassie Raine
Understudy: Charlotte/Annie



Gemma Soul
Understudy: Debbie



Simon Yadoo
Understudy: Henry/Max

CHRONOLOGY TOM STOPPARD, HIS LIFE & WORKS

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| <p>1937 – Born Tomáš Straussler in Zlin, Czechoslovakia.</p> <p>1939 – On the day the Nazis invade Czechoslovakia, the family leaves Zlin for Singapore.</p> <p>1942 – Four year old Tomas and his mother and brother are evacuated to India. His father remains behind and later dies in Japanese captivity.</p> <p>1945 – His mother Martha marries Army Major Kenneth Stoppard.</p> <p>1946 – The family moves to England. Kenneth Stoppard adopts Tom and his brother.</p> <p>1946-51 – Attends Dolphin School in Nottinghamshire.</p> <p>1951-54 – Attends Pocklington School in East Riding, Yorkshire.</p> <p>1954-58 – Works as a journalist at the Western Daily Press in Bristol.</p> <p>1955 – The British premiere of Samuel Beckett's <i>Waiting for Godot</i> at the Art's Theatre, London.</p> <p>1958-60 – Works at the Bristol Evening World as a features writer and drama critic.</p> <p>1960 – Writes his first play, <i>A Walk on the Water</i>.</p> <p>1960-66 – Writes <i>The Gamblers</i> and <i>The Stand-Ins</i>.</p> <p>1962-63 – Works as a drama critic at Scene magazine in London.</p> <p>1963 – <i>A Walk on the Water</i> performed on commercial TV.</p> <p>1964 – <i>The Dissolution of Dominic Boot</i> and <i>'M' is for Moon Among Other Things</i> broadcast on BBC radio.</p> <p>– <i>A Walk on the Water</i> staged in Hamburg, Germany</p> <p>1965 – Marries Josie Ingle. They go on to have two sons.</p> <p>– <i>The Gamblers</i> staged at Bristol University.</p> <p>1966 – <i>If You're Glad I'll Be Frank</i> broadcast on BBC radio. Translates Slawomir Mrozek's <i>Tango</i> for the RSC.</p> <p>– <i>A Separate Peace</i> performed on TV.</p> <p>– <i>Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead</i> staged at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival to critical acclaim.</p> | <p>1967 – <i>Teeth</i> performed on TV.</p> <p>– <i>Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead</i> staged at the National Theatre, transferring to Broadway. <i>Another Moon Called Earth</i> performed on TV.</p> <p>1968 – <i>Enter a Free Man</i>, a reworking of <i>A Walk on the Water</i>, staged in the West End.</p> <p>– <i>The Real Inspector Hound</i> staged in the West End.</p> <p>1969 – <i>Albert's Bridge</i> and <i>If You're Glad I'll Be Frank</i> staged at the Edinburgh Festival.</p> <p>– Stoppard and Josie separate.</p> <p>1970 – <i>Where are they Now?</i> on radio. <i>After Magritte</i> staged.</p> <p>1971 – <i>Dogg's Our Pet</i> staged.</p> <p>1972 – Stoppard and Josie divorce. Stoppard granted custody of their two sons.</p> <p>– <i>Jumpers</i> staged at the National Theatre.</p> <p>– Stoppard marries Dr Miriam Moore-Robinson. They go on to have two sons.</p> <p>– <i>Artist Descending a Staircase</i> on radio.</p> <p>1974 – <i>Travesties</i> staged by the RSC.</p> <p>1976 – <i>Dirty Linen</i> and <i>New-Found-Land</i> staged as a pair at the Almost Free Theatre, transferring to the West End.</p> <p>1977 – <i>Every Good Boy Deserves Favour</i>, with music by André Previn, staged at the Royal Festival Hall.</p> <p>– <i>Professional Foul</i> performed on TV.</p> <p>1978 – <i>Night & Day</i> staged in the West End.</p> <p>– <i>Undiscovered Country</i>, an adaptation of Schnitzler's <i>Das Weite Land</i>, staged at the National Theatre.</p> <p>1981 – <i>On the Razzle</i>, an adaptation of Johann Nestroy's <i>Einen Jux will er sich machen</i>, staged at the National Theatre.</p> <p>1982 – <i>The Real Thing</i> staged in the West End</p> <p>– <i>The Dog It was that Died</i> on radio.</p> | <p>1984 – <i>The Real Thing</i> staged on Broadway, winning five Tony awards.</p> <p>– <i>Squaring the Circle</i> performed on TV.</p> <p>1985 – His screenplay of <i>Brazil</i>, co-written with Terry Gilliam, receives an Oscar nomination.</p> <p>1987 – Writes screenplay for <i>Empire of the Sun</i>.</p> <p>1988 – <i>Hapgood</i>, starring Felicity Kendall, staged in the West End.</p> <p>1990 – Stoppard and Felicity Kendall are linked romantically.</p> <p>1991 – Film version of <i>Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead</i>, written and directed by Stoppard.</p> <p>1992 – Stoppard and his wife Miriam divorce.</p> <p>– With Marc Norman writes screenplay for <i>Shakespeare in Love</i>.</p> <p>1993 – <i>Arcadia</i> staged at the National Theatre.</p> <p>1995 – <i>Indian Ink</i> staged at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre Guildford, transferring to the West End.</p> <p>1997 – <i>The Invention of Love</i> staged at the National Theatre, transferring to the West End.</p> <p>– Stoppard is knighted at Buckingham Palace.</p> <p>1999 – Donmar Warehouse revival of <i>The Real Thing</i>, transferring to the West end and Broadway.</p> <p>2002 – <i>The Coast of Utopia</i>, a nine-hour trilogy, staged at the National Theatre.</p> <p>2004 – <i>Henry IV</i>, an adaptation of Luigi Pirandello's <i>Enrico IV</i>, staged at the Donmar Warehouse.</p> <p>2006 – <i>Rock 'n' Roll</i> staged at the Royal Court, and transfers to the West End and Broadway.</p> <p>2007 – <i>On Dover Beach</i> on radio.</p> |
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THE REAL THING SYNOPSIS

Scene 1

Charlotte returns home from a business trip to Geneva. While she was away, her husband Max had searched through her things and discovered that she had left her passport behind, suggesting that she couldn't have gone abroad and was therefore lying to cover up an affair. Charlotte refuses to answer Max's questions about who her lover is. She takes her suitcase and leaves.

Scene 2

Charlotte and Henry are at home on a Sunday morning. Henry sifts through his record collection trying to select his favourites for a forthcoming appearance on *Desert Island Discs*. Max arrives at the house. We slowly realise that he and Charlotte are both actors currently appearing in a play, *House of Cards*, written by Henry, and that the previous scene was a section from that play. Charlotte criticises the witty artificiality of Henry's writing and his representation of women.

Max's wife Annie (who is also an actor) arrives from a committee meeting about freeing Brodie, a political prisoner who was arrested during an anti-missile demonstration. When Annie and Henry are left alone in the living room, we discover they are having an affair. They are interrupted by Max coming in from the kitchen with a cut finger. Henry gives him his handkerchief for the wound.

Before the visitors leave, Annie arranges a secret rendezvous with Henry that afternoon.

Scene 3

Annie arrives home as Max is listening to Henry on *Desert Island Discs*. Max confronts her with Henry's handkerchief, now stained not only with blood but also with semen, which he has found in their car.

Max breaks down as Annie confesses that she and Henry are in love.

Scene 4

Henry and Annie have left their spouses and set up home together. Henry is working on a play as a gift for Annie, but is finding it impossible to write about love. Annie accuses Henry of not caring enough to be jealous of other men, but Henry affirms his love for her. He leaves to go and collect his daughter Debbie, and Annie begins to methodically search through his things.

Scene 5

Two years have passed. With the encouragement of Annie, Brodie – still in prison – has written a TV play. Henry thinks the play is terrible but Annie wants to get it produced and to perform in it. Henry and Annie argue about the nature and value of good writing, and she tries to persuade him to rewrite Brodie's play.

Scene 6

Annie and Billy (another actor) are travelling by train to Glasgow to continue rehearsals for *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, in which they are to play incestuous siblings. Annie had given Billy the play by Brodie to read, thinking that Billy might be interested in playing the part of Brodie. Billy flirts with Annie, and they end up acting out part of a sexually charged scene from *'Tis Pity*.



Scene 7

Henry and Charlotte are saying goodbye to their daughter Debbie, now 17, who is leaving home. Debbie and her father discuss sex, love and fidelity, before her boyfriend arrives. Henry and Charlotte talk about jealousy and commitment, and Charlotte confesses that while they were together she had affairs with nine men.

Scene 8

Annie and Billy are rehearsing a seduction scene from *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. As the characters kiss, Annie goes off-script and speaks Billy's name.

Scene 9

Annie returns home after finishing the run of *'Tis Pity* in Glasgow. Suspecting that she is having an affair with Billy, and having phoned her hotel to find out when she checked out, Henry quizzes Annie about which train she took back. Annie explains that she has spent the morning with Billy at a café, but denies having had sex with him on the sleeper down. Annie tells Henry that she loves him, but at the same time says that she intends to see Billy again.

Scene 10

Billy and Annie are on a train. They act out a scene from Brodie's play, but the dialogue is different from the original version. Billy fluffs his lines, and we see that they are in a TV studio, filming Brodie's play.

Scene 11

As Annie gets ready to go to the last day of the shoot for Brodie's play, Billy telephones the house. This prompts Annie to explain why she continues to see him, and Henry to explain what the betrayal is doing to him.

Scene 12

At Henry and Annie's house, Brodie finishes watching a video of his TV play. He prefers his original version before Henry's rewrite, and claims that anyhow his early release had nothing to do with the play but was due to a prison funding crisis. Provoked by his rudeness and ingratitude, Annie throws a bowl of dip into Brodie's face, who leaves.

Max telephones with news that he is remarrying. Annie and Henry seem to renew their commitment to each other. Henry turns on the radio, which plays "I'm a Believer".



THE REAL THING CHARACTERS

Henry

Aged 40-ish, Stoppard describes him as “amiable but can take care of himself”. He is a playwright, considered to be the author of “intellectual” plays, and is established and successful as shown by his appearance on *Desert Island Discs*. As well as writing for art’s sake, he also takes on jobs purely to earn money, for example writing the sci-fi script *Kronk and Zadok*.

Passionate about words, he cannot bear bad writing, unfocused political rant, or people making grammatical mistakes when speaking. Despite being a snob with language, he is a fan of pop music, particularly of the 1960s.

At the beginning of the play he is married to Charlotte; they have a teenage daughter, Debbie. When his affair with Annie is discovered he leaves his wife and daughter and sets up home with Annie, whom he goes on to marry. His experience of Annie’s infidelity brings about profound crisis and change in his life and in his attitude towards love.



Annie

Aged 30-ish. At the beginning of the play she is married to Max, whom she leaves for Henry. She is an actress who once starred in a popular children’s TV series, *Rosie of the Royal Infirmary*. During the course of the play, she also takes jobs as Miss Julie in the August Strindberg play of the same name, and as Annabella in *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* by John Ford in Glasgow. While in Glasgow she begins an affair with a fellow actor in the production, Billy, though it is not clear whether their relationship is sexual.

Before the action of the play starts, Annie has met a young soldier, Brodie, who goes with her to an anti-missile demonstration. Brodie is arrested trying to impress her, and she takes on the cause of getting him released from prison. This is born out of a sense of guilt for leading him into trouble rather than out of genuine political conviction.

She is a fan of classical music and tries to educate Henry into appreciating it. Stoppard describes her as “very much like the woman whom Charlotte has ceased to be”.

Max

Aged 40-ish. He is an actor, appearing as the male lead in Henry’s play *House of Cards* in the West End. Stoppard describes him as “nice, seldom assertive, conciliatory”. Max also comes across as not particularly bright and lacking a sense of humour.

He is married to Annie; they do not have any children. They live in London but have a country cottage in Norfolk. When Annie has an affair and leaves Max, he is devastated, and tries to punish her by confronting her with his pain. By the end of the play Max has met a new woman – this time not an actress – whom he plans to marry.

Charlotte

Aged 35-ish. She is an actress, appearing as the female lead in *House of Cards*. Stoppard says that in this role she “doesn’t have to be especially attractive, but you instantly want her for a friend”. Off stage, however, he describes her as “less amiable [than Henry] and can take even better care of herself”.

Initially married to Henry, Charlotte’s sharp and cutting wit proves more than a match for his. She blames Henry for their marriage not working out, accusing him of neglecting the relationship beyond the initial commitment of fidelity. She was serially unfaithful to Henry when they were married, and goes on to cheat on her new architect lover. She still desires Henry after they have split up.

Billy

Aged about 22. Billy is an attractive young actor who plays Giovanni in *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*. He flirts with Annie despite claiming to be scared of her, and offers to do Brodie’s TV play, even though he thinks the writing is bad, as a way to please and be near her.

Debbie

Aged 17 when we meet her as she is about to go off with her boyfriend, who works in a fairground. When her parents split up she would have been about 15, at which time she was a punk who was also into horse riding. She went to a private school.

Debbie has inherited her parent’s quick wit and facility with language, but Henry accuses her of sophistry – her words sound intelligent and convincing, but the ideas behind them lack credibility.

Brodie

Aged 25 when we meet him at the end of the play. Four years previously he was a soldier stationed in Norfolk. He met Annie on a train to London after going absent without leave, and recognised her from TV. Brodie tagged along with Annie to an anti-missile demonstration and, trying to impress her, set fire to the Cenotaph wreath before beating up two policemen during his arrest.

While in prison he is encouraged by Annie to write a play as a means of raising the profile of his case. On his release, he visits Annie and Henry at their home, where he comes across as naïve, arrogant and ungrateful.



THE REAL THING MAJOR THEMES & INTERESTS

Love and fidelity

The Real Thing is a play about love, but Stoppard's theatrical route into the theme is to create a central character – also a playwright – who can't write about it.

Henry says that "Loving and being loved is unliterary", suggesting that love makes a bad subject for a play. When he tries to write about it, it's "either childish or it's rude." The problem for the playwright is to find a language to express the real thing, rather than something that "comes out embarrassing".

Stoppard juxtaposes the theatrical expression of love in passages from *House of Cards*, Strindberg and Ford, with the 'real' dialogue of Henry and other characters. The stylised and heightened qualities of the plays-within-the-play often contrast starkly with the banality of the 'real' lovers' dialogue. So Henry says to Annie "I love you anyway ... I love you ... I love you" It is as if words in real life cannot stretch beyond clichés to fully express the inner life. Henry and Annie's feelings may be intense, but their language is mundane.

It is only later in the play, when Henry is at a point of crisis in suspecting Annie's affair with Billy, that he seems to find a more intense emotional release through words: "I believe in mess, tears, pain, self-abasement, loss of self-respect, nakedness."

For Henry, fidelity and trust are essential cornerstones of his life with Annie, an issue made more complicated by the fact that the relationship itself began in infidelity and betrayal.

Debbie places a different value on fidelity. For her, "exclusive rights isn't love, it's colonization". Henry's *House of Cards* therefore holds no interest for her, because its central plot carries no weight: "it wasn't about anything, except did she have it off or didn't she? What a crisis." Through Debbie, Stoppard presents a case for sex not as love but as simply biology.

Through Charlotte, he shows us an even more cynical viewpoint. She mocks and vulgarises Henry's fictional idea of a perfect wife as "a quiet, faithful bird with an interesting job, and a recipe drawer, and a stiff upper lip, and two semi-stiff lower ones all trembling for him". When confessing to Henry that she had nine affairs during their marriage, she claims that "There are no commitments, only bargains". Even her view of parental love is cynical, suggesting that Henry's loving their daughter is not "normal".

In giving voice to such a diverse range of attitudes and responses to love and fidelity, Stoppard never allows the play or the audience to settle on a single dominant opinion. As Stoppard himself said, "Because *The Real Thing* had an English playwright editorialising about writing love and marriage and all that, it was perfectly obvious that when he was waving his prejudices around, he was pretty much speaking for me. But then so are the people who contradict him. That's what playmaking is. You have to take everybody's side." (*Stoppard in Conversation*, Paul Delaney).

Art and life, illusion and reality

Tom Stoppard and his character Henry are not one and the same, but the family resemblance is strong. Both are witty intellectual playwrights, both in their forties (when the play was written), both can't stand the misuse of language, both have a taste for 60s pop music, and both are accused of not being able to write convincing women's parts.

But as if to warn us of the dangers of reading too much into these similarities, Stoppard gives Charlotte a speech about the folly of an audience interpreting a play biographically: "thinking that I'm her... – It's me! – ooh, it's her! – so that's what they're like at home", when in reality she is poles apart from her stage persona. Stoppard sets up a guessing game between himself and Henry, between biographical fact and dramatic fiction, where there may or may not be a 'real' answer.

The game of setting illusion against reality, art against life, forms the structural backbone of the play. The first scene, which we gradually learn is a play within the play, establishes the template of the confrontation of an adulterous wife, later to be repeated with Max and then Henry in the role of cheated husband.

But just as Charlotte predicts when she claims "his sentence structure would go to pot", the reactions of the 'real' husbands are in both cases strikingly different from the polished wit of the architect character. Life may imitate art, but it is never as neat.

The other key game of mirroring played by Stoppard concerns Annie and Billy. Their first exchange seems to be a flashback to Annie's real meeting with Brodie or a scene from its dramatisation, before we work out that it's a 'real' train ride. Later, we see the same moment played out again, but this time it is exposed as fiction in a TV studio. As if to underscore the connections between these different strands, Stoppard gives the actor Billy the same name as Bill Brodie. And Giovanni, Billy's character name in *'Tis Pity*, is Italian for William.

This is typical of a play rich with structural game playing, twinning, and mirroring. For example, Charlotte's stage husband and real lover are both architects, and Charlotte and Annie both wear Henry's robe in different scenes. There are many more instances to explore.

Words, language and writing

The plays of Tom Stoppard have come to be associated with clever wordplay and stylish jokes, and *The Real Thing* is no exception. Henry is a witty man who delights in puns and sharp one-liners. The flip side of this is that he is also a pedant about language, correcting Debbie for misusing "me" instead of "I", or pulling up Max for mixing his metaphors.

This fastidiousness comes from a passion about words and their potential power, which is why Brodie's badly written play offends Henry so much. For Henry, Brodie is a "lout with language", who puts words together without skill, respect or self-awareness, so that everything he builds is "rubbish".

Henry dismisses Annie's argument that the message of Brodie's play and the authenticity of the author compensate for its technical failings. For him, the way it's put together, its structure, are vital for its success and validity – like a well made cricket bat, a play should be able to give an idea a "little knock" and make it "travel".

By putting the right words in the right order, Henry believes, you can "nudge the world a little or make a poem which children will speak when you're dead." In this way words are sacred, with the power to effect change or make a writer immortal.

But the abuse of words is seen as dangerous, since it can lead to a distorted vision of the world. This isn't just the case for words badly put together; it also applies to clever, educated speech used to mask authentic content. Billy levels this charge



at Annie: “[Brodie] sounds like rubbish, but you know he’s right. You sound all right, but you know it’s rubbish.” Similarly, Henry picks Debbie up on the “persuasive nonsense” which she has developed a skill for; her language is “flawless but wrong”.

Political action and moral responsibility

The Real Thing is not an explicitly ‘political’ play. First staged in November 1982, it makes no reference to the Falkland’s War waged earlier that year or to the IRA’s bombing campaign that had caused carnage in London. At first sight the main characters seem immune to these wider events, cocooned in comfortable middle class security.

But the play was written at a time when international tensions were running high in a second “Cold War”, and it is this issue that touches the play.

In 1981, London saw the biggest ever CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) rally with over a quarter of a million people marching in protest at US plans to site cruise missiles at Greenham Common. Stoppard takes this fact and reworks it as a plan to introduce nuclear arms to Little Barmouth, where Max and Annie have a country cottage.

This prompts Annie to attend a demonstration in London, on the way to which she meets Brodie. Annie has a vested interest in keeping arms out of her village, so as not to turn it into “a sitting duck for the Russian counter-attack”. That, as Max puts it, is her “motivation”, not a larger sense of what is right or wrong, good or bad.

Stoppard explores this idea of how and why we are motivated to act for political change in a number of other moments. When Charlotte suggests that Henry would be going to a Brodie committee meeting for the wrong reasons, he answers “I don’t see my motivation matters a damn. Least of all to Brodie. He just wants to get out of jail. What does he care if we’re motivated by the wrong reasons”. Later, when Annie tells Billy he shouldn’t do Brodie’s play for the “wrong reasons”, he replies “Why not? Does he care?”

Henry and Billy both suggest that their desire to act is legitimate if it brings them closer to Annie. Their notion of moral or political responsibility is entirely bound up in their personal relationships.

This point is brought home explicitly at the end of the play, as Annie tells Henry he shouldn’t have rewritten Brodie’s play if he didn’t think it was right. He replies “You think it’s right. I can’t cope with more than one moral system at a time. Mine is that what you think is right is right.”

The demands of the political sphere and the responsibility to do the right thing are secondary to, or trumped by, the ultimate moral commitment between two lovers in a relationship.

IN CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR ANNA MACKMIN

Why did you want to direct *The Real Thing*?

I don't think you can be truly gripped by theatre making and not be in love with this play. It's a piece of genius. It's amazing to do it in this building which is the great theatre. There's such a rich history. It's a very strong play for a proscenium arch space.

Not only is it one of the great plays ever written about love; it's also one of the great plays ever written about writing, about creativity and playmaking. It delights in the game of the play, the playfulness of the play. We've been working solidly day and evening for two weeks and every day we discover new layers and links. For example, a little silly thing, one of Henry's favourite records is The Crystals' 'Da Doo Ron Ron'. The first lyric is "I met him on a Monday and my heart stood still, Somebody told me that his name was Bill". Brodie's name is Bill, and Billy's name is Bill. The whole play's layered with these wonderful and apparently flippant tricks, but it's an absolutely taut net. It's hugely skilful, and that skill creates the most fantastic door into what I think great theatre is: emotion and thought in perfect symmetry.

Had you seen any previous productions of the play?

No, and I wouldn't know how to direct it if I had. There've been a number of famous performances by actors in this play, which of course can be scary. But I'm looking at a production - it's the ensemble which really gets me. Of course Henry is the most remarkable central character, but it's also a great ensemble play.

Does that sense of the importance of the ensemble influence how you cast the production?

Of course you're looking for a great actor who might do something they've never done before in the central role, something remarkable. But the play is truly ensemble in that everybody gets to do something remarkable. People keep coming through the door and you think "Oh my god who are you?" Even in the last scene of the play there's a completely new character on stage and yes he's only got one scene, but if he isn't "the real thing" then you're screwed. You're always looking for the best possible actors.

I understand Tom Stoppard has been around in rehearsals. How does that affect things?

It's a bit sparkly! He's Tom Stoppard, he's one of the biggest brains on the planet. He's also the person for whom the term "gentleman" was invented: he is a truly gentle man. He came to the first day of rehearsals, then gave us some space and left us alone for a few days. Now he's around more. How lucky are we?

Do you ask him questions?

Of course, that's the beauty of it. That's why I love working on new plays, because you've got the greatest resource in the room. It's a privilege to have the writer in rehearsals for a revival. He knows it's a great play - he himself wouldn't describe it like that because he's too modest - but he knows it's a play that works, so there's nothing for the play to prove. It's all about how this particular team are approaching it. And how he can develop that, support that. And sometimes just tell us, "No. That's wrong!" It saves a lot of time!

Do you have a strong sense of an interpretation before going into rehearsals?

I have a strong visual sense. There's such playfulness in the echoes running through it. In terms of the staging (which is the base note of visual interpretation): all the rooms are a version of the same room, there are variations on the starts and ends of scenes, mirrored and connected all the way through. In an introduction to one of the editions Tom says that he's seen lots of productions and it's been done differently in each, from incredibly naturalistic with blackouts and complete scene changes to very stylised. But he also says that he hopes the play could be done very simply. I read that and thought that was true - that the words, the language can speak absolutely for themselves. Everything connects, that was my starting point. And making sure I landed fully on the simplicity of the final line.

The joy of somebody coming through a door, and it's the same door as it was a moment ago and yet we now witness a different person and a different space - I really wanted to trust the audience with that, believing that they would love to get it for themselves. I wanted the production to be as theatrical as possible, but also as real as possible. I wanted the acting and the people to be absolutely real, and yet to be bold with the physical world so that I could make the play sing as true to life as possible.

You talk about the brilliant marriage of the theatricality of the play with the particular properties of the Old Vic space. But is there a separate challenge presented by that, to do with the intimate and domestic scale of a lot of the scenes versus this big proscenium arch space?

To a certain extent the challenge of that match is the case with any play, whether it's a big verse play in a small space or a naturalistic play in a big space. There's always a push-pull. But if the delicacy of domestic language is placed with absolute emotional reality, it can resonate in an extraordinary theatrical setting.

For example with Henry and Annie, their mantra if you like is "all right?" They check in with each other throughout the play using this. That's tiny but hopefully by the final time they say it the emotional resonance for the audience is enormous.

And what more can you ask, just to be present in the moment, to be held in the moment, and to be "all right"? It's such a tentative, human, fragile and yet potentially robust thing that the domestic then becomes beautifully theatrical.

The only problem is volume. In the rehearsal room you can have an actor whispering to another actor "I love you", but then they have to be able technically to work that up into a big space.

So is there a point in rehearsals where you encourage the actors to play at a bigger level?

No, never "bigger". I'm talking about volume. The technical trick whereby they're still apparently whispering and it feels just like it did in the rehearsal room, even if you're at the very back of the theatre. The impact of the blogosphere presents a problem. It can badly interrupt that development. A delicate and complicated part of the process for an actor, and why previews are cheaper, is because they need to take baby steps at the beginning of public performances to take the rehearsal work out. And bloggers come in on a first or second preview and write "We couldn't hear him" or, worse, "There was no emotional connection".

But that's how we're using previews, to grow that up. Not just the actors either, the whole production, all moves, lighting and sound cues the whole bag. It's very delicate. You make different choices once you're in front of an audience. Things that were very funny in the rehearsal room suddenly fall apart. You learn with the audience. Hopefully they're your friend, they know they're seeing something in a preview which will be different in five shows' time. The trouble with blogs that come out early is that they're looking at it and judging it when it's jelly which has not yet set. And that judgement gets out there.

There's a lot in the play that could be seen as autobiographical, relating directly to Stoppard's life and work. Is that something you've drawn on?

No, because it's really none of my business. But what I do, since I have the privilege of working with a living writer, is try to scent my way to some sort of germ about who and why and what the writer is, and to try to honour that in some way. But that's not a logical thing. So with Tom, what's clear is the gentleness, the goodness, the intelligence of the man. He's a good wise man, and he's written a good wise play. I'd like people to feel that they were a bit better and wiser when they left the theatre, to give them a sprinkle of that Tom-like quality.

And that informs how you approach the play in the rehearsal room. Inevitably we're all talking and thinking a lot about the creative process, about the process of thought, the analysis of thought and ideas and how you make a piece of work. As well as how you do or don't cherish love, and how you put together instinct and head. Ultimately that's what it's about. It's none of my business whether it's real or not real.

Throughout the play there are criticisms levelled at Henry's work. For example Debbie says of *House of Cards* "it wasn't about anything, except did she have it off or didn't she. What a crisis. Infidelity among the architect class." Is Stoppard pre-empting criticism of his own play?

Henry has the best reply to that – he says the play is about self-knowledge through pain. He then goes on to have what I think is one of the great speeches about love, because Debbie's been very glib. She's about to go off into the world and he gives her the greatest gift that any father could give a child. He says that love is "to do with knowing and being known". It's too brilliant for words, it's such a perfect piece of writing. And of course this play being what it is the next beat undermines or re-examines the one before that. All over again. Endlessly connecting and re-visiting. So built into the work are all the criticisms that could be levelled at it, while at the same time the writing soars to heights of great brilliance. And it's all done with a very light touch, it's always playful.

When Henry tries to give Debbie advice before she goes off with her boyfriend, she seems to say it's too late.

Yes, we see a father who leaves the mother at the incredibly important and delicate point when their daughter is coming into her adulthood, when she's losing her virginity. He basically chooses another woman over his daughter and consequently forfeits the right to intimate connection with Debbie for the rest of her life. Possibly.

The notion of virginity runs right through the play; even the medieval idea of courtly love, which is that your virginity can be made whole again if the love is truly perfect. Whether or not Annie actually has sex with somebody else, or whether she is only emotionally unfaithful, there is a sense that she does come back whole again. She and Henry somehow return to a place where they can say "All right?", and they're tentatively making it whole again, but so much richer, so much more complete. And maybe Henry's writer's block can finally shift, and maybe he can finally write "the real thing" – Annie's play – by the end of it.



TOM STOPPARD PORTRAIT OF A PLAYWRIGHT

TOM STOPPARD'S THEATRE CONVEYS HUMAN COMPASSION SAYS PAUL DELANEY

Tom Stoppard catapulted to international acclaim overnight with *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*. Not only did he become the youngest playwright to have a work presented by the National Theatre, but that 1967 premiere at The Old Vic became the first NT production to cross the Atlantic for a run on Broadway. Vaulting wit and verbal panache coupled with an impressive theatricality became the hallmarks of theatre that was recognisably 'Stoppardian'; but in *The Real Thing* these intricacies of form are imbued with a deepened concern for emotional authenticity.

Compassion for the lowly as well as passion for high comedy prompted Stoppard's plays from the start. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern* springs, as Clive James notes, from 'the perception – surely a compassionate one – that the fact of their deaths mattering so little to Hamlet was something that ought to have mattered to Shakespeare'. Two spear-carriers from the wings of Shakespeare's imagination take centre stage in Stoppard's play in recognition of a frame of meaning beyond their ken. Figuring their lives as a play-within-a-play, Stoppard lets metatheatricality resonate with metaphysical mystery. As an audience, we know what Stoppard's courtiers do not because we know the world of Hamlet. But Rosencrantz and Guildenstern never pluck out the heart of that mystery; their intuitive reach exceeds their cognitive grasp.

Jumpers (1972) explodes on stage with a troupe of acrobats, a trapeze striptease, a moon landing and a bumbling philosopher, George. The play pits logical positivism against George's positively illogical attempts to demonstrate theist origins for morality. But the play invites us to empathise with the plodding, pedestrian George in his glimpses of a realm beyond the material – and with his wife Dotty whose musical comedy idealism has been dealt a fatal blow by a murder on the moon.

In 1974's *Travesties* Stoppard offers a fantasia on James Joyce, Tristan Tzara and Lenin set in Zurich just after World War I. Featuring revolutionary political ideology, Dadaism and Joyce's modernism, the whole debate is seen through the lens of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* as recalled by Henry Carr, a minor functionary acquainted with Joyce through the theatre. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern before him, the ordinary mundane Henry Carr is given centre stage amid Stoppard's high jinks.

The equally ordinary frailties of another Henry, a married playwright who becomes romantically involved with an actress, animate *The Real Thing*, a work that redefines what it means to be Stoppardian. 'Can a play show us the very truth and nature of love?' Queen Elizabeth asks in Stoppard's film *Shakespeare in Love*. It was a question with which he was all too familiar by the time he came to write *The Real Thing* in 1982. Alternately lauded for being clever and faulted for being too clever by half, Stoppard had endured repeated queries as to whether his plays spoke to the heart. *The Real Thing* was his answer to the question of whether he could write love and 'make it true', rather than just pretty, or comical, or lustful. By bridging scenes with pop music refrains, he dramatised the disparity between the song – or person – one 'should' like and what actually moves you.

As *Arcadia* (1993) reels back and forth between 1809 and the present day, each new scene requires us to reframe what we have seen with our own eyes, and, as in *The Real Thing*, the play pulses to a musical accompaniment. Improvisational piano playing in the next room may make it hard to spot the tune, but *Arcadia* both invites and involves the audience in 'wanting to know'. The final tableau swirls together the Regency and contemporary eras as thumping bass from a party marquee provides the beat for characters to sweep across the stage waltzing. They use what time they are given – even in the face of imminent loss – to dance.

Music itself comes to the fore in Stoppard's *Rock'n'Roll* (2006), as the primal spirit unleashed by Pink Floyd and the Velvet Underground reverberates through Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution. Pitted against totalitarian constraint, rock becomes an uncontrollable, uncageable expression of 'spirit as opposed to machinery' in a paean to the great god Pan. In *Rock'n'Roll*, as in all his other plays, Stoppard celebrates a humanness that is not just biology, and not just reason.

Paul Delaney, Professor of English, Westmont College, has published two books on the playwright: *Tom Stoppard: The Moral Vision of the Major Plays* (Macmillan, St. Martin's) and *Tom Stoppard in Conversation* (University of Michigan Press).

GLOSSARY OF TERMS & REFERENCES

apologia	a formal defence of an action or opinion	Ku Klux Klan	violent and racist far-right hate group in America
a priori	got at by reasoning, without drawing on experience	lacuna	a gap, a missing portion
badinage	humorous or playful talk	Lourdes	place of pilgrimage in France, noted for healing miracles
Basel	city in Switzerland famous for its museums and art fair	Marx brothers	madcap American comedy act from the 1930s to 1950s
Bertie Wooster	very posh character in <i>Jeeves & Wooster</i> novels by PG Wodehouse	mensa-a-table	part of a Latin grammar exercise
blank verse	poetry which has a regular rhythm but no formal rhyme	MCC	Marylebone Cricket Club, the owners of Lords
Callas, Maria	opera star hugely successful in the 1950s and 60s	Mog	short for Mogadon, a drug taken for insomnia
Cambridge Circus	most West End theatres are south of this junction	Mussolini, Benito	fascist dictator who ruled Italy from 1923 to 1943
Chips Rafferty	Australian actor famous for his bushman roles	nouvelle cuisine	fussy cooking style, often involving tiny portions
Christie's	along with Sotheby's, one of the main arts auction houses	petard	to be 'hoist on your own petard' is to be hurt by a device that you intended to use on others
Cortez, Hernando	Spanish coloniser who overthrew the Aztecs in Mexico and claimed to discover the Pacific Ocean	pick-a-sticks	game in which sticks have to be removed from a pile
Covent Garden	another name for the Royal Opera House in London	precepts	rules of conduct. Henry is quoting Polonius in <i>Hamlet</i>
cuckoldry	when a man's wife is unfaithful to him	Procul Harum	Rock band who's hit 'Whiter Shade of Pale' was based on Bach's 'Air on a G string'
Dame Janet Baker	English classical singer	Rembrandt	17th century painter who lived and worked in Amsterdam
Das Kapital	critical analysis of capitalism written by Karl Marx	Saint Augustine	5th century philosopher, theologian and teacher
de facto	existing as a fact, whether by right or not	Sartre, Jean-Paul	French existentialist philosopher, writer and critic
Desert Island Discs	radio show in which a celebrity guest selects their favourite eight records, a book, and a luxury	sophistry	reasoning which sounds impressive but is false or misleading
dilettante	someone with an amateurish interest in a subject	Strindberg, August	Swedish playwright, author of <i>Miss Julie</i> (1888)
Duragel	spermicide gel used with a contraceptive diaphragm	Three Sisters	Russian play of 1900 by Anton Chekhov
ersatz	inferior imitation or substitute	Trotsky	Communist leader and theorist
feed	in comedy, the straight line that sets up a joke	virgo syntacta	a wordplay on virgo intacta, meaning a virgin with an unbroken hymen, and syntax, meaning the grammatical arrangement of words
Finnegans Wake	experimental 1939 novel by James Joyce	Webster, John	Jacobean dramatist famous for his macabre tragedies
Ford, John	Dramatist, author of <i>'Tis Pity She's a Whore</i> (1633)	Whitehall	road in London where the Cenotaph and main Government buildings are based
in extremis	at the point of death	Zermatt	ski resort in the Swiss Alps
Jacobean	associated with James I's reign, 1603 to 1625		