



**Alive In A Box: Death, Laughter, and Metaphysics
in the Plays of Tom Stoppard**
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CLOV

You've asked me these
questions millions of times.

HAMM

I love the old questions.
Ah the old questions,
the old answers,
there's nothing like them.

--Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

ROSENCRANTZ

I remember when
there were no questions.

GULDENSTERN

There were always questions.
To exchange one set for another
is no great matter.

--Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern are Dead*

In his *Modern Tragedy and the British Tradition*, Richard Dutton describes Tragedy as a genre “seeking to appease or come to terms with the unknowable forces which govern our existence...a way of embodying a sense of providence, a sense of the real shape and pattern of existence which is not apparent in our everyday lives”(Dutton 14). A similar concern for identifying the patterns of existence can be found in the plays of Tom Stoppard, even if those patterns are ultimately exposed as mere byproducts of all-encompassing brands of chaos and absurdity. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *Jumpers*, *Travesties*, and *Arcadia*, are vivid illustrations of the more prominent features of modern Tragedy. They combine provocative examinations of profound metaphysical issues with biting comic and ironic flourishes. A theatrical gaiety and unshakable sense of hope are expertly coupled with deep foreboding and existential despair. Laughter is omnipresent, even as death threatens.

In Act Two of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, we find the following exchange:

Player: There's a design at work in all art—surely you know that? Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion.

Guil: And what's that, in this case?

Player: It never varies—we aim at the point where everybody marked for death dies.

Guil: Marked?

Player: Between “just desserts” and “tragic irony” we are given quite a lot of scope for our particular talent. (57)

Somewhere between the Player's "just desserts" and "tragic irony" lies *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*'s poignant, vivid, and peculiar conceit. For though our two titular protagonists emerge as ostensibly guiltless victims, their final demise strikes a rather hollow note—affecting in only the most abstract of terms. They are ultimately representatives, not merely of the Danish court, but of the genus of mankind—their fate decided by the indifferent and random nod of chance, and not, as it might at first seem, by the cool, calculating hand of evil human agency. This thematic feature is illustrative of I.A. Ratsky's assertion that "the hero of Tragedy depends on circumstances, he often plays the role of a victim of events and of fate" (Ratsky 596). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the victims of fate, their deaths are the result of the same brand of randomness that they've been investigating throughout the course of the play; a randomness embodied in the simple act of tossing a coin. But Stoppard's dramatic illustration of a decidedly existential scenario does not itself fall victim to the potentially depressive weight often associated with such a seemingly bleak philosophical position. On the contrary, the play abounds with humor, both rollicking and cerebral, and Stoppard's conspicuous subversion of the supposed purity of a given genre is employed toward great comic effect. The subversion is accomplished through a jarring, self-conscious blend of laughter, death, and thematically resonating metaphysical/philosophical investigations.

The effectiveness of Stoppard's subversions is due, in large part, to his concurrent recognition of the existence of rules governing a particular genre. The play's self-conscious acknowledgement of standard generic features is found in the Player's description of his troupe's repertoire:

Player: We're more of the blood, love and rhetoric school.

Guil: Well, I'll leave the choice to you, if there is anything to choose between them.

Player: They're hardly divisible, sir—well, I can do you blood and love without the rhetoric, and I can do you blood and rhetoric without the love, and I can do you all three concurrent and consecutive, but I can't do you love and rhetoric without the blood. Blood is compulsory—they're all blood, you see.(23)

The Player's strict, declared adherence to a set of pre-established generic guidelines makes Stoppard's calculated reconfigurations all the more vivid and startling. Modally, the play never surrenders its decidedly comic bent—but, as we shall see, the humor is frequently and abrasively foregrounded by a series of peculiar, often disturbing events, exchanges, and thematic embroideries which transport the play into more conspicuously tragicomic realms.

The most prominent of these thematic components is a relentless confrontation with death, both in material and abstract terms. Death, of course, is both threatened and experienced, prefigured by Guildenstern in yet another contentious debate with the Player, who has, ironically, just declared that "audiences know what to expect, and that is all they are prepared to believe in" (Stoppard, *Rosencrantz* 62).

Gildenstern responds:

Guil: No, no, no...you've got it all wrong...you can't act death. The *fact* of it is nothing to do with seeing it happen—it's not gasps and blood and falling about—that isn't what makes it death. It's just a man failing to reappear, that's all—now you see him, now you don't, that's the only thing that's real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back—an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death.(62)

Guildenstern's description reaches an abrupt fruition at play's end:

Guil: Our names shouted in a certain dawn...a message...a summons...There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it.
(He looks around and sees he is alone.)

Rosen--?

Guil--?
(He gathers himself.)

Well, we'll know better next time. Now you see me, now you—
(And disappears.)(91)

Several lines later, their deaths are announced by the Ambassador in the borrowed scene from *Hamlet*. A purely comic mode is subverted by the play's willingness to "stir deep emotions and directly confront human suffering, mortality, and death" (Gerould 80). But unlike many tragicomedies, the "tragic impasse" (Gerould 80) is *not* avoided—our protagonists die. Their deaths, foreshadowed from the beginning of the play, run parallel to the carnage at *Hamlet's* conclusion; *Hamlet*, of course, being the Tragedy from which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were born. Yet *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*'s final resonances are vastly dissimilar to those of *Hamlet*, or any other more traditional Tragedy for that matter. For while the play confronts the "irreconcilable conflicts between reason and emotion," (Dutton 14) it also keeps the audience "in a state of bewildered amazement rather than engaged sympathy" (Dutton 14). Its distancing effects are reinforced because it is "self-consciously theatrical and draws attention to its own artifice" (Dutton 15).

The most prominent examples of the play's self-conscious theatricality and self-acknowledged artifice are found in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's semi-regular exchanges with the Tragedians. The following passage from Act Two directly diffuses the potential emotional impact of the protagonists' demise:

Guil: You!—What do you know about *death*?

Player: It's what the actors do best. They have to exploit whatever talent is given to them, and their talent is dying. They can die heroically, comically, ironically, slowly, suddenly, disgustingly, charmingly, or from a great height.(60)

And just a few lines later:

Guil: Actors! The mechanics of cheap melodrama! That isn't death! (More quietly.) You scream and choke and sink to your knees, but it doesn't bring death home to anyone—it doesn't catch them unawares and start the whisper in their skulls that says—"One day you are going to die." You die so many times; how can you expect them to believe in your death?

Player: On the contrary, it's the only kind they do believe. They're conditioned to it.
(61)

We are constantly reminded that death on stage is a mere theatrical contrivance, manufactured toward dramatic effect. Yet the manner of Guildenstern's death—a simple "failure to reappear...a disappearance...now you see him, now you don't..."(62)—is directly reflective of his own philosophical musings on the nature of death. In light of his constant theorizing, his demise is pondered more than is it felt—both as a theatrical device and as a metaphysical phenomenon. The play's residual proddings are, therefore, less emotional and more cerebral in nature.

Jumpers, likewise, features a rather ostentatious and economical mix of death, laughter, and metaphysical exploration. The play's opening scenes contain the odd combination of the seemingly disparate elements in a highly stylized and theatrical form. The circus-like introduction to the world of the play is capped by Dotty's apparent murder of the Jumper, while the comic, farce-like attempts to conceal the dead body are interspersed with George's rehearsals for his lecture on the existence of God. These abrasive juxtapositions of the three elements are maintained throughout the course of the play.

While standard generic features of the Murder Mystery are craftily incorporated (i.e., Inspector Bones's investigation), George's sincere attempts to formulate an intellectually/philosophically sound metaphysical argument are constantly being interrupted by comic—albeit macabre—happenings. The tragic dimensions of the Jumper's death, Dotty's impending implication and all its attendant consequences, and the weighty profundities of serious metaphysical inquiry are ultimately undermined and diluted by an unrelenting and eventually overpowering comic mode.

In Act Two, George asks:

George: Do I say 'My friend the late Bertrand Russell' or 'My late friend Bertrand Russell'? They both sound funny.(31)

George's question and subsequent observation are illustrative of *Jumpers*'s conscious mingling of death and laughter. Meanwhile, his strained assemblage of an intellectually sound polemic becomes integral as both a narrative and thematic component; it acts as a kind of fulcrum midway between the play's tragic and comic characteristics, both initiating their respective developments and negotiating their subtle fusion.

Death's omnipresence manifests itself literally. The presence of the murdered Jumper's lifeless body is a constant, tangible reminder of the characters' tenuous proximity to death. The discovery of the impaled hare Thumper and the tortoise Pat's horrifying on-stage death are also powerful illustrations of life's fragility; the not-so-subtle implication being that the inhabitants of *Jumpers*'s world, and we ourselves, are only one small step away from a similar fate.

But death is also treated hypothetically, as when George and Archie discuss Man's place in the Universe:

George: Where did he find the despair...? I thought the whole *point* of denying the Absolute was to reduce the scale, instantly, to the inconsequential behaviour of inconsequential animals; that nothing could ever be that important...

Archie: Including, I suppose, death...It's an interesting view of atheism, as a sort of crutch for those who can't bear the reality of God...

George (still away): I wonder if McFee was afraid of death? And if he was, what was it that he would have been afraid of: surely not the chemical change in the material that was his body. I suppose he would have said, as many do, that it is only the dying he feared, yes, the physical process of giving out. But it's not the dying with me—one knows about pain. It's *death* that I'm afraid of.
(69)

The myriad intimations of such discourse abstracts the actual dying—we are forced to ponder the circumstances surrounding the tragic events, not to feel them. The metaphysical inquiry works as a distancing device, preventing the establishment of profound emotional connections. Death becomes a conceptual issue, an idea, not a present, immediate, corporeal reality.

Laughter, of course, is also omnipresent, disallowing the formation of any genuinely tragic reverberations. In comic mode, the Jumper's corpse is not treated in any remotely respectful and/or dignified manner; instead it is employed by the respective characters as an inanimate tool for their own self-preservation. It is propped up in a chair, hung on a door, stuffed in a plastic bag and left in a park. Likewise, George's accidental destruction of Pat following his discovery of the skewered Thumper, incites a perversely comical reaction. The poignancy of the revelation of Thumper is quickly and hysterically dissipated, described by Stoppard as follows:

George realizes that the blood must have come from the top of the cupboard, i.e. wardrobe. He needs to stand on his desk or chair. He puts Pat, whom he had been holding, down now and climbs up to look into the top of the cupboard; and withdraws from the unseen depths his misfired arrow, on which is impaled Thumper. The music still continues. Holding Thumper up by the arrow, George puts his face against the fur. A single sob. He steps backwards, down...CRRRRRUNCH!!!

He has stepped, fatally, on Pat.(81)

Pat's ghastly, shocking, sudden death is somehow funny, both in its unexpectedness and its position as an ostensible culmination of some strange sort--emblematic of the pervasive themes of randomness and meaninglessness that the plays aim to confront.

Toward the end of *Travesties*, Stoppard describes a set change in which Beethoven's "Appassionata" degenerates absurdly into "Mr. Gallagher and Mr. Shean," (89) a music-hall patter song. The caustic coupling of "high" and "low" art, of a grand, moving, passionate work with an imbecilic, pedestrian ditty highlights the play's intentional mingling of seemingly oppositional ingredients. This type of mingling echoes the play's odd mixture of great, historical figures like James Joyce, Tristan Tzara, and Lenin with the insignificant, somewhat buffoonish Henry Carr, who ultimately emerges as the play's senile tragicomic hero.

Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Carr meets Ratsky's criteria for a tragicomic hero. Not only is he entirely subject to the whims of a fickle fate, but, contrary to his assertions in the opening narration, he seems entirely unaware of the potential implications of the events as they unfold before him. He is a victim of circumstances, not a creator of them, and his impotency is highlighted by his untrustworthy recollections of former acquaintances who went on to achieve greatness in one form or another.

Like the confrontation of disparate musical forms, *Travesties'* locale reflects the careful negotiation of two opposing forces; the kind of negotiation resting at the center of the tragicomedic genre. Switzerland during World War I is retrospectively described by the aged Carr as follows:

Oh, Switzerland!—unfurled like a white flag, pacific civilian Switzerland—the miraculous neutrality of it, the noncombatant impartiality of it, the non-aggression pacts of it, the international red cross of it—entente to the left, détente to the right, into the valley of the invalided blundered and wandered myself when young.(25)

Yet, in the middle of this apparent neutrality, profound ideas are being cultivated; ideas which will change the world: "two revolutions formed in the same street" (Stoppard, *Travesties* 24).

But the import of the illustrated events is only truly appreciated in hindsight, for, as Tzara is so quick to observe, even the monumental figures inhabiting the world of the play are helpless in the face of an all-subsumptive randomness that governs the universe—the same randomness to which Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Thumper, Pat, and Carr are necessarily subjugated. The respective fruitions of the ideas of Joyce, Lenin, and Tzara are merely the result of a series of chance events, and even in the end, are rendered meaningless by the

absurdity of man's existence. It is an idea that Tzara espouses throughout the course of the play, and one which is supported by John Orr in his *Tragicomedy and Contemporary Culture*, when he writes that in Tragicomedy there is "endlessly reflexive play and the rapid improvisations of game-playing lead to bewilderment rather than certainty" (Orr 18). Or, as Tzara makes clear:

I am sick of cleverness. The clever people try to impose a design on the world and when it goes calamitously wrong they call it fate. In point of fact, everything is Chance, including design.(37)

Tzara, of course, practices his preachings. He composes poetry through the random selection of words from a hat, while insisting that

The causes we know everything about depend on causes we know very little about, which depend on causes we know absolutely nothing about. And it is the duty of the artist to jeer and howl and belch at the delusion that infinite generation of real effects can be inferred from the gross expression of apparent cause.(37)

While Tzara's musings are reminiscent of George's extemporaneous analyses of the metaphysical implications of Absolutism, they also directly confront the myriad perspectives on the nature and/or function of artistic design. In the same spirit of opposition, Tzara tenets are challenged by both Carr and Joyce, the latter of whom strongly asserts that the "artist is the magician put among men to gratify—capriciously—their urge for immortality"(Stoppard, *Travesties* 62). Joyce, perhaps ironically, is actually reiterating Carr's earlier espousal of design and craftsmanship in art:

An artist is someone who is gifted in some way that enables him to do something more or less well which can only be done badly or not at all by someone who is not thus gifted. If there is any point in using language at all it is that a word is taken to stand for a particular fact or idea and not for other facts or ideas...Don't you see my dear Tristan you are simply asking me to accept that the word Art means whatever you wish it to mean; but I do not accept it.(38-39)

The willingness to confront, if not reconcile, opposing ideas becomes a primary component in *Travesties*'s tragicomic design—even when that design is intimated to be inextricably linked to a greater, overriding chaos.

The aesthetic design of *Arcadia* is much more rigid and identifiable. It maintains a rather strict adherence to a relatively simple parallel structure: two narrative threads, moving forward in separate temporal locales; independent narrative which ultimately convene in the play's final scene. The respective narratives are linked, however, through a rich and disparate set of connecting devices which enrich and intensify an otherwise straightforward parallel structure. The play's scheme supports the diverse elements which make *Arcadia* exemplary of modern Tragicomedy.

In *Currents in Contemporary Drama*, Ruby Cohn discusses the "mixing" found in Tragicomedy. The idea of mixing is explored in *Arcadia* in both literal and metaphysical terms, embellishing the play's own generic and modal mix of dramatic and thematic elements:

Thomasina: When you stir your rice pudding, Septimus, the spoonful of jam spreads itself round making red trails like the picture of a meteor in my astronomical atlas. But if you stir backward, the jam will not come together again. Indeed, the pudding does not notice and continues to turn pink just as before. Do you think this is odd?

Septimus: No.

Thomasina: Well, I do. You cannot stir things apart.

Septimus: No more you can, time must needs run backward, and since it will not, we must stir our way onward mixing as we go, disorder out of disorder into disorder until pink is complete, unchanging and unchangeable, and we are done with it forever.(5)

The tragicomic mixture of independent generic features mirrors *Arcadia*'s Scene Seven convergence of separate temporal narratives, as well as the mixture cited in Septimus's above-quoted metaphysical inquiry. Once again, serious metaphysical exploration emerges as the thematic centerpiece, around which tragic and comic modalities compete and eventually meld.

Perhaps the most prominent and interesting of *Arcadia*'s tragicomic features is found in the play's concluding images. In Scene Seven we learn, through Hannah, of Thomasina's tragic death by fire on the eve of her seventeenth birthday, and of Septimus's subsequent madness and complete withdrawal. Yet the play's finale features a vital, happy Thomasina, at last waltzing joyfully, with her beloved Septimus. The play's structural design has, in fact, rescued Thomasina and Septimus from their tragic ends, at least in terms of the on-stage drama. Our knowledge of their respective fates is in sharp and disturbing contrast to the ecstatic on-stage image. The provocative juxtaposition resonates in powerfully eerie, unsettling ways—indicative of some of Tragedy's more ambitious aims.

In Act Two of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, we find the following exchange:

Rosencrantz: Do you ever think of yourself as actually *dead*, lying in a box with a lid on it?

Guildenstern: No.

Rosencrantz: Nor do I, really...It's silly to be depressed by it. I mean one thinks of it like being alive in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account that one is dead...which should make all the difference...shouldn't it? I mean, you'd never know you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being asleep in a box. Not that I'd like to sleep in a box, mind you, not without any air—you'd wake up dead, for a start and then where would you be? Apart from inside a box. That's the bit I don't like, frankly. That's why I don't think of it...(50)

Coupled with his attendant commentary, Rosencrantz's image of one being "alive in a box," emerges as a superlative example of Stoppard's unique excavations in tragicomic territory. It is a vivid crystallization of the expert mingling of those distinct modal features which swim about the hybrid genre: death, laughter, and metaphysical inquiry. In Stoppard's plays, death does not merely threaten, it is experienced. Laughter does not merely offer occasional relief, it is relentless. Metaphysics is not merely an esoteric thematic device, but an active, affecting presence. And the volatile combination is not merely unsettling, entertaining, and thought-provoking, but amazingly, strikingly, artfully assembled with all the skill of a practiced magician. Now you see him, now you—

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