

TOM STOPPARD'S POSITION WITHIN THE TRADITION OF CONTEMPORARY COMIC DRAMA*

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Comedies of the traditional type continue to be written and performed in the twentieth century. In England, Noël Coward and Ben Travers have been able to meet with commercial and critical success, without disrupting the mould of comedy of manners and farce respectively. The same can be said of Alan Ayckbourn and the American playwright Neil Simon. However, a new type of comedy has emerged, one that differs from that of earlier periods of drama in both form and content. The broad trends of comedy of the new type do not stop at frontiers: playwrights like Tom Stoppard

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and Peter Shaffer in England; Arthur Kopit, David Rabe and Sam Shepard in America; and Slawomir Mrozek, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Peter Weiss, Václav Havel, and Peter Handke on the Continent have embraced this new, eclectic form which they call **comedy** as the most adequate model to express the complex, chaotic reality of our time.

According to George BRANDT, the fact that **comedy** has thrived in the twentieth century seems in itself a paradox, since we have witnessed some of the greatest disasters in human history, such as

worldwide economic crises, two world conflicts, a Thirty Years War in Vietnam, fascism, systematic genocide, the invention of the fission and fusion bombs, the threat of biological and environmental warfare.¹

All this suggests that our time is very unpropitious for comedy, but the fact is that it has produced very little tragedy.

George STEINER in his survey on the **death of tragedy**² suggests that the history of literature since the Renaissance has witnessed the decline of tragedy. With the advent of scientific discoveries in the seventeenth century, the old cosmic mythologies (the classic myth, and Christianity of the past), which were the essential force behind the conventions of tragedy, tended to become meaningless. The death of the gods and traditional mythologies gave rise to a new modern man who, being incapable to face the chaos of the contemporary world, lacks heroic grandeur which makes him an unsuitable protagonist for tragedy. He sees contemporary tragedy as an art of pastiche, with mocking variations of the myths of the past; he considers most of the recent attempts to imitate tragedy as **travesties** of tragedy.

¹BRANDT, G. *Twentieth Century Comedy*. In: HOWARTH, W. D. *Comic Drama: the European Heritage*. London: Methuen, 1978. p.166. Viewing the genesis of modern drama in retrospect, George BRANDT refers to Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Rex* as being the first play to blur the traditional image of man and his world. There is an element of literary parody in the play, which is not directed at Sophocles as the title might suggest, but at Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: Jarry presents a grotesque anti-hero whose sordidness shatters the traditional myth of the **greatness** of the hero. (See BRANDT, p.174.)

²STEINER, G. *The Death of Tragedy*. London: Faber, 1974. 355 p.

1. THE MIXTURE OF MODES: THE TRAGICOMIC AND THE SERIOCOMIC

In an attempt to elucidate the reasons why comedy has been established as the most important contemporary dramatic genre, BRANDT proposes the examination of two important points: first, the disruption of the old structure of society and, second, the gradual breakdown of traditional values and beliefs.

In our century, not only rigid social stratification has ceased to be a reality, but even more significantly, the belief that status expresses the essence of man is no longer acceptable. In BRANDT's terms, "this blurring of felt distinctions among men has led to a blurring of genre distinctions".³ Comedy of the new type is different from that of the past, because the model of the world upon which it is predicated is in no way similar to the old idealistic image of society. There is a "new comic response"⁴ in contemporary plays, which derives exactly from the blurring of genre boundaries: the mixing of modes and conventions has resulted in a distinctively contemporary kind of drama that is either tragicomic or seriocomic.

Moreover, the complexity of modern urban society has brought striking alterations in the social framework: there has been an inver-

³BRANDT, p.167. Renaissance theorists, among them Julius Caesar SCALIGER had provided a class-based distinction between **comedy** and **tragedy**: "Tragedy, like comedy, is patterned after real life, but it differs from comedy in the rank of the characters, in the nature of the action and in the outcome. These differences demand, in turn, differences in style. Comedy employs characters from rustic, or low city life. . . . Tragedy, on the other hand, employs kings and princes. . ." (See SCALIGER, J.C. Poetics. In: CLARK, B.H., ed. *European Theories of the Drama*. New York, Crown: 1965. p.46.) This kind of distinction between comedy and tragedy resulted from the erroneous interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. While the Greek philosopher emphasized that tragedy is the imitation of a **noble action**, his followers tended to confuse noble action with the **social position of the protagonist**. This neo-classical modification tended to exclude **laughter** from the literary genres that were considered **serious**. Laughter was not universally accepted; the laughable was restricted to **comedy and farce**, which represented the vices of individuals from the lower classes. Laughter used to confirm the social norms, expressing the moral of absolutism: it was natural for the aristocrat to laugh at the expense of the petit-bourgeois, who was always presented as a simpleton who could be easily fooled. For a useful synthesis of the several conceptions of laughter, which have changed throughout the centuries, see BAKHTIN, M. *Rabelais and his world*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968. p.59-114.

⁴BRANDT, p.168. BRANDT says that a new comic sensibility has developed because the quality of our laughter as well as its target have changed: "In the past, when spectators were rocking with laughter they were safe. The butt was up there on the stage and could be mocked without any self-questioning. Now when the auditorium is rocking it may be an earthquake right under our feet. As likely as not we are ourselves the butts - not in our personal capacity as misanthropes or imaginary invalids but as members of a society that is palpably sick. Laughter used to confirm the social norms and in that sense it was conservative. Now it often becomes a means of insight into social contradictions and in that sense it disturbs the norm". (See BRANDT, p.173.)

sion of values in the sense that now quantity prevails over quality. This does not merely allude to the fact that the population of the world has increased in an alarming way; it also reminds us of the drastic *shrinking of the role of the individual* in contemporary society.⁵

Brandt makes reference to an essay by Friedrich DÜRRENMATT entitled **Problems of the Theatre**, in which the playwright tries to convey how the new departure in comedy has its roots in the change of values in contemporary life:

Tragedy presupposes guilt, despair, moderation, lucidity, vision, a sense of responsibility. In the Punch-and-Judy show of our century, in this backsliding of the white race, there are neither guilty nor responsible individuals any more. No one could do anything about it, and no one wanted to. Indeed, things happen without anyone in particular being responsible for them. Everything is dragged along and everyone gets caught somewhere in the sweep of events. We are all collectively guilty, collectively bogged down in the sins of our fathers and of our forefathers. We are the children of our forebears. That is our misfortune, but not our guilt: guilt today can exist only as a personal achievement, as a religious act. *Comedy is the only thing that can still reach us.*⁶

This short quotation reveals the radical theoretical differences between past and present: the former concentration on guilt and responsibility concerning the individual in society has largely lost its meaning in a world of technology, totalitarian power-structures, and collective force. Referring to Schiller as one of the last tragedians, DÜRRENMATT asserts that the modern dramatic author can no longer write in the grand tragic tradition in a time that lacks heroic grandeur:

The world today as it appears to us can hardly be en-

⁵BRANDT, p.172.

⁶DÜRRENMATT, F. *Problems of the Theater*. In: SANDER, V. (ed.). *Friedrich Dürrenmatt: Plays and Essays*. New York : Continuum, 1982. p.254-5.

compassed in the form of drama as Schiller wrote it, for the simple reason that we *no longer have any tragic heroes*, but only vast tragedies staged by world butchers and produced by slaughtering machines. Hitler and Stalin cannot be made into Wallensteins. Their power was so enormous that they themselves were no more than incidental, corporeal, and easily replaceable expressions of this power; and the misfortune associated with the former and to a considerable extent also with the latter is too vast, too complex, too horrible, too mechanical, and usually simply too devoid of all sense. Wallenstein's power can still be envisioned; power as we know it today can only be seen in its smallest part for, like an iceberg, the largest part is submerged in anonymity and abstraction. Schiller's drama presupposes a world that the eye can take in, that takes for granted genuine actions of state, just as Greek tragedy did.⁷

The playwright argues that tragedy needs heroes, which seem completely out of place in an age of automation and impersonal institutions, boards of directors and secretaries of anonymous executives.

Furthermore, the tragic conflict is no longer possible in a world deprived of certainty, order and moral absolutes. **High tragedy** presupposes a homogeneous audience, a real community sharing religious beliefs and ethical standards. There is an equilibrium or balance implied in high tragedy: suffering and catastrophe are related to a universal law whose operation justifies them or compensates them. As tragedy is essentially optimistic, modern playwrights tend to become inhibited, because the faith in the perfectibility of man is gone. Thus, from a political and social viewpoint, high tragedy becomes impossible in our time.

In the essay mentioned, Dürrenmatt proposes that **comedy** is the only dramatic form suitable for the twentieth century. Under the influence of the playwrights of the German tradition,⁸ he sees **comedy** as a genre tending towards the **tragicomic**. In most of his plays he lays bare the victimization of the individual as a conse-

⁷DÜRRENMATT, *Problems of the Theater*, p.252-3.

⁸J.M.R. LENZ (*Sturm u. Drang* – 18th century) has argued about the impossibility of the purely tragic in his own age. He suggests that **comedy** must incorporate functional elements of tragedy, because: "was ehemals auf dem Kothurn ging, sollte doch heutzutage an unsere Sokkus reichen. Soviel Trauerspiele sind doch nicht umsonst gespielt worden, was ehemals grausen machte, das soll uns lächern machen". (See LENZ, J.M.R. *Pandämonium Germanicum*. In: NICOLAI, H. (ed.), *Sturm u. Drang: Dichtungen und theoretische Texte*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971. v.1, p.823.)

quence of accidental factors. He theorizes about the adequacy of **the mixed genre tradition** to express the reality of the present time; he insists that in an age of grotesqueness and paradox, an inherently **tragic subject** must assume the **form of comedy** and a non-heroic character may display heroic dimensions:

But the *tragic* is still possible even if *pure tragedy* is not. We can achieve the tragic out of comedy, we can bring it forth as a frightening moment, as an abyss that opens suddenly. As a matter of fact, many of Shakespeare's tragedies are really comedies out of which the tragic arises.

After all this the conclusion might easily be drawn that *comedy is the expression of despair*, but this conclusion is not inevitable. Of course, whoever perceives the senselessness, the hopelessness of this world might well despair, *but this despair is not a result of this world, but rather an answer given by an individual to this world*. Another answer would be *not to despair*: it might be an individual's decision to endure this world in which we frequently live like Gulliver among the giants. He also achieves distance, he also steps back a pace or two who takes measure of his opponent, who prepares himself to fight his opponent or to escape him. *It is still possible to portray man as a courageous being.*⁹

Dürrenmatt insists that the realization of absurdity of modern life must not call for despair. He invites us to come to terms with the world in which we live and encourages us to participate in the fight against the powers that threaten it. He claims that the writer of comedy transforms "a world that is no laughing matter into a stage world about which he laughs".¹⁰ But such laughter has a "bitter aftertaste";¹¹ it is not liberating any more.

DÜRRENMATT shows the world as a stage of grotesque

⁹DÜRRENMATT, *Problems of the Theater*, p.255.

¹⁰DÜRRENMATT, F. *Theater: Schriften und Reden*. Zürich: Arche, 1966. p.72.

¹¹In his essay on **laughter**, Henri BERGSON states that **comedy** is itself only "a slight revolt on the surface of social life". He compares laughter to "a froth with a saline base. Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the after-taste bitter". (BERGSON, H. *Laughter*. In: SYPHER, W. *Comedy*. London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983. p.190.)

theatricality, because he believes that **the grotesque** is one of the great possibilities of being precise:

Our world has led to the grotesque as well as to the atom bomb, and so it is a world like that of Hieronymus Bosch whose apocalyptic paintings are also grotesque. And yet, the grotesque is only a way of expressing in a tangible manner, of making us perceive physically the paradoxical: it is the form of the unformed, the visage of a faceless world. And just as our thinking today seems to be unable to do without the concept of paradox, so also art and our world, which still exists because the atom bomb exists: out of fear of the bomb.¹²

In an essay entitled **Terms of the Tragicomic Mixture**, Ruby COHN argues that the critical writings of Baudelaire and Pirandello foreshadow a distinctively contemporary kind of tragicomedy. Baudelaire conceives of **laughter** as an **expression of anguish**. He is fascinated by the grotesque which he calls the **absolute comic**. He insists on a degree of artistic self-consciousness that prefigures Pirandello and the seriocomic play of doubles.¹³ Pirandello regards **humour** as a fusion of laughter and grief. In his essay entitled **L'Umorismo**, he argues that **humourism** is related to the grotesque and the ironic and that it implies an attitude of self-consciousness and suffering. He claims that it makes one aware of the opposite of every thing, thought and emotion.

Ruby COHN concludes her essay suggesting that although such concepts as **humor**, **irony**, and **the grotesque** do not define the new genre, they remain useful as descriptive elements of the **new kind of comedy**, which views the contemporary world with a critical eye:

Today Unamuno's tragic sense of life is dramatized

¹²DÜRRENMATT, *Problems of the Theater*, p.255.

¹³In his **Essence of Laughter**, BAUDELAIRE writes: "Artists create the comic. After studying and collecting the elements of the comic, they know that a certain being is comic, and that he is so only on condition that he is unaware of his nature, in the same way that, following an inverse law, the artist is an artist only on condition that he is a double man, and that he is aware of every phenomenon of his double nature". (Quoted in COHN, R. *Terms of the Tragicomic Mixture. Drama Survey*, v. 5, p.187, 1966.)

through the comic, the grotesque, and the farcial. Not only is man-in-the-world absurd, but so are his words for that situation. So that criticism becomes a kind of third degree absurdity, but it imposes coherence for all that.¹⁴

Playwrights have attempted to invent generic names for this new type of drama, other than straightforward comedy. When Dürrenmatt calls *The Visit* a **tragic comedy**, Ionesco calls *The Chairs* a **tragic farce** and Beckett calls *Waiting for Godot* a **tragi-comedy**, they use the terms in a specifically modern sense.

Besides the tragicomic, another form has developed in the twentieth century, that has been denominated either as **seriocomic** or **jocoserious** by modern critics. The current playfulness within the novel and drama is certainly not confined merely to literary form, but it is part of a broader development in culture which is profusely registered in all post-modernist art.

In our time, experimentation has persistently taken the form of parodying existing forms of literature. Besides parody and related forms, contemporary playwrights and novelists also make prolific use of game-like and playful strategies to express their concerns about the world. They tend to see everything as its own parody which presupposes an attitude of play, however, their playing is not gratuitous, since it serves to make reality transparent and confronts man with the limits of his power and understanding.

The game-playing technique is highly theatrical, it is one of the many technological resources that call attention to the **theatre-as-theatre**, i.e., theatre is not reality, but reality that is played. After Brecht, Pirandello, Ionesco and Dürrenmatt, contemporary playwrights have acquired a new consciousness of the autonomy of the stage. In a personal pronouncement in 1972, Dürrenmatt contends that today most playwrights consciously write **theatre**, and because they are aware that they are making theatre they choose to write **comedies**.¹⁵ He shows that the choice for comedy can also be explained from an aesthetic point of view. With the exploitation of the theatrical environment, the theatre has become a highly self-

¹⁴COHN, p.191. The author points out that a history of modern tragicomedy still needs writing. She mentions J.L. STYAN who has called this new type of play the "dark comedy". (See STYAN, J.L. *The Dark Comedy: the Development of Modern Comic Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962. 311 p.)

¹⁵See KNAPP, G.P. Friedrich Dürrenmatt: **die Physiker**. München: Verlag Diesterweg, 1979. p.9: "Wir schreiben heute bewusst Theater, wir wissen, dass wir Theater machen, und darum schreiben wir Komödien".

reflective medium.

2. POST-ABSURDIST DRAMA: THE EVOLUTION OF FORM

Modern drama can be defined as a revolt against the limits of both realism and naturalism.¹⁶ The Theatre of the Absurd is generally considered as the culmination of this revolutionary impulse. The antimimetic structures of the Absurd drama revealed themselves appropriate to express the absurdist metaphysical ideas upon which the new kind of play was predicated: there is a perfect integration of structure and idea, which in synthesis constitute the **form**. The result was **anti-form**, a purposely formless drama which portrays the chaos of modern life, thus reflecting the world view of the present time.

The growing acceptance of the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd in the late 1950's represented a **dead-end** for the new playwrights in terms of artistic development and literary creation. In their quest for a new form, the post-absurdist dramatists rejected anti-drama as a model: they realized that the absurd was just another form with its own conventions, which had become the dominant form. Their revolt consisted in parodying their predecessors and in adapting not only the conventions of the Absurd but also those of traditional drama to fit their own purposes.

Parody is always bound to appear as a response indicative of a movement towards a new form when established forms tend towards exhaustion. In searching for a new form, contemporary playwrights have simultaneously revolted against and embraced the structures and ideas that preceded them. This approach was made notorious by John BARTH in his article **The Literature of Exhaustion**,¹⁷ in

¹⁶The experimental character of modern art has succeeded in renewing and revitalizing modern drama. Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Georg Büchner, Frank Wedekind, Ernst Toller, Georg Kaiser, Bertold Brecht, Alfred Jarry, Tristan Tzara, André Breton, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Luigi Pirandello, Anton Chekhov, among others, have contributed to the remaking of modern drama. Modern drama has been characterized by a series of revolts (Symbolism, Expressionism, Epic Theatre, Surrealism) which culminated in the Theatre of the Absurd. Robert BRUSTEIN argues that revolutions in art are usually accompanied by upheavals in the world that produces them. (See BRUSTEIN, R. *The Theatre of Revolt*. Boston: Little Brown, 1964. 435 p.)

¹⁷BARTH, J. *The Literature of Exhaustion*. *The Atlantic Monthly*, v. 220, n.2, p.32, 1967. In this essay BARTH speculates about the complexities of modern literature,

which he advocates the necessity to exhaust the forms that have been created to arrive at new forms. He refers to parody as an important device in the literature of exhaustion process, since the "artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work".

According to DÜRRENMATT, parody delivers the artist from the "museum of inventions".¹⁸ Within this form he finds freedom, it offers him the possibility of **originality** in an age of worn-out modes and sterile facts. He acknowledges that original subject-matter is practically inexistent today; all we have is **preformed material**, i.e., material which has already been given form. The artist's alternative is to refunction the preformed literary material if he wishes to take it as subject-matter, and it is only through parody that he will achieve such an intent:

This is why the artist must reduce the subjects he finds and runs into everywhere if he wants to turn them once more into real materials, always hoping that he will succeed. He *parodies his materials*, which means he consciously contrasts them with what they have actually become. By this means, *by this act of parody*, the artist regains his freedom and hence his material; *and thus material is no longer found but invented*. For every parody presupposes a conceit and an invention. The dramaturgy of available materials is thus being replaced by the dramaturgy of invented material.¹⁹

in an attempt to describe the remarkable new directions that it has taken. Due to a great deal of misunderstanding, including that of his prophecy of novelistic exhaustion, he later wrote **The Literature of Replenishment**, in order to explain that what he really meant was not the **exhaustion** of language or of literature, but of the aesthetic of high modernism with the advent of a post-modernist aesthetic. (Also see BARTH, J. The Literature of Replenishment: Post-Modernist Fiction. *The Atlantic*, v.245, n.1, p.65-71, Jan. 1980.) Concerning the exhaustion process, Barth feels that in an age of ultimacies and final solutions, an artist mustn't merely exemplify an ultimacy, he must employ it. The artistic victory of the modern writer is that he confronts an intellectual dead-end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work. It is a tacit rejection of the accepted forms in the very act of consciously using them.

¹⁸See DÜRRENMATT, *Problems of the Theater*, p.239: "... the theater today is anything much more than a *museum* in which the art treasures of former golden ages are put on exhibition".

¹⁹DÜRRENMATT, *Problems of the Theater*, p.258-9. NIETZSCHE has also claimed that it is only through parody that we can achieve originality: "Wir sind das erste studierte Zeitalter in puncto der 'Kostüme', ich meine der Moralén, Glaubensartikel, Kunstgeschmäcker und Religionen, vorbereitet, wie es noch keine Zeit war, zum Karneval grossen Stils. . . Vielleicht, dass wir hier gerade das Reich **unsrer Erfindung** noch entdecken, jenes Reich, *wo wir noch original sein können*, etwa als Parodisten der *eltgeschichte und Hanswürste Gottes, - vielleicht dass, wenn auch nichts von heute sonst Zukunft hat, doch gerade unser **Lachen** noch Zukunft hat!" (Quoted in KARRER, W. *Parodie, Travestie, Pastiche*. München: Fink Verlag, 1977. p.23.)

As parody presupposes creation or invention, it becomes the only successful mode of expression in an age where "originality has been used up".²⁰ Being essentially a player, the parodist plays with his material. Through parody he distorts, degrades and destroys, but at the same time he regenerates. He avoids pathos and sentimentality, since playing is a liberating force: it creates distance, energy and freedom:

In laughter man's freedom becomes manifest, in crying his necessity. Our task today is to demonstrate freedom. The tyrants of this planet are not moved by the works of the poets. They yawn at a poet's lamentations. For them heroic epics are silly fairy tales and religious poetry puts them to sleep. Tyrants fear only one thing: a poet's mockery.²¹

Besides parody, contemporary dramatists are imbued with an acute historical sense; they tend to interpret the present in terms of what they have learned from the past. This heritage comes to them from the modernist writers. In **Tradition and the Individual Talent**, T.S. ELIOT makes two demands which typify the modernist aesthetic: first, that the writers must thoroughly know and use the works of the past in order to exert influence and take their place in tradition; and second, that all great art involves a "perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" and that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past".²²

The paradox at the heart of contemporary drama – the playwrights' conscious use of the past in both idea and structure to illuminate the present, can be explained by the fact that they are de-

²⁰The observation of Moon in Stoppard's only novel applies to both the form of contemporary art and the peculiar situation the contemporary artist faces: "The thing about people is that hardly anyone behaves naturally any more, they all behave the way they think they are supposed to be, as if they'd read about themselves or seen themselves at the pictures. The whole life is like that now. It's even impossible to think naturally because opinion has been set out for you to read back. *Originality has been used up*. And yet faith in one's uniqueness dies hard". (STOPPARD, T. *Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon*. London: Faber, 1974. p.53.)

²¹DÜRRENMATT, Problems of the Theater, p.259.

²²ELIOT, T.S. Tradition and the Individual Talent. In: SHAPIRO, K. *Prose Keys to Modern Poetry*. New York: Harper and Row, 1967. p.67.

prived of coherent metaphysical and sociological structures and ideas in the contemporary world.²³ Therefore, they shape bits and pieces from history and theatre history, from art, from myth and ritual and from life around us into a new meaningful whole: the chosen pieces are given new meaning through the playwright's arrangement of them. This reworking of fragments in a collage-like form elevates parody as the principal critical tool to effect the new synthesis. It follows that parody, travesty, pastiche and allusion have become the essential ingredients of contemporary drama.²⁴

3. NEW DIRECTIONS IN POST-ABSURDIST DRAMA: STOPPARD'S SERIOCOMIC METATHEATRE

Although many of the themes that we have come to associate with the Theatre of the Absurd (the futility of human action, the search for self-definition and the inability of communication) also reappear in the works of Stoppard, he nevertheless succeeds in making the borrowed elements his own, altering and developing them to suit his own ends. He does not merely juxtapose the bits and pieces that he takes from various sources; he uses parody as a linking device to achieve a new synthesis. As most post-absurdist playwrights he explicitly recognizes the influences upon him and consciously tries to embody them in the form of his work in a process of transcendence.²⁵

Stoppard likes to play with the theatrical possibilities of his themes: playing – with ideas and forms, with dramatic devices and formulas, with situations, with a role, with words – is especially

²³For a more extensive account on the problem of form in contemporary drama, see O'NEILL, M.C. *The Evolution of Form in Contemporary Drama*. Purdue, 1980. 250 p. Dissertation, (Ph.D.), Purdue University.

²⁴In her study about the uses of parody in the **Nouveau Theatre**, Elaine Ruth HOPKINS reaches a twofold conclusion: first, that parody is the single most important element distinguishing the **nouveau theatre** from the forms of theatre which preceded it, and second, that the tragic and the comic are not present separately in the **nouveau theatre**, but are bound in a dynamic relationship in which parody is the link. (HOPKINS, E.R. *The Language of Parody in the Nouveau Theatre*. Chapel Hill, 1980. 193 p. Dissertation, (Ph.D.), University of North Carolina.)

²⁵Stoppard's originality has been widely acknowledged by important drama critics. Christopher BIGSBY has said that despite the highly derivative nature of his work, "he has emerged as a writer of genuine originality". (BIGSBY, C.W.E. *Tom Stoppard*. London: Longman, 1976. p.4.)

important for him.²⁶ His characters, like their creator, are also players in the widest sense; references to playing a game occur in almost every work. His art is genuinely **seriocomic**: he is always sharpening his ideas and situations into paradoxical and parodistic formulations, challenging the audience with his constructions.

Although *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* displays some tragicomic aspects, it seems to me that even in this play the seriocomic mode prevails because Stoppard does not merely concentrate on the predicament of Ros and Guil, but he provides a joco-serious parody of both the Shakespearean and the modern tragic sense: he illustrates man's existential confusion and search, by comparing and contrasting two world views.

Stoppard shares a parodic world-view with other post-absurdist dramatists, which could be compared with Bakhtin's carnivalistic vision of the world. He can be regarded as a sort of carnival king, laughing at all claims of eternity and certainty, since he perceives a profound ambiguity in every phenomenon. In *Travesties* he points at the arbitrariness of all norms and rules, laughing at the historically limited judgements which tend to stand for eternal verities. He **travesties** reality as carnival does: crowning and uncrowning, inverting rank and exchanging roles, making sense from nonsense and nonsense from sense. He uses the logic of the **turnabout** and of the **inside out** to get a deeper insight into the issues that he plays through on the stage, in order to gain new and multiple perspectives.

Enoch BRATER has suggested that Stoppard is

– a serious comic writer born in an age of tragicomedy and a renewed interest in theatrical realism. Such deviation from dramatic norms not only marks his original signature on the contemporary English stage, but has sometimes made it difficult for us to determine whether his unique posture of comic detachment has been 'good', 'bad', or simply 'indifferent'.²⁷

²⁶Stoppard likes to explore the theatricality inherent in every subject. In several interviews he has declared that he enjoys **theatre as theatre**, and that "his plays are born out of theatrical concepts and images ('Suppose two attendant lords were to...'; 'Suppose a pyramid of Gymnasts...'; 'Suppose the critic got involved in the action...') and it is this exclusive theatricality which makes his plays so disconcertingly difficult to cope with..." (See SELF, D. On the Edge of Reality: Some Thoughts on the Studying of Tom Stoppard. *Use of English*, v.26, p.196, Spring 1975.)

²⁷BRATER, E. Parody, Travesty, and Politics in the Plays of Tom Stoppard. In: BOCK, H. & WERTHEIM, A., eds. *Essays on Contemporary British Drama*. München: Hüber, 1981. p.117.

Although BRATER's statement is true concerning the dramatic tradition in which we might place Tom Stoppard, I do not agree with his argument that the playwright adopts a "posture of comic detachment", since when Stoppard involves his characters in a game of contradictory arguments on any subject, he seeks to engage the audience in a continuing process of questioning reality, subverting any unitary vision of the work of art itself or of the world. Contemporary nonliterary developments on language philosophy, sociology, psychology, and even physics, that have explored similar issues to those that Stoppard plays through on the stage, offer enough evidence that such arguments are worth making.

Concerning the roots of the seriocomic in Stoppard's work, I agree with BRATER that it is the interplay of parody and travesty that produces both critical distance and comic effect in *Travesties*. These two intertextual literary forms which reverberate in simultaneity throughout the play help to create a new kind of comedy that captures the drama of contemporary ideas. The playwright dramatizes the tension between these two elements of comedy which have traditionally remained separate and distinct.

Stoppard's proposition to blend "seriousness" (parody) with "frivolity" (travesty),²⁸ in an attempt to contrive "the perfect marriage between the play of ideas and farce, or perhaps even high comedy",²⁹ has been successfully achieved, and it is this feature of his work that transforms the comic tradition to which he belongs.

However, there is another aspect in Stoppard's work which can be considered as a special characteristic of his dramatic accomplishment. It is his adaptation of the parodic strategies of contemporary metafiction writers for the stage, which has not received critical attention up to date. Therefore, I shall seek to investigate the implications of these literary phenomena of novelistic practice for dramatic theory. I intend to demonstrate that the many types of modern textual self-consciousness that Stoppard appropriates in *Travesties*, constitute critical tools to reflect not only on the work of art itself, but also on the contemporary issues that he examines in the play, such as the relationship of art and reality, and art and politics.

Stoppard's contribution to dramatic theory is that he definitely

²⁸See Stoppard's pronouncements in his interview with Derek Mahon that I have mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation. (MAHON, D. Tom Stoppard: a Noticeable Absence of Tortoises. *Vogue*, v.164, p.21, Jun. 1974.)

²⁹See Stoppard's interview with the editors of *Theatre Quarterly* that has also been mentioned in the introduction. (STOPPARD, T. Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas: interview with the Editors. *Theatre Quarterly*, v.14, p.7, May/Jul. 1974.)

establishes the seriocomic mode as a new genre. As an ingenious parody of theatrical styles, *Travesties* can be seen as an important dramaturgical experiment in the remaking of contemporary drama.

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