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Contents

NICOLA PASQUALICCHIO	
<i>Introduction</i>	3
JAVIER CUESTA GUADAÑO	
<i>Forms of Short Modernist-Symbolist Theatre in Spain</i>	27
DIDIER PLASSARD	
<i>Edward Gordon Craig and the “smallest drama in the world”</i>	51
ELISA MARTINI	
<i>Just Two Cues: Achille Campanile’s Upside-Down Tragedy</i>	65
LAURA PEJA	
<i>Shorter and Shorter: Samuel Beckett’s Challenge to the Theatre</i>	81
MARK TAYLOR-BATTY	
<i>Harold Pinter’s Early Revue Sketches</i>	101
CARLO VARESCHI	
<i>“... worth using twice”?</i>	
<i>Making a Short Story Long. Tom Stoppard’s Two Early One-Acters</i>	117
ALEXANDRE KOUTCHEVSKY	
<i>Repetition as Zoom Effect. A Mechanism of Short Writing Played at the Level of Words</i>	139
SIMONA BRUNETTI	
<i>Ten Years of Short Theatre. Rome and Its ‘Short’ Festival</i>	165

CARLO VARESCHI*

“...worth using twice”? Making a Short Story Long. Tom Stoppard’s Two Early One-Acters

Abstract

The article focuses on Tom Stoppard’s TV drama *Another Moon Called Earth* (1967) and the radio play *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1972). Moving from the analysis of their peculiarities in relation with the medium they were written for, the essay considers their function in the writing of two stage dramas: *Jumpers* (1972) and *Travesties* (1974). In both cases, the borrowings from other works, namely Shakespeare’s and Oscar Wilde’s, have been an essential element of the transformation of short pieces into longer ones. Yet, somehow against expectations, the second pair of dramas (*Artist Descending a Staircase* and *Travesties*) is characterized by a lessening in dramatic force and complexity in the passage from the short to full-length play. This brings forth the hypothesis that Stoppard, in his production for TV and radio, felt less constrained by the commercial rules regulating the production of West End plays. This is further reinforced by looking at other two short radio plays (*M is for Moon Among Other Things*, 1964 and *If You’re Glad I’ll Be Frank*, 1966) which reveal how Stoppard possessed an ability of dealing with human sentiments that was not detectable in the longer plays of the period.

“I wanted to be in the theatre ... It is simply the way I felt, and there were many like me in those early Osborne, Wesker and Pinter years, when bliss was to be performed but to be staged was very heaven” (Stoppard 1998: vii). In the preface to the volume collecting his TV plays, Tom Stoppard defined his own hierarchical order among spectacular forms when he was a young playwright. Nonetheless, he had to wait until 1967 to see his *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* staged by professionals; in the meantime, the young writer had to make do with other ways to support himself and his growing family, that is, by writing for radio and television.

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Stoppard's work for the small screen has been going on to the present day – it is worth remembering that his five-part TV adaptation of Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy *Parade's End* (1924–28) was aired on BBC in 2012. Nevertheless, he gave up writing original pieces for television quite early, since his last televised play is *Squaring the Circle*, broadcasted in 1984. On the contrary, his interest in the radio as an appropriate medium for drama has lasted for all of his lifetime, as demonstrated by *On Dover Beach* (2007), a 15-minute radio play based on Matthew Arnold's nearly homonymous poem, and *Dark Side* (2012), a 55-minute radio play aimed at celebrating the fortieth anniversary of Pink Floyd's album *The Dark Side of the Moon*. Therefore, Stoppard's interest in short pieces is not to be considered as entirely depending on a contingent situation of need, as implied above. In fact, his quickness of wit was probably most suitable for dramas that were to find their resolution in a short time span, but that is not all. Besides, with the benefit of hindsight, we know that his short works were often to be developed into longer plays. It is hard to say if this transformation of short pieces into full-length ones was somehow planned: probably not, but what Stoppard declared in the mid-seventies about his habit of re-using texts and ideas – “If it's worth using once, it's worth using twice”, he once said (Hayman 1982: 2) – cannot be ignored. It seems to suggest that this process was consciously and willingly replicated, envisaging what was going to be a very fruitful creative streak spanning the whole of his career.

The relationship between the short piece (be it a radio or a TV drama or a theatrical one-acter) and the full-length play can assume different forms. For instance, although adapted for the stage with a few additions and a new title (*Indian Ink* [1995]), the radio play *In the Native State* (1991) maintained both the original characters and plot, while *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*¹ was more radically transformed and eventually became *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*'s third act. Occasionally, the short play provided the full-length one with nothing more than a general frame or setting: for instance, the radio drama *The Dog It Was That Died* (1983) and the play *Hapgood* (1988) have not much in common in terms of plot and characters, except for their setting (the world of espionage during the Cold War) and especially their dealing with the psychic estrangement affecting double agents. This suggests that the radio drama somehow constituted a first step in the composition of the later piece. Derek Marlowe, a playwright Stoppard was friend with in the early years of his career, thus describes his composing

¹ *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear* was probably written by Stoppard in Berlin in the summer of 1964; this early draft was never published, see also note 6 below.

method: "For Tom, writing a play is like sitting for an examination. He spends ages on research, does all the necessary cramming, reads all the relevant books and then gestates the result. Once he's passed the exam ... he forgets all about it and moves on to the next subject" (Tynan 1979: 90). The logical deduction is that such a work of research was wasted on just one short play, or at least it must have looked so to Stoppard himself.²

In the following pages I will select two different cases of Stoppard's transformative practice: one TV and one radio drama, both turned into full-fledged plays for the stage at a later date. I will discuss this peculiar process of expansion with a focus upon the dramaturgical features of both the short and the long plays with the aim of identifying the specifics of the former from a comparative perspective.

A Trip to the Moon

I will start with *Another Moon Called Earth*, a 30-minute TV play broadcasted by BBC in June 1967. This date bears some importance, since the real event constantly referred to (man's first landing on the moon) is still two years away. There are four characters: a married couple, Bone and Penelope, a visitor, Albert, and Crouch, the porter. The action (in fifteen takes) is entirely located in three rooms of the flat: Penelope's room, Bone's study and the hall, while in the street below a celebratory parade for the astronaut's homecoming is being held. The background is Bone's and Penelope's marital crisis, thus summarized by Bone himself:

We have on the one hand, that is to say in bed, an attractive married lady whose relations with her husband are, at their highest, polite, and have been for some time. We have, on the other hand, daily visits by a not unhandsome stranger who rings the doorbell, is admitted by Pinkerton and shown into the ladies bedroom, whence he emerges an hour or so later and lets himself out. Now, let's see: does anything suggest itself? Wife in bed, daily visits by stranger. What inference may one draw? (Stoppard 1998: 52)

Of course the drama does not boil down to the relationship between an unfaithful wife and a cuckolded husband. A short explanation is needed:

² As regards this work of research, the case of *Neutral Ground* deserves a treatment of its own for being based on Sophocles's *Philoctetes*, and yet containing elements from another *Philoctetes*, namely Euripides's that we possess only in fragments. The genealogy of *Neutral Ground* will be the subject of a separate study I am currently working on.

Penelope claims to be unable to get off her bed since man's landing on the moon and attributes her incapacity to her sense of bewilderment deriving from that event:

God, is it only me? I tell you, he has stood outside and seen us all, all in one go, little. And suddenly everything we live by – our rules – our good, our evil – our ideas of love, duty – all the things we've counted on as being absolute truths – because we filled all existence – they're all suddenly exposed as nothing more than local customs – nothing more – because he has seen the edges where we stop, and we never stopped anywhere before ... I'm telling you: when that thought drips through to the bottom, people won't just carry on. The things they've taken on trust, they've never had edges before. (Ibid.: 57)

This speech is not devoid of sense, yet it bears the signs of an uneasy state of mind: up to this point (that is, halfway through the play) the spectator is still in doubt whether Penelope is just a spoilt woman (there is a reference to her being an heiress) or she is mentally breaking down: however, her carefree demeanour contributes to maintaining an atmosphere of light comedy. This far, the play is based on the witty banter between husband and wife, who has interrupted him in his research work as historian. It is soon clear that, even if she behaves quite foolishly, she is far from being unintelligent. Their exchanges mostly revolve around Albert, a doctor whose visits started well before Penelope's supposed illness, giving some foundations to Bone's suspects. The crisis breaks out when Bone finds out that Penelope has fired her life-long nanny, Pinkerton, because she beat her at every kind of game ("Every damn thing. Cards, nought and crosses, charades ...", *ibid.*: 54). As we will understand later, the conversation regarding Pinkerton is a whole series of double-entendres ("I got rid of her ... Gave her the push ... sudden impulse"; "You can't just throw your old nanny into the street", *ibid.*: 53-4). When Albert arrives, bringing an expensive-looking bunch of flowers, Bone retires to his study and the story seems to go towards a predictable ending. The turning point coincides with an informal enquiry carried out by the porter, Crouch, about an incident occurred in a street nearby. This is how he sums it up to Bone: "The incident. There's been a bit of an incident ... Woman, middle aged to elderly ... fell in the street. Dead" (*ibid.*: 61). Of course, the woman is the ex-nanny, Pinkerton, but Crouch's words are misunderstood: Bone gathers that she died of a heart attack, and here once more Stoppard revels in underlining the ambiguities of verbal expression (a theme that will become central in another TV movie, *Professional Foul*, 1977) in order to ambush his audience.

Bone informs his wife (who is clearly uninterested) of Pinkerton's death due to a natural cause, but, when he goes back to Crouch, he gets a more complete narration: "From the window. We were all watching the parade and suddenly behind us – thump ..." (Stoppard 1998: 63). Now, both Bone and the audience understand what really happened, that is, that Pinkerton was pushed out of the window. Yet Penelope persists in her insouciant manner and Albert, signing a certificate of accidental death due to natural causes, solves any prospective trouble. In the final scene Bone is left alone with his wife, a probable murderer, who has miraculously regained the use of her legs and waves happily to the parade from her window. Their final conversation, which takes up the motif of the loss of moral certainties deriving from the first moon landing, is worth citing in full as a proof of the uneasy atmosphere the spectator is left with. It has to be noted that Stoppard here introduces the typically Beckettian contrast between words and gestures through an ironic show of Albert's unreliable diagnostic skills: in leaving the apartment, he had predicted that Penelope would never regain the use of her legs, which is soon proved false, since she is finally shown standing at the window:

BONE. She was your nanny.
 PENELOPE. Poor Pinkers. You think I'm a bad loser – but no one is safe now.
 BONE. You can't hush it up, you know. And what about me? There's the law – accessory after the fact. You can't flout the laws – and nor can Albert.
 PENELOPE. (*Fondly*) Huh – him and his ripe pears...³
 BONE. And don't think I don't know what's going on!
 PENELOPE. Nobody knows, except me and him; so far. Albert almost knows. You'll never know. There he goes... [*she smiles. Waves her hand slightly at the lunanant below*] Hello... [*the parade fades into the distance*].

(*ibid.*: 66-7)

Penelope's disturbed state of mind is apparent in her refusal to take Pinkerton's murder seriously, while also teasing her husband who, on his part, is reduced to a complete state of helplessness. It is hard to imagine somebody as good as Stoppard at turning a sophisticated comedy into a thriller in only half an hour, with an open ending made even more disquieting by the idea of unpunished crime and vaguely apocalyptic undertones ("... but no one is safe now"). If we consider the general

³ A reference to Albert's description of Penelope's breasts.

setting of *Another Moon Called Earth*, it is clearly theatrical (three adjoining spaces). Unfortunately, no video recording is available on the international commercial networks nor on the web, so that any consideration on this play in performance is based on conjectures: we can presume that close-ups on the two main characters could express what in the text is left in the shadows, like Penelope's mental health.⁴ There is an element of suspense in Bone's going back and forth between his wife and Crouch, yet the quick solution of the mystery surrounding Pinkerton's death does not allow for a real tension, while Bone's resigned stance prevents any curiosity on the part of the audience as regards the (probable) adultery, which is hinted at but never shown. Stoppard seems more interested in the moral implications of the story and, even if the idea of the moon landing causing a complete overturning of previous ethic principles and existential certainties seems a bit far-fetched (and it did prove so in two years' time) the author's unease in an epoch of changing moral standards is genuine, and it clearly shows in other works of the same period. In the year before the broadcasting of *Another Moon Called Earth*, that is, in 1966, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* was staged at the Edinburgh festival and Stoppard's only novel, *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*, was published. In the former the two characters moving inside the plot of *Hamlet* seem to have no control or responsibility for their actions, and yet Guildenstern's often quoted cue, "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, when we could have said – no. But somehow we missed it" (Stoppard 1968: 125), implies that their role as spies was not plainly written in their destiny and they had anyway a possibility of choice. As for *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*, its links with *Another Moon Called Earth* are apparent in the characterization of one of the two protagonists, Mr Moon, a historian sexually snubbed by his adulterous wife; but, as regards moral questions, the other eponymous hero, Lord Malquist, is a clear example of the difficulty of living in times of rapidly changing moral standards: his vision of contemporary life is expressed by, and reflected in, his (somehow Wildean) statement: "Since we cannot hope for order, let us withdraw with style from the chaos" (Stoppard 1980: 21). I agree with Kenneth Tynan when he affirms that "[t]hrough Stoppard would doubtlessly deny it, these pronouncements of Malquist's have a ring of authority that suggests the author speaking" (Tynan 1979: 55).

⁴ Conversely, the stage directions of *Jumpers* clearly state from the first scene how Doty should be characterized in performance: "From her tone now it should be apparent that Doty, who may have appeared pleasantly drunk, is actually breaking down mentally" (Stoppard 1972: 20).

Verbal Gymnastics

Morals are at the centre of Stoppard's next stage play, *Jumpers* (1972), whose affinity with *Another Moon Called Earth* is soon evident. In *Jumpers* we have four main characters: a professor of moral philosophy, eloquently called George Moore, who is busy dictating to his secretary the text of a conference paper; his wife, Dotty, a former singer who retired from the stage (and from marital duties, as George remarks: "Unfortunately she retired from consummation about the same time as she retired from artistry", Stoppard 1972: 58) because of a mental breakdown consequent to the moon-landing, which by that time had really happened; a doctor-philosopher-acrobat coming every day to examine and assist Dotty, Archie, and a porter, Crouch. The play's unfolding is triggered by a murder: during a celebratory party at the Moores' for the electoral victory of a fictitious Radical Liberal Party, one of the guests, McFee, a professor of Logic who was forming a human pyramid with other amateurish gymnasts, is killed for unknown reasons by a shot coming from a dark corner of the room. There arrives a police inspector, but the situation is resolved partly by a certificate of suicidal death issued by Archie, and partly by Archie and Dottie falsely accusing the inspector of attempting to rape Dotty. As happened in *Another Moon Called Earth*, a parade is going on in the streets, this time celebrating the Radical-Liberal victory, but differently from the TV play the murderer's identity and motives remain undisclosed (even if many clues point to Archie). Apart from the plot, whole textual excerpts passed from the TV to the stage play, and they are really too numerous to be mentioned here. It is possible to surmise that a widespread feeling of déjà-vu characterized the first audience's reaction at inspector Bones' cue "Sawing ladies in half –that kind of things?" (ibid.: 44), born out of the confusion between the meaning of the words "Logician" and "Magician", that came straight from *Another Moon Called Earth* (Stoppard 1998: 58); or the poetic description of a medical examination passing almost verbatim from Albert to Archie: "You think that when I'm examining Penelope I see her eyes as cornflowers, her lips as rubies, her skin so soft and warm as milk ... You think that my mind turns to ripe pears as soon as I press those firm pink..." (ibid.: 60).⁵ Perhaps Stoppard counted on the fact that not too many spectators would remember the TV play or maybe he consciously resorted to repetition as a device aimed at entertaining and engaging

⁵ Apart from being slightly enlarged, Archie's speech has, of course, "Dorothy" instead of "Penelope" and "her skin as soft and warm as velvet" (Stoppard 1972: 70) instead of "her skin so soft and warm as milk".

the audience. As Kenneth Tynan put it, "... self-cannibalism is not alien to Stoppard" (Tynan 1979: 89), and so, even at that early stage of the playwright's career, a certain amount of self-quotation was not deemed reproachful. In conclusion, Stoppard added, as it were, flesh and muscles to the bare skeleton of *Another Moon Called Earth*, turning a light dark comedy into a thoughtful, albeit often very funny, drama on moral views and choices. The character of professor Moore is centre-stage for almost the whole play. In preparing his paper for a philosophical conference he tackles a series of moral questions: his soliloquy is always resumed after every interruption by the other characters, so that a coherent discourse on ethics unfolds throughout the play. Yet, what gives *Jumpers* a different quality from the TV drama are the Shakespearean borrowings. The transplant of textual matter had already been one key element of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead's* success.⁶ Stoppard's borrowing of whole passages from Shakespeare, sometimes verbatim,⁷ sometimes by narrativizing the action of the original or dramatizing one of its narratives,⁸ were an obvious part of the drama's concept. These passages were meant to give the spectators the thrill of recognizing the quotations from a classical author: a kind of intellectual flattery Stoppard consciously carried out in order to please his audience. To acknowledge Shakespeare's presence was clearly part of the pleasure of watching *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, since in that play we were entirely plunged into *Hamlet's* plot; in *Jumpers* the intertextuality is more subtle and casts an interesting light on Stoppard's creative process, including his way of transforming short plays into full-length ones.

⁶ This proceeding had also a decisive role in the development of the short play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear* into *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. For the lack of a published edition of the former, we have to rely on the reconstruction by John Fleming, who examined a draft of this play in Stoppard's personal archive kept at the University of Texas's Harry J. Ransom Humanities Research Center. According to him, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet King Lear* roughly corresponds to the third act of the longer play, while the two first acts, which contained the largest Shakespearean inserts, were written later.

⁷ As in the King's and Queen's speeches to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet* 2.2.1-25.

⁸ As in Ophelia's report of Hamlet's strange behaviour to her father (*Hamlet* 2.1.74-81) that passes in descriptive terms into the stage directions of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*: "Ophelia runs on in some alarm, holding up her skirts – followed by Hamlet. Ophelia has been sewing and she holds her garment. They are both mute. Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced, no hat upon his head, his stockings fouled, ungartered and down-gyved to his ankle", Stoppard 1968: 34-5); or in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's comic narrative of Hamlet's first encounter with them (*Hamlet* 2.2.217-376 and Stoppard 1968: 56-8)

It may be argued that *Jumpers* is *Another Moon Called Earth* plus Logical Positivism plus Shakespeare (and particularly *Macbeth*). Of course this statement needs to be explained. This is how Tynan recounted the genesis of *Jumpers*: “Early in 1970, he [Stoppard] told me, over lunch, that he had been reading the logical positivists with fascinated revulsion. He was unable to accept their view that because value judgements could not be empirically verified they were meaningless” (Tynan 1979: 90). There was a bit of expediency on Stoppard’s part in focusing on a school of thought that, as Neil Sammells puts it, “... was as dead as a dodo before he [Stoppard] started writing the play” (Sammells 2001: 113). Clearly, Stoppard’s preoccupation was not with philosophical matters but with practical ones: what he was worried about were the consequences of a vision of life that excluded the idea of absolute good.⁹ This concern surfaced also in *Another Moon Called Earth* but it was resolved in a quite cursory way and, even if a murder was involved, Penelope’s generally foolish behaviour prevented any serious approach. In *Jumpers* the most significant change is exactly in the figure of the female protagonist: instead of the child-wife Penelope there is Dotty, a character who takes on a Lady Macbeth-like status, even in her nervous frailty, and here is where Shakespeare comes to the fore. I will not discuss all Shakespearean borrowings in *Jumpers*¹⁰ but I will focus on the one taken from *Macbeth*, marking the differences with the corresponding situation in *Another Moon Called Earth*. In the opening of the TV play, Penelope tries to call her husband’s attention by crying for help and then literally crying wolf (“Wolves! Look out!! Rape! Rape! Rape!”), causing Bone’s ironic comment: “Not the most logical of misfortunes” (Stoppard 1998: 49). In this exchange all the elements of light entertainment can be detected (a silly wife, an ironical husband, a hint at sex), and even if, as one may expect from Stoppard, this is not going to be the whole story, the audience is oriented towards an expectation of fun. In *Jumpers*, Dotty, after crying for help in a similar fashion, turns to *Macbeth* for her cues: “... Oh, horror, horror, horror! Confusion now hath made its masterpiece ... most sacriligious (*sic*) murder— [*different voice*] Woe, alas! What, in our house?” (Stoppard 1972: 24). It is worth recalling that the spectators have already witnessed the murder of McFee, whose first name is Duncan:

⁹ There is also a political angle in this moral preoccupation, since, in the words of Tynan, *Jumpers* “... is an attack on pragmatic materialism as this is practiced by a political party called the Radical Liberals, who embody Stoppard’s satiric vision of socialism in action” (Tynan 1979: 93) but it is beyond the scope of this essay.

¹⁰ The other three are from *Hamlet*, *Richard II* and *Richard III*.

consequently, the echoes from *Macbeth* (2.3.62-5, 85-6), with Dotty borrowing Macduff's and Lady Macbeth's cues after the King's murder has been discovered, acquire more sinister overtones, since everyone in the audience knows (or should know, as Stoppard probably expected) that Lady Macbeth's words are just a screen intended to hide the premeditated murder of King Duncan. From that moment on the gap between Dottie and Penelope widens. Although the latter is a confessed murderer, she is never endowed by Stoppard with a tragic status since, murder apart, the general tone of *Another Moon Called Earth* is comic. On the contrary, Dottie is increasingly characterized as mentally unbalanced but also as cynical and exploitative: this makes her a more perverse character than Penelope and even if her role in McFee's murder remains undisclosed, she is not exempted from suspicion. Dotty's transformation into a veritably dark lady is accomplished both in the scene of the feigned rape, aimed at getting rid of inspector Bones, and in the subsequent lunch with Archie, when the woman gloats quite ungraciously on the success of the enterprise. This scene must have been really disturbing in performance, because Stoppard completely changed it for the 1984 staging of *Jumpers* (with Felicity Kendall impersonating Dottie instead of Diana Rigg). In the later production the most disquieting features were toned down and there was a perceptible shift towards comedy, probably because the moral (and political) issues that were behind *Jumpers* were no longer as pressing as in the early seventies. Where *Jumpers* completely drifts away from *Another Moon Called Earth* is in the Coda "in bizarre dream form" (Stoppard 1972: 83) in which Archie definitely shows his most sinister side ordering the elimination of a political enemy with a slightly modified quote from Shakespeare's *Richard III* 3.4.1983-5: "My Lord Archbishop, when I was last in Lambeth I saw good strawberries in your garden – I do beseech you send for some" (Stoppard 1972: 87). In an interview with Ronald Hayman, Stoppard famously remarked that "Prufrock and Beckett are the twin syringes of my diet, my arterial system" (Hayman 1982: 8). We could add that Shakespeare too is an extremely important 'tool' in his literary artistry (or craftsmanship). In brief, the TV play here examined testifies to the dramatic autonomy of the genre of the short play, as well as to its flexibility in providing material for longer dramas. In this case, the derivative play turns out to be more complex thematically and more ambitious in scope by absorbing a Shakespearean frame and a philosophical background.

Portrait of Three Artists as Young Men

My next example is a 45-minute radio play that was instead to stand behind a somehow less complex and tragic stage play: *Artist Descending a Staircase*, broadcasted by BBC in November 1972. Its time structure is well described by Stoppard himself in his directions:

There are eleven scenes. The play begins in the here-and-now; the next five scenes are each a flashback from the previous scene; the seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth and eleventh scenes are, respectively, continuation of the fifth, fourth, third, second and first. So the play is set temporally in six parts, in the sequence ABCDEFEDCBA.

A= here and now

B= a couple of hours ago

C= last week

D= 1922

E= 1920

F= 1914

(Stoppard 1990: 111)

Despite its seeming convolutedness, the plot can be easily followed: it revolves around three elder avant-garde artists, Martello, Beauchamp and Donner, and one girl, Sophie. According to Elissa Guralnick, the three artists are transparent disguises of Marcel Duchamp, whose *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* is hinted at in the title:

Martello is transparently Marcel. Beauchamp (that is, Beecham, as the British would say) needs only a French pronunciation to approximate Duchamp. And Donner, in French, not only sounds like the significant word in the title of Duchamp's last great work, *Etant donnés*, but also, being an infinitive, recalls *A l'infinifif*, the collection of previously unpublished notes that Duchamp issued in facsimile in 1967. Small surprise, then, that each of the artists, to different degrees, can be seen to embody Duchamp. (Guralnick 1996: 41)

Modern art is evidently the main theme traversing the whole drama, and yet it has a tragic core concerning the three artists' relationship with Sophie, a girl who will commit suicide. Following Stoppard's steps, the plot unfolds (backwards) like this:

A: Martello and Beauchamp find the dead body of Donner down the staircase of a flat shared by the three of them. A tape recorder, left switched

on by Beauchamp (a supposed attempt at avant-garde art he has practiced for all of his life) reports a possible aggression by someone the victim knew well. At the end, the hearer (but not the characters) understands that Donner fell and died by accident, trying to catch a fly.

B: Beauchamp and Donner discuss art but then come to talk about Sophie, and Donner, who was desperately in love with her, shows all his bitterness towards Beauchamp, whom he blames for her suicide.

C: Also Martello's and Donner's exchange moves from art to Sophie. Martello reveals that Sophie probably loved him, even if she had become Beauchamp's lover by mistake (between their first and second encounter she had become completely blind and had mistaken one from the other).

D: Sophie, realizing that Beauchamp is about to leave her, refuses Donner's suggestion that they could live together and commits suicide by throwing herself from a window.

E: Sophie visits the three artists in their flat and tries to remember whom she had fallen in love at first sight with before becoming completely blind. Her choice, based on her memory of a painting she saw during her first encounter with the three of them, falls on Beauchamp.

F: The three young friends go for a walking tour in France and witness the very early stages of World War I.

This short summary does not do justice to the brilliance of a play that mixes comedy and tragedy with a clear emphasis on the latter. In her soliloquy preceding her suicide, Sophie fully achieves the status of tragic heroine and, in my view, is probably the best-rounded among Stoppard's female characters, thanks also to the dramatic density of the short play. Previously, Sophie had raised the characters' and the audience's admiration for her capacity of facing her blindness head on, and in the previous scene she had impressed the three young artists with her ability in finding her bearings in their room. But, in knowing that Beauchamp is about to leave her, she is suddenly overcome by her disability. For an understanding of the following excerpt, it is important to make clear that Mouse is Donner's schoolboy nickname, and therefore it is him Sophie is addressing, without knowing if he is still there or not. The audience will soon be informed that he was already downstairs without Sophie's noticing his exit, and in fact his nickname came exactly from his capacity of entering or leaving rooms without being heard:

I feel blind again. I feel more blind than I did the first day, when I came to tea ... what are you thinking of, Mouse? ... We can't live here like brother and sister. I know you won't make demands of me, so how can I make

demands of you? Am I to weave you endless tablemats and antimacassars in return for life? ... And I cannot live with you knowing that you want me – do you see that? ... Mouse? Are you here? Say something. Now, don't do that, Mouse, it's not fair ... Are you going to watch me? – standing quietly in the room – sitting on the bed – on the edge of the tub ... Oh no, there is no way now – I won't – I won't – I won't – no, I won't ... ! [*Glass panes and wood smash violently. Silence. In the silence, hoof beats in the street, then her body hitting, a horse neighing*].

(Stoppard 1990: 151-2)

It is worth pointing out that Sophie's death does not coincide with the climax of the play, since it is already hinted at and taken for granted in the first scene. The real tragic catastrophe comes when Martello discloses to Donner his idea that the girl was in love with him and not with Beauchamp. For clarity's sake, it should be recalled that Sophie had met the three men at an art exhibition before losing her sight, and she had instantly fallen in love with the one who was standing next to a picture, representing a snowy landscape:

DONN. But it was Beauchamp – she remembered his painting, the snow scene ... It was the only snow scene.
 MART Yes, it was, but – I promise you, Donner, it was a long time afterwards when it occurred to me, when she was already living with Beauchamp ... Well, your painting of the white fence ... Thick white posts, top to bottom, across the whole canvas ... one might be wrong, but her sight was not good even then.

(Ibid.: 153)

In Guralnick's words, “[t]he source of Sophie's unhappiness in love was her possibly having confused, in her gathering blindness, the foreground and the background of a painting. What Sophie believed to be a snow scene ... might have easily been a white fence” (1996: 47). With a typically Stoppardian paradox, in this radio-play sight is contemporarily central and dispensed with. *Artist descending a staircase* is quintessentially fit for radio broadcasting in that it fully exploits the possibilities of the medium, be it in putting a fifty-year gap between scenes C and D without even changing the clothes or the make-up of the actors, or in the representation of Sophie's suicide by means of sound effects. The epitome of this phonic illusion is Beauchamp's horse: in the scene that occupies the centre of the drama, that is, the temporally remotest one, hoof beats are heard and Beauchamp constantly refers to the horse he is mounting, and even

the other two acknowledge its presence. But when other sounds effects (lorries, galloping cavalry, explosions) occupy the whole phonic space suggesting that something really terrible is approaching (the outbreak of World War I), the joke somehow wears thin for the three friends, and Donner cries out: “For God’s sake, Beauchamp, will you get rid of that coconut” (Stoppard 1990: 146). In this respect, Guralnick remarked that

[a]nyone familiar with radio sound effects is certain to remember how hoof beats are produced: namely, by clapping together the halves of a hollowed-out coconut shell. And with this simple recollection, Beauchamp’s horse dematerializes. We instantly infer that he was never there at all. Although, how can that be? For in seeing him, did we not actually create him, so that, by radio magic, he was there when he was not? (1996: 52).

And yet, to the hearer they all sound the same, the (fake) horse and the (fake/real) gun shots. Is radio really magic, or does it just perform some cheap aural tricks to the other senses? In *Artist Descending a Staircase*, while celebrating the suggestive power of sounds that allows him to concentrate a veritable tragedy in a 45-minute play, Stoppard seems to warn the audience against trusting the sense of hearing. Indeed Sophie’s admittedly faltering sense of sight played some part in her unfortunate choice of a partner and this unreliability of the senses may refer us back to *After Magritte*, in which an initial tableau, bizarre but explicable, tricked a policeman into thinking that something shady was going on. An irregular droning noise is interpreted as Donner dozing but in the last scene we gather (yet can we be sure about that?) that the noise was the buzzing of a fly, and Donner fell from the stairs trying to catch it. Nonetheless, tragic as may be the deaths of Sophie and Donner, the real climax of the play is the latter’s discovery that probably he was the one Sophie loved. The tragic outcome of *Artist Descending a Staircase* results from the encounter of real (that his, Sophie’s, in her passage from extreme short-sightedness to total darkness) and metaphoric blindness (Donner’s incapacity to go beyond the literariness of the definition of “snow scene” and thus recognize himself as the one loved by Sophie), while a sense of unavoidability is enhanced by the flashback structure. Apart from depicting Sophie’s and Donner’s tragic destiny, Stoppard had another goal in writing *Artist Descending a Staircase*, that is, to expose the shaky foundations of contemporary art. Sophie has a traditional conception of art and, given Stoppard’s conservatism in cultural matters,¹¹

¹¹ “I’m a conservative with a small ‘c’. I’m a conservative in politics, literature, education and theatre” (qtd in Bull 2001: 151).

we can presume that her positions do not differ much from the author's. In scene E, when she visits the three young artists, she clearly expresses her views: "I think every artist willy-nilly is celebrating the impulse to paint in general, the imagination to paint something in particular, and the ability to make the painting in question" (Stoppard 1990: 139). This offers a stark contrast with Beauchamp's view, whose aim in recording various kind of games (namely, table tennis and chess) is to create mental images, free from the constraints of visual art: "... I'm trying to liberate the visual image from the limitations of visual art. The idea is to create images – pictures – which are purely mental. I think I'm the first artist to work in this field" (ibid.: 136-7). Fifty years later, Donner will demolish with gusto Beauchamp's illusion of creating something meaningful: "Those tape recordings of yours are the mechanical expression of a small intellectual idea, the kind of notion that might occur to a man in his bath and be forgotten in the business of drying between his toes" (ibid.: 120). Apart from illustrating the obvious opposition between avant-garde and traditional ideas on art, the contrast between Beauchamp's enthusiasm and Donner's cynicism exemplifies another key feature of this radio drama. As Anthony Jenkins put it, "the three carefree young men will grow up to be ridiculous old fools" (Jenkins 1987: 106) and the portrait of this loss of both innocence and intellectual brilliance connected to ageing is one of the play's main source of pathos.

However, *Artist Descending a Staircase* is also very funny: the conversations in which the three friends try to reconstruct some episodes of their lives as young men are among Stoppard's funniest bits and in their being inconsequential they point, once again, at Beckett's Didi and Gogo as models, as in the following example:

- BEAUCHAMP. ... The first duty of the artist is to capture the radio station.
- DONNER. It was Lewis who said that.
- BEAUCHAMP. Lewis who?
- DONNER. Wyndham Lewis.
- BEAUCHAMP. It was Edith Sitwell, as a matter of fact.
- DONNER. Rubbish.
- BEAUCHAMP. She came out with it while we were dancing.
- DONNER. You never danced with Edith Sitwell.
- BEAUCHAMP. Oh yes I did.
- DONNER. You're thinking of that American woman who sang negro spirituals at Nancy Cunard's coming-out ball.
- BEAUCHAMP. It was Queen's Mary wedding, as a matter of fact.

DONNER. You're mad.
 BEAUCHAMP. I don't mean wedding, I mean launching.
 DONNER. I can understand your confusion but it was Nancy Curnard's coming out.
 BEAUCHAMP. Down at the docks?
 DONNER. British boats are not launched to the sound of minstrels favourites.
 BEAUCHAMP. I don't mean launching, I mean maiden voyage.
 DONNER. I refuse to discuss it ...

(Stoppard 1990: 121)

And yet the play is also very moving in its dealing with lost love and lost lives, partly acted and partly confusedly recounted through the staggering memories of old men. As Anthony Jenkins also remarks, “[b]ehind the glittering cleverness, Stoppard’s depiction of sorrow and misunderstanding injects the play with an emotion that is all the more moving because of his constrained handling of a potentially saccharine plot” (Jenkins 1987: 111). In its delving into human pain *Artist Descending a Staircase* represents a unique achievement in Stoppard’s production before the 1990s, unequalled even by *The Real Thing* (1982), a story of betrayed love that does not reach a tragic dimension since adultery is dealt with in a very upper-middle class civilized way or, as one character, Debbie, puts it: “What a crisis. Infidelity among the architect class. Again” (Stoppard 1999: 218). As regards the common view that Stoppard’s early plays lacked emotional depth, Kenneth Tynan, in his *Show People* (1979), reported a conversation he had with the playwright:

Not long ago, I asked Stoppard what he thought of Marlowe’s charge that his plays failed to convey genuine emotion. He reflected for a while and then replied, “That criticism is always presented to me as if it were a membrane that I must somehow break through in order to grow up. Well, I don’t see any special virtue in making my private emotions the quarry for the statue I’m carving. I can do that kind of writing, but it tends to go off, like fruit. I don’t like it very much even when it works ... There’s a direct line of descent from the naturalistic theatre which leads you straight down to the dregs of bad theatre, bad thinking and bad feeling ... Let me put the best possible light on my inhibitions and say that I’m waiting until I can do it well”. (Tynan 1979: 64)

Stoppard apparently (and unnecessarily) connects the expression of deep emotions in his plays with the baring of his own soul. In its

requiring a sustained, albeit time-limited tension, the short form seems to have liberated, in this and other cases, something in Stoppard, a way of handling human feelings he was not familiar with. I will quote in the last paragraph two more examples of short plays from the Sixties in which human feelings and relationships were subjected to an in-depth scrutiny; oppositely, one was to wait until *Arcadia* (1993) in order to find a similar unflashing of passions in a full-length play, with the cruel destiny of Thomasina, a seventeen-year-old girl whose untimely death by fire, after receiving her first kiss, moved the audiences in a very un-Stoppardian way.

The Importance of Being in 1917 Zurich

Quite predictably, after *Artist Descending a Staircase* Stoppard went back to a lighter tone and wrote *Travesties* (1974). The two plays have much in common. Without quoting the source, Anthony Jenkins claims that Stoppard himself recognized their kinship: “[T]hematically it [*Artist Descending a Staircase*] offers what Stoppard himself called a ‘dry run’ for ideas that will appear more expansively in *Travesties*” (1987: 105). The debate on early twentieth-century avant-gardes, and, more specifically, the role of the artist in society is a theme the two plays have in common. This is particularly evident in a few lines pronounced by Beauchamp: “What is an artist? For every thousand people there’s nine hundred doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good, and one lucky dog painting or writing about the other nine hundred and ninety-nine” (Stoppard 1990: 144) and reprised, if slightly modified, by *Travesties*’s protagonist, Henry Carr. This character is based upon a real person of the same name, an employee of the British consulate in Zurich during the Great War, infamous for a judicial quarrel with James Joyce, who, on his part, later exacted retribution against him by giving his surname to a despicable character of *Ulysses*, Private Carr. Besides Carr’s documented relationship with Joyce, his fictional acquaintance with two other famous inhabitants of 1917 Zurich, Lenin and Tristan Tzara, is the unifying idea of the drama. Tzara and Lenin were also present in secondary episodes of *Artist Descending a Staircase* (the former being comically confused at some point by Beauchamp with Tarzan), while some other artists, such as Hans Harp and Picabia, are also mentioned in both plays. The comic device of re-telling the past through the uncertain memories of an elderly person, which had worked so effectively in *Artist Descending a Staircase*, is replicated here by Carr who recalls his past life mixing and confusing it with the characters and plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The choice of the Wildean play is not casual: real-life Carr’s

only claim to fame (his court case with Joyce) had been originated by a quarrel on the expenses he had sustained in order to interpret the character of Algernon in a staging of *The Importance of Being Earnest* directed by Joyce himself. That episode, transposed in the fictional reality of the play, seems to have haunted Carr for the rest of his life. It could even be argued that *Travesties* originated from the merging of *Artist Descending a Staircase* with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, from which the framework of the play and the female characters' names, if not their personalities, are derived: suffice it to say that Henry Carr and the Dadaist Tristan Tzara take on the role and are given the (modified) cues of Algernon Moncrieff and John Worthing; that the female characters of Cecily and Gwendolen, besides being wooed by Carr and Tzara respectively, work as enthusiastic personal assistants of Lenin and James Joyce, and that the latter is paired with Lady Bracknell/Aunt Augusta and at some point even speaks one of her lines: "Rise, sir, from that semi-recumbent posture" (Wilde 1972: 60; Stoppard 1975: 55). In a characteristically self-deprecating fashion, Stoppard defined *Travesties* as "a pig's breakfast" (Hayman 1982: 12), in order to underline the play's richness verging on confusion. This kind of operation did not prove entirely convincing, though. As Kenneth Tynan, otherwise an enthusiastic admirer of Stoppard, put it: "Stoppard imposes the plot of Wilde's play, itself thoroughly baroque, upon his own burlesque vision of life in war-time Zurich, which is like crossbreeding the bizarre with the bogus" (Tynan 1979: 109). *Travesties* is an intellectual extravaganza (a certain familiarity with *The Importance of Being Earnest* is mandatory in order to appreciate and enjoy its humour) and a fireworks display of wit, yet at the same time it betrays a kind of hollowness, especially in comparison with the radio play, in which Stoppard's verbal ingenuity is not an end in itself but it is functional to the tragic development of the drama.

To Make a Short Story Long

In both *Jumpers* and *Travesties* the full-length play is the result of the insertion of textual matter (massive in one case, quantitatively limited but extremely meaningful in the other) of a classic author into the fabric of a short play. This creative modality has been employed by Stoppard in two other cases: the unpublished *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*, liberally transformed into the third act of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, while *Hamlet* gave substance to the first two acts; and *Dogg's Our Pet*, a fifteen-minute play written in 1971 for Ed Berman's *Almost Free*

Theatre. *Dogg's Our Pet* constituted the embryo of *Dogg's Hamlet – Caboot's Macbeth* (1979), a double-bill play that included both Shakespearean tragedies in abridged versions. Stoppard's goal in this play was to call the attention on the situation of political dissidents in Eastern Europe: the focus was particularly on Pavel Kohout, a Czech playwright and director who, forced out of work for his political beliefs, founded a Living-Room Theatre and performed *Macbeth* in any household that would accept the risk of hosting it. Anyway, the peculiarity of the four dramas sequence (*Another Moon Called Earth*, 1967, *Jumpers*, 1972, *Artist Descending a Staircase*, 1972, *Travesties*, 1974) is that they stand in a sort of chiasmic relation: while in the first couple we find a predictable increase in complexity (i.e. the longer play develops and deepens the themes of the shorter one), in the second one, the longer play somehow trivializes the motifs of the short one, using them as pretexts for the author's flamboyant fantasy and verbal dexterity. This may come as a surprise but, apart from the obvious consideration that, in drama, short is never synonymous with easy or second-rate, in Stoppard quite the opposite is true. In his early production there are two other specimens of short radio plays in which human feelings are the object of an in-depth investigation that Stoppard seemed not interested in transplanting into his longer plays. One is *M is for Moon Among Other Things* (1964), a fifteen-minute radio play in which the lack of communication and feelings between a middle-aged married couple is highlighted by the emotional response of the husband to the news of Marilyn Monroe's suicide; the other is the thirty-minute long *If You're Glad I'll be Frank* (1966), in which a surreal plot (the search of a husband for his wife, trapped somewhere as the voice of the Speaking Clock of the telephone) gives way to a tender exchange between the two spouses. It is hard to find a satisfactory explanation for Stoppard's tendency to investigate the human soul in short plays and to emphasize comicality in the longer ones. One may be led to conjecture that, after the success of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, he realized that the paying customers of the West End theatres expected from him a sophisticated laugh, and gave them exactly that, while with the at-home audiences of TV and radio he felt freer not to conform to the cliché depicting him as a wizard of verbal expression. Given that his ultimate goal was just to "entertain a roomful of people" (Hudson, Itzin, and Trussler 1994: 57) it is quite pointless to look for explanations that the author himself would be unable, or better, unwilling to give. The following quotation is taken from a 1974 interview with the editors of *Theatre Quarterly* and refers to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, but can be applied to all of Stoppard's

dramas, showing how hard it is to distinguish in his work the spontaneous from the planned:

[O]ne is the victim and beneficiary of one's subconscious all the time and, obviously, one is making choices all the time ... It's difficult for me to endorse or discourage particular theories – I mean, I receive lots of letters from students, and people who are doing the play, asking me questions about it, which seem to expect a yes-or-no-answer. It is a mistake to assume that such questions have that kind of answer. I personally think that anybody's set of ideas which grows out of the play has its own validity. (Hudson, Itzin, and Trussler 1994: 58)

Stoppard reiterated this explanation in his interview with Ronald Hayman, also emphasizing an element of chance in his creative process: “My experience is that a lot of one's work is the result of lucky accidents ... What's wrong with bad art is that the artist knows exactly what he's doing” (Hayman 1982: 2). A logical conclusion is that a strictly delimited (and non-negotiable with a theatre management) space of time, spanning between the 15 and the 45 minutes of the radio and TV play under scrutiny helped Stoppard to keep his creative forces concentrated, without leaving free reins to his somehow straying verbal exuberance.¹² The staging of both *Jumpers* and *Travesties* bears witness to Stoppard's difficulty in keeping his longer plays into manageable dimensions testifying his flair for long forms. As regards the former, Kenneth Tynan takes credit for having reduced, seemingly without Stoppard's consent, its size in rehearsals: “Ten days before the premiere, however, the play was still running close to four hours ... The next afternoon ... I nipped into the rehearsal room ... and dictated to the cast a series of cuts and transpositions that reduced the text to what I consider manageable length” (Tynan 1979: 97).¹³ The case of *Travesties* is even more peculiar: the second act of the play starts with Cecily's long lecture on Marxist theories. The 1984 printed edition has this extraordinary direction: “*the performance of the whole of this lecture is not a requirement but an option*” (Stoppard 1984: 66). The fact that Stoppard looked at a long speech as dispensable shows that he was aware that his

¹² As the *New York Times* critic Walter Kerr remarked, “[i]ntellectually restless as an hummingbird, and just as incapable of lighting anywhere, the playwright has a gift for making the randomness of his flight funny” (qtd in Jenkins 1987: x).

¹³ Kenneth Tynan was literary manager of the National Theatre between 1963 and 1974 (see <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/discover-more/welcome-to-the-national-theatre/the-history-of-the-national-theatre/kenneth-tynan>, last access 15 November 2015.)

tendency to verbal overflowing sometimes stretched an audience's patience to breaking point. One has only to compare this hypertrophy with the economy of expression achieved in the short plays previously quoted to notice how much Stoppard profited from imposed time limits. *Another Moon Called Earth* is a perfect entertaining device that holds the ground for all of his running time with no dull moment, as opposed to *Jumpers* whose monologues seem sometimes to exceed the audience's attention span; and, as discussed above, *Artist Descending a Staircase* comprises a balanced mixture of tragedy and comedy unrivalled in Stoppard's early production. Given these qualities, it is quite surprising that these short plays are largely forgotten, especially in comparison with the plays derived from them, which have been even recently staged.

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