Stoppard and Playwrighting: A Labyrinth of Communication

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Before John Wood was half-way through his opening speech I already knew that in Stoppard I had encountered a writer of my generation whom I could admire without reserve

-Clive James

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Biography

Tom Stoppard was born on 3 July 1937 in the Czechoslovakian town of Zlin, as Tomas Straussler. His father was a middle-class physician who worked for the Bata Shoe Company. In 1939 they moved to Singapore and were evacuated to India three years later. His father was killed in the Japanese invasion.

In 1946 Stoppard's mother remarried, after which he assumed the name of his stepfather, Kenneth Stoppard, an officer in the British army, and the family moved back to England where Mr Stoppard worked in the machine tool business.

Tom Stoppard claims to have spoken only Czech until the age of three. His first school in Darjeeling was an English-language institution and after having settled in England he moved to Dolphin Preparatory School in Nottingham and then to Pocklington School in Yorkshire, leaving at the age of seventeen. He returned home to Bristol and joined the Western Daily Press as a reporter, switching to the Evening World in 1958 where he often covered theatre as a second-string critic.

Stoppard has subsequently become one of the leading contemporary playwrights and has often been likened to Harold Pinter and Peter Shaffer.

1.2 Tom Stoppard: playwright supreme

> Tom Stoppard works with a brilliance, an intellectual agility, and a capacity of mind as well as wit that have no rival on the contemporary stage
>
> - Harold Hobson

> ... He is the wittiest of our West End playwrights and his plays assure the reactionary that theatre was and is what they always trusted it was, anodyne and anaesthetising
>
> - Philip Roberts

Stoppard has frequently been hailed as one of the most significant and influential contemporary playwrights although some critics have displayed remarkable indifference and even open hostility towards his work. According to Brassel "... the conflicting reactions to his work seem to reflect the crises in our current cultural thinking about the theatre" (Brassel, 1985:2).

Nevertheless, even though some fault may be found with Stoppard's plays, there is no denying the fact that much of his work is brilliant, both technically and linguistically speaking. What distinguishes him from most other playwrights is

his remarkable flair for words and innovative structure combined with his vast knowledge of literature in general, something which is illustrated again and again in his subtle and witty use of allusion. In addition, Stoppard displays a remarkable love for the theatre itself and has on occasion insisted that a play is written primarily to be performed. Subsequently, his own plays display an exquisite theatricality which almost never fails to captivate the audience.

Employing dazzling puns, witticisms, allusions, word-games and verbal acrobatics, Stoppard imbues his plays with a distinct sense of life, never losing track of the essential core of his work, viz. the unique way in which his comedies are intricately woven around a serious centre, as is clearly illustrated in some of his best plays such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead in which the two main characters' incessant but futile search for meaning and significance is interspersed with farcical effects, and Jumpers, in which underlying philosophical issues are counterpointed with various comic elements. Subsequently, Brassel has pointed out that Stoppard's vision of life is simultaneously comic and serious and one question runs through all his plays: "... how do we cope with existence in such a mad world?" (1985:265). According to Brassel, Stoppard attempts to answer this question through various forms of escapism and in Rosencrantz[1] he "... most clearly defines the uselessness of wild escape-attempts" (p.226).

Critics frequently describe Stoppard as the most "intellectual" of the contemporary playwrights, although he never studied at a university. He himself has on occasion remarked that his extensive general knowledge of literature derived mainly from a "necessity" to read while being a journalist and theatre critic. His aim as an artist is to achieve "the perfect marriage between the play of ideas and farce or perhaps even high comedy" (Kahn, 1978:187), some elements of which can be detected in almost all of his plays. As a result, his work is frequently excruciatingly funny.

Another distinctive characteristic of Stoppard's plays is that they are often woven around a bizarre dramatic puzzle, as in Jumpers, where a man opens the door of his apartment while carrying a tortoise in one hand and a bow and arrow in the other, his face covered in shaving cream. Outside the door he finds a policeman with a bouquet of flowers. Stoppard, however, presents a perfectly rational explanation for all of this. In such a way, the playwright delights in teasing his audience and capturing their attention from the very beginning.

Like most contemporary dramatists', Stoppard's characters are endlessly fascinated by withdrawal and detachment, aiming to survive in an essentially hostile universe. The tragic sense in his plays is, however, effectively counteracted by that which is laughable and amusing, though it does tend, like true contemporary comedy, to leave the audience in an unsettled and confused state of mind.

We should keep in mind that "... it is possible to take Stoppard too seriously... As he has himself argued, it is difficult to find a 'single, clear statement' in many

1) Rosencrantz refers to Stoppard, T.1967. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. London: Faber and Faber.

of his plays: rather, there's a 'series of conflicting statements made by conflicting characters', who 'tend to play a sort of infinite leapfrog'" (Trussler in Page, 1986:6).

1.2.1 Motive and hypothesis

The aim of this survey is to determine and define, in some measure, Stoppard's stature as a contemporary dramatist. In order to arrive at some assessment of the main elements employed by this playwright to communicate effectively with his audience, it is necessary to conduct a thorough, albeit concise, survey of the main trends in Stoppard criticism. Representative plays, ranging from his earliest to his most widely acclaimed later theatre works will be included in this survey and will be based primarily on the thoughts and attitudes of well-known theatre critics as well as on those of the playwright himself. It will subsequently be shown how three distinct trends emerge from such a survey of relevant criticism. These include Stoppard's preoccupation with comedy and farce, his unmistakable link with the Theatre of the Absurd and his idiosyncratic use of dramatic language. Stoppard's stature as a playwright is seen to be founded on these elements and it is my considered opinion that no conclusion as to what makes him great and unusual as a playwright can be reached without paying due attention to his link with the comic, the Absurd and allusion, which are the areas of greatest apparent critical concern.

Comedy has emerged as the most suitable vehicle of expression for contemporary dramatists, including Stoppard. In order to reach some measure of understanding of the nature of comedy in general, and contemporary comedy in particular, it is crucial to consider briefly the areas of greatest critical concern within the domain of comedy itself. These include some traditionally acceptable aspects of comedy which have evidently influenced the very essence of contemporary comedy as well as concepts which form the basis of contemporary notions of comedy. Throughout, an attempt will be made to indicate how Stoppard employs the forementioned aspects of his dramatic work in an ongoing attempt to communicate with his audience.

These notions of comedy will be used in order to make a selection of playwrights and plays to serve as a basis for an understanding of contemporary comedy in general and of Stoppard's rightful place within its domain.

Allusive language usage emerges as the sole element which constitutes Stoppard's driving force and all his plays find their existence most properly within the manipulation and development of this all-encompassing element of dramatic language. As will be indicated, it is not a clearly-defined field, as various problems face the intending student of literary allusion. A survey of the most crucial areas of concern when dealing with allusion will be used in order to show how Stoppard employs these skilfully within the context of his plays in general. The four main targets of his allusive practice are Shakespeare, Beckett, Wilde and Joyce. It will subsequently be shown how the playwright effectively employs his connection with Beckett as a means of linking his work with the Theatre of the Absurd. Some discussion will be devoted to the merit of allusion as a functional literary device as it is my contention that much of

literature in its entirety depends on the wide range of effects which can be attained through the use of this extremely useful literary device. Stoppard succeeds admirably in manipulating allusion in the various nuances of his attempts to communicate.

The manner of this survey will derive from the notion that a survey of Stoppard criticism can serve as a basis for determining the areas of most crucial critical concern on which the whole of this dissertation is based. A determination of elements critical within the domains of comedy and allusion will be employed in order to ascertain Stoppard's integral association with these elements. Particular Stoppard plays will be selected and analysed in each section in order to ascertain how he manipulates these elements within the wider context of his work.

It's fun ... to watch the critics, whether or not they're aware of it, joining in the game

-Simon Trussler

2 AN OVERVIEW OF CRITICISM ON A SELECTION OF STOPPARD PLAYS

The following plays have been selected more or less chronologically on the basis of their importance within Stoppard's oeuvre. Attention will be paid to both appreciative and adverse criticism by leading theatre critics to determine the most crucial elements of Stoppard criticism in general. An attempt will be made to outline briefly the major trends in Stoppard criticism on which the remainder of this dissertation will be based with the purpose of determining which crucial elements Stoppard employs in his quest for communication.

2.1 Enter a Free Man

Enter a Free Man is Stoppard's earliest known play and is regarded by many critics as one of his least successful. He wrote this play while he was working as a reporter on the Western Daily Press in Bristol and it was first produced on television as A Walk on the Water in November 1963, remaining virtually unnoticed. The following year it turned up in Hamburg and subsequently, after the success of Rosencrantz, it appeared in the West End in March 1968 as EFM[1]. Although it had presumably undergone some revision, the outlines of the play remained constant.

Some of the earliest comments on this play are found in Taylor's The Second Wave (1971). He points out that, in comparison to Stoppard's later work, EFM is "... surprisingly straightforward and realistic-seeming" (1971:95). He remarks fairly favourably on the play: "It is much more firmly founded on character, gleefully explored for its own sake, than any of his later glittering constructions" (p.95). Eleven years later Jim Hunter would refer to this play as "Stoppard's weakest surviving play... Dated, second-hand, and not very funny, it makes in the direction of psychological realism uneasy moves which are abortive and embarrassing" (1982:198).

In looking at these two critics' responses to Stoppard's first play it is immediately evident that we are confronted by a seemingly diametric opposition. One view is that a play such as EFM is practically worthless and uninspiring merely because it was Stoppard's first attempt at playwrighting and is cast in a completely different mould from his later, more complex plays, such as Travesties and Jumpers. Such a view would suggest, however, that complexity is a virtue in itself which is, of course, a grave misconception.

Taylor continues by presenting favourable comments on the structure of EFM. He feels that Stoppard succeeds in keeping us aware of the fact that the play is "... built like a goldfish bowl ..." (p.96) while the main character does not exhibit any real ability or desire to escape. He does point out, however, that in comparison with Stoppard's later plays, EFM comes across as being "... a little crude, a little obvious" (p.96). Taylor feels that the main fault of this play is that

1) EFM refers to Stoppard, T.1977. Enter a Free Man. Whitstable: Whitstable Litho.

Stoppard's imagination was not really fired while he was writing it. It does, however, point "... to Stoppard's later passion for patternmaking, [but] lacks the intricacy of point and paradox which seems necessary really to fire his imagination" (p.96).

Stoppard himself has on occasion confessed that this play could in fact be called Flowering Death of a Salesman because of its extensive allusion to Miller's Death of a Salesman and Bolt's Flowering Cherry. He points out that he does not think it is a very true play in the sense that he feels no intimacy with the characters. "It works pretty well as a play, but it's actually phony because it's a play written about other people's characters" (in Bigsby, 1976:8). EFM may be phony to a certain extent but from another point of view it may also be regarded as the beginning of an art Stoppard would later perfect, viz. the creative use of allusion to other authors and their literary works.

Bigsby relates Stoppard's first play to the comic tradition by commenting that George Riley, the protagonist, is the first of many portraits of a modern comic hero created by Stoppard. Riley is marked by a "tattered dignity" which essentially "... characterizes the Stoppard hero" (1976:8). Bigsby continues to relate this play to the comic tradition by remarking that here Stoppard "... is drawn to both comedy and farce: the one implying a world in which values exist, the other an antinomian world of ethical relativity" (p.9).

Various critics have recently commented on the lack of development in practically all of Stoppard's characters. Ronald Hayman seems to have foreseen these views in his book Tom Stoppard (1977) when he states that "Enter a Free Man light- heartedly develops the theme of the life-lie without depending on solidly realized relationships between the characters. Realization of this sort could never have been Stoppard's forte and his development has carried him felicitously away from the need to depend on it" (1977:15). Hayman also chooses to relate EFM to contemporary comedy in general. He points out that "... the dazzling brightness of the comedy" (p.15) blinds us to such an extent that we forget to ask whether the relationships in Stoppard's plays are convincing. He argues that "... the comedy and the bids for sympathy are not working comfortably together" and that "the action is on safer ground when it stays close to farce" (p.17).

Hayman feels that Stoppard here already exhibits some talent "for developing extravagant ideas into lively action" (p.18) and already foreshadows some of his delight in "exploring the dilemma of the ordinary man caught up with extraordinary people and extraordinary events" (p.18).

In an interview with Giles Gordon in 1968, just a week after EFM opened in the West End, Stoppard remarked that even though it had been revised, "it is still a play about the same people in the same situation... I no longer think of it as the kind of play I would write now or would ever write again" (in Gordon, 1968:23-24). Nevertheless, many of the remarkable qualities of Stoppard's later masterpieces are already present in his first play, even though they may be somewhat laboured and artificial.

In the same year Ronald Bryden remarked in The Observer that EFM is "... a fairly cautious exercise in comic nonconformity" and that it "... bears out that his

flair for language and turning ideas on their heads is genuine and original ..." (in Page, 1986:26).

In 1979 Victor Cahn published an extensive study on Stoppard's plays, relating them to the Theatre of the Absurd. He regards Stoppard's first play as a "conventional domestic comedy" which is not "a startling or original piece of theatre" (1979:25). He also points out that some critics have viewed this play with "grave disappointment" while others "have viewed the work as an interesting discovery to be considered in the light of Stoppard's recent achievements" (pp.25-26). Cahn also pays attention to two important considerations, viz. what this play's relationship to the Theatre of the Absurd is and how it stands as a precursor to the rest of Stoppard's work. He comes to the conclusion that EFM "serves as the thematic and the theatrical foundation of Stoppard's writing" (p.34). He regards it primarily as a realistic work and quotes Raymond Sokolov who writes that it lies "somewhere about midway between the well-made entertainment and the Beckett-like limbo of Rosencrantz" (p.34). In EFM, Cahn feels, Stoppard has created his archetypal theatrical situation, viz. "a realistic, identifiable man confronting an absurd world and seeking refuge from it" (p.35).

The notion that EFM is more realistic and not as complex as Stoppard's later plays has led to comments such as those made by Roger Shiner in his article Showing, Saying and Jumping. He remarks that "Enter a Free Man ... is possibly the play of Stoppard's that is most accessible to the average playgoer. It plumbs no great depths either philosophically or theatrically" (Shiner, 1982:626).

According to Jim Hunter (1982) the characters of EFM are quasi- realistic and the play itself is "never quite sure whether to be realist or cartoon" (1982:124). This could be a result of the fact that, according to Hunter, this play is the work of a playwright "... not yet bold enough to give his characters the elegant brilliance of his very special marionettes, and not sufficiently experienced or informed to give them the consistency of realism" (p.103).

A critic such as Thomas Whitaker (1983) chooses not to view EFM quite as seriously and refers to its "playful design" (p.19), indicating that "balancing sympathy and distance, its semi- realistic form prevents us from remaining firmly inside or outside of any individual world" (p.15). According to Brassel (1985) Ronald Bryden regards George Riley as being a "... splendid full-fledged comic creation, a dynamo of theatrical energy spraying his fantasies and paranoias over the stage like rainbow carnival streamers" (in Brassel, 1985:70). Brassel continues by commenting upon the apparent weakness of EFM as compared to Stoppard's later plays. He indicates that the "... kind of critical scrutiny of domestic and suburban pressures" which constitutes much of the essence of this play "does not fit comfortably into the kind of comedy toward which Stoppard's strongest instincts seem to draw him, and it is ground to which he never really returns" (p.73).

Brassel also comments upon Stoppard's inherent flair for language and points out that already in this earliest of his plays do we find word play "... of a very high order, organised with the kind of highly structured dexterity that continually characterises Stoppard's work" (p.76). He concludes that "... it is

the anarchic humour of George Riley... which represents the continuing stream in Stoppard's work" (pp.76-77).

It thus seems evident that while most critics seem to agree that EFM cannot be compared to plays such as Rosencrantz and Jumpers as far as theatrical brilliance is concerned, it does serve as the basis of Stoppard's playwrighting in general, foreshadowing many of the inherent qualities of his later masterpieces.

2.2 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead was written in 1964 and was Stoppard's first theatrical success, bringing him instant fame, earning him a world-wide reputation and, together with Jumpers and Travesties, it remains his most widely acclaimed work. It has variously been referred to as "a dazzling, compassionate fantasy" and "a most remarkable and thrilling play" (in Cahn, 1979:35), although it has also been criticized for being a merely derivative work, drawing too extensively upon the creations of others.

Evans (1985) points out that "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is one of the most popular plays in amateur repertoire today - difficult though it is to manage - and it has had, and continues to have, a respectable amount of professional revival" (1985:149). Because it is such a popular play and is regarded by many critics as Stoppard's best, an extensive variety of critical responses to this play exists.

In his article To be and Not to be (1967) Gerald Weales refers to Rosencrantz as "a funny, intelligent, and finally moving play" (Weales, 1967:39). He concludes his review of the performance of this play by indicating that it is a "well-written play, the happy American debut of the most interesting English playwright to come along since Harold Pinter"(p.40). Some critics were less sympathetic after viewing this play's initial production in 1967. Philip Hope-Wallace writes in The Guardian (1967): "I had a sensation that a fairly pithy and witty theatrical trick was being elongated merely to make an evening of it. Tedium, even kept at bay, made itself felt" (in Evans, 1985:150), while W.A. Darlington comments: "Well, it is all very clever, ...but it happens to be the kind of play that I don't enjoy... It is the kind of play, too, that one might enjoy more at a second hearing, if only the first time through hadn't left such a strong feeling that once is enough" (in Evans, 1985:150).

Even though Rosencrantz is one of Stoppard's most successful plays, various critics have viewed it in a negative light. Taylor (1971) describes it as "a long play in which virtually nothing happens... it is very evidently the working out of an intellectual...conceit... It is not, to put it mildly, a play mad with too much heart" (1971:100-101). Taylor thus continues by assuming that its success can be contributed to the fact that "audiences are not by any means so impervious to the appeal of writing which sets out to work on them primarily by way of their intelligence as we always... tend to assume" (p.101). Frank Marcus is more explicitly negative in his comments:" The philosophical implication... is banal; dramatically it's self- destructive. We might as well go to the theatre, count up to 10,000, and go home again. A creative exploration of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, building on Shakespeare's meagre foundations, would have made

the play less fashionable, but vastly more entertaining" (in Page, 1986:20). Robert Brustein ties in with Marcus and Taylor when he takes Stoppard to task for his extensive use of allusion: "As an artist, Stoppard does not fight hard enough for his insights - they all seem to come to him, prefabricated, from other plays - with the result that his air of pessimism seems affected, and his philosophical meditations, ... never obtain the thickness of felt knowledge" (in Page, 1986:20).

Bigsby disagrees with these critics when he comments: "While it is true that the argument behind Rosencrantz is not complex, its strength lies precisely in the skill with which he has blended humour with metaphysical enquiry, the success with which he has made the play's theatricality an essential element of its thematic concern" (1976:16). Thus, even though critics vary in their opinions of the merits or weaknesses of Rosencrantz, there are a few main areas of criticism of this play. These include Stoppard's use of allusion, his use of dramatic language and his relation to the Theatre of the Absurd.

John Weightman remarks: "The text abounds in allusions. At times it seems as if he has put Waiting for Godot inside Hamlet, and one admires the courage of a young man who has the nerve to do this. His characters needle each other in a vacuum... The stage business becomes reminiscent of the mirror-like complexities of Genet, when the Players put on for them a play within the play within the play" (in Page, 1986:19). Most critics appear to agree that the main "sources" of Stoppard's play are Hamlet and Godot.[1] Bigsby comments upon this when he says that Rosencrantz is "A play which seemed to combine the brittle wit of Oscar Wilde with the mordant humour of Samuel Beckett, Rosencrantz takes as its main characters two of literature's most marginal figures... The strategies which they adopt... are familiar enough, particularly to audiences aware of Beckett's Waiting for Godot" (1976: pp.10-11).

Hayman takes these comments further when he says that "Stoppard was not the first playwright to incorporate generous slabs of Shakespearian dialogue into a modern text, but he was the boldest and the cleverest. More important, he was the most proficient at using the theatrical situation as an image of the human condition" (1977:34).

Schlueter (1977) points out that virtually all reviewers of Rosencrantz have noticed that this play is derivative, "... constructed of passages of poetry from Shakespeare (Hamlet) and rather loud echoes of Pirandello (Six Characters) and Beckett (Waiting for Godot). Despite being what Robert Brustein called a 'theatrical parasite', however, the play possesses indisputable originality particularly in the way which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern achieve their own unique status as metafictional characters" (1977:98). Schlueter remarks upon the close association between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and concludes that "Their entire time in the outer play is overshadowed by our knowledge that they are Shakespeare's, and not Stoppard's characters... Hamlet absorbs its frame completely, rendering the protagonists without their Hamlet roles nonentities. In both plays, whether the characters' fates are determined by the slick whoduni

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1) Godot refers to Beckett, S.1953. Waiting for Godot., in Whitfield, G.1963. An Introduction to Drama. London: Oxford University Press.

play or the Shakespearean masterpiece the power of Stoppard's art is supreme" (p.103).

Kennedy (1979) chooses to relate Rosencrantz to parody. He feels that this play "fully exploits the potentialities of parodic theatricality" (in Hunter and Rawson, 1979:50) and that Hamlet provides a frame of action for Stoppard's play. "The borrowed amalgam is... inventively modified, and made to absorb layer upon layer of newly created parodic text. In this sense Stoppard's parody transcends all the known limits of dramatic burlesque... and pervades practically the whole texture of the play" (p.50).

Kennedy indicates that certain passages from Hamlet are quoted in Stoppard's play and that "it is this new meta-text, with the omissions and intermissions appropriate to the fragmented perspective of the two cue-less would-be performers, that casts a parodic light back on the old text itself" (p.50). Kennedy also feels that Stoppard resorts to parody on the language level and concludes by quoting Bigsby when he says that Stoppard's two courtiers' "loss of control is mirrored in a fragmentation of language. To that extent, the parody of dialogue is, here, mimetic" (p.51).

Leslee Lenoff (1982) draws attention to the fact that as a result of Stoppard's extensive allusion to Hamlet, he "is confined by his adherence to the action of Shakespeare's Hamlet. He too has a limited sort of freedom with which he creates the character and action involving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern" (Lenoff, 1982:46). Thus we can assume that allusion simultaneously implies some sense of limitation and freedom.. Lenoff then indicates the differences between Stoppard's and Shakespeare's characters:

> ... as the original characters in Shakespeare's Hamlet they are also confined to a script and a definition of tragedy in which all must die... As Stoppard's characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist within a universe of randomness for which they might create an effective structure. However, beneath this apparent freedom lies the fact that, as Shakespeare's original characters, their deaths have truly been predetermined. Perhaps this is the ultimate illustration of the concept of limited freedom (p.55).

According to Lenoff, Stoppard succeeds in utilizing this limited freedom to its fullest potential and in doing so "Stoppard ironically creates characters who surrender their own freedom and reduce themselves to ineffectual beings" (p.55). Lenoff concludes by remarking on Stoppard's successful "transformation" of Shakespeare's characters. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "... emerge from Stoppard's play as characters with full-fledged emotional and intellectual dimensions. Stoppard transforms them... into vivid human beings... Rosencrantz emerges as an organic work, revealing a complex but necessary relationship between Stoppard's imagination and Shakespeare's original creation. Stoppard undeniably has used his own 'limited freedom' in a brilliant way" (pp.60-61).

According to Nightingale (1982) Rosencrantz is essentially a play in which the main characters "... attempt to acquire some grasp, if only an intellectual one,

of a world they find confusing and alarming" (1982:413). He indicates that although this play has been criticized for being derivative, with insights which are prefabricated, pessimism which is unfelt and philosophical implications which are spurious, "the least that can be said for Rosencrantz is that it teases the intellect, fulfilling Stoppard's very modest aims as an entertainer and provoking us to speculate in general terms about the subjects that preoccupy him: perception, truth, free will, design, the moral character of the universe" (p.414).

Various critics, including Normand Berlin, Helene Keyssar-Franke and Jonathan Bennet, agree that one responds to Rosencrantz intellectually and not emotionally, which could be ascribed to its extensive use of allusion. Berlin refers to this play as "conspicuously intellectual", and as lacking the "feeling" or union of thought and emotion that we associate with Waiting for Godot and Hamlet, plays which RGD[1] presupposes (in Shiner, 1982:628). Shiner comes to the conclusion that "... the play embodies a directness of intellectual showing, not an indirectness of intellectual saying" (p.631).

Jim Hunter draws our attention to some other points of consideration regarding allusion in Rosencrantz. He feels that Stoppard chooses to travesty Hamlet "because of his affection and regard for it... More important, it deals with subjects, and deals in ways, some of which are also Stoppard's" (1983:133). His comments tie in with those of Lenoff when he indicates that Stoppard's characters are subject to a "fixed identity" which is essentially more frightening than their inherent uncertainty of identity (p.137). Hunter also points out that some critics, amongst others Anthony Callen, have apparently missed "entirely the humour of travesty and allusion" (p.184), describing the play as "existential", "baroque" and "nihilistic". Hunter quotes John Weightman who feels that "Perhaps the whole play is just intellectual fooling-around, with occasional stabs at seriousness" (p.185). He indicates that such criticism is not in itself entirely wrong but merely misplaced.

Whitaker (1983) feels that "Rosencrantz manages to turn Hamlet inside out. It shunts the entire tragedy to the periphery of the theatrical scene, where we glimpse it through bits of Shakespearean dialogue and accelerated mime" (1983:47). He continues:

> Rosencrantz and Guildenstern first seem ignorant spectators who are trying to enter an as yet undiscovered play. Engaging the plot of Hamlet, they begin to seem bad actors who are trying to understand their roles. When they have almost locked themselves into their destiny, they seem to become partial authors of their fate by choosing death. Each step in that ironic progress is a drastic self-limitation (p.59).

Whitaker thus disagrees with Hunter and Lenoff who feel that the two courtiers fate is predetermined. He reflects that they deliberately choose death and are

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1) According to Shiner (1982), RGD refers to Stoppard, T.1967. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. London: Faber and Faber.

not bound by Shakespeare's plot. "To the very end, they are able to rise into a spectatorial freedom and a quasi-authorial creativity" (p.59).

According to Brassel (1985) Rosencrantz is an "elaborate piece of writing and construction. As a complete piece of dramatic composition in its own right, it far exceeds the usual terms of reference of a burlesque ... while retaining the broad context given by Shakespeare, Stoppard develops his 'borrowed' characters into his own creations speculating philosophically upon the 'reality' of a dramatic situation - the plot of Hamlet - which they cannot understand" (1985:37). Brassel analyses the structure of Rosencrantz, especially how it relates to the use of allusion to Hamlet. The use of scenes from Shakespeare's play is of such significance that he goes as far as to say that "the 'on- stage' encounters [of the courtiers] hold the key to their existence. They are hovering on the edge of a great drama that every so often sweeps them up in its wake as Stoppard works passages of Hamlet into the play..." (p.41). Brassel regards it as of fundamental importance to explore the use to which Stoppard puts Hamlet within his own play, in other words, "the relationship he creates between his two levels of dramatic 'reality'" (p.42). He points out, however, that Stoppard is not attempting "a simple expansion, or revaluation, of Shakespeare's materials and characters. What he has done is to take a fledging nuance from Shakespeare's play and develop it with his own dramatic creations. Their characters and fates may be anchored in Hamlet, but they spend far less time 'in' it than 'out' of it..." (p.46).

Brassel comments more explicitly on the use of allusion in Rosencrantz:

> A sense of wide ranging cultural allusions is a constant feature of Stoppard's work, as his novel demonstrates, as the use of Hamlet shows here... The echoes of Godot which run throughout Rosencrantz are therefore present neither in a spirit of plagiarism, nor even parody, but... in a spirit of celebration, as Stoppard pays his own, idiosyncratic tribute to the play which provided the most dramatic rejection of realism in the theatre's history (pp.61-62).

Brassel thus agrees with Hunter in his assumption that allusion is Stoppard's way of paying tribute to other great works of literature, in this instance Hamlet and Godot.

Stoppard has frequently been praised and admired for the use of dramatic language in his plays. He himself regards the "orchestration" of language as of primary importance: "I write with a very dominant sense of rhythm in the dialogue, and to me the orchestration of that dialogue has a kind of inevitability. The words on the page appear to me to be able to be said in only one particular way to achieve an optimum effect" (in Gordon, 1968:22).

Various critics regard the use of language in Rosencrantz as its most worthwhile element. Frank Marcus feels that

"The play's great achievement is its use of idiom... Stoppard gives them modern, slightly stylized, speech which, surprisingly, blends quite naturally with the excerpts from Hamlet. These sound like rather archaic court jargon, which, like

present-day legal jargon, is easily accepted. Moreover, it lends scenes in question a rarified distinction" (in Page, 1986:17).

Marowitz presents another point of view:

> By dramatizing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's off-stage life in a capering contemporary prose that jacks up into Shakespeare's courtly verse when the excerpts come round, Stoppard vividly suggests the two languages that are native to all of us. One, our own carping, unbridled private tongue with which we question our existence and bitch at our circumstances; the other, the formal and politic language with which we conduct our business in society (in Page, 1986:17).

Rosencrantz thus contains two distinct kinds of dramatic language, viz. that which reminds one of Shakespearean verse and that which is similar to modern dialogue. Stoppard has indicated that the dialogue he wrote for this play was an exteriorization of dialogue he had carried on with himself: "They both add up to me in many ways in the sense that they're carrying out a dialogue which I carry out with myself" (in Gordon, 1968:20). Some critics have subsequently assumed that Rosencrantz is partly about language and style.

In British Theatre since 1955 we find comments on the difference between the use of modern and Elizabethan language in this play:

> By putting modern speech-patterns into their mouths and juxtaposing the comic prose scenes with sequences of Shakespeare's tragedy, Stoppard makes modern clichés appear to be indicative of a cowardice and a slow-wittedness that contrast unfavourably with both Hamlet's courage and Hamlet's language... the modern phrases seem to play safe, to hold back, to evade the point at issue, while the Elizabethan language takes risks, explores, discovers (Hayman, 1979:26).

To Bigsby (1976) "language itself is simply an elaborate papering over of cracks, which constantly threaten to open up beneath those who remain either blithely unaware of their plight or numbed with despair" (1976:15). Evans (1977) attributes greater significance however, to Rosencrantz's language and indicates that the two courtiers "... are conceived in an intensely intellectual way - in a very certain sense their superbly athletic use of language is the only 'reality' they definitely possess" (1977:224).

Hayman (1977) also comments upon the deliberate contrast drawn between Elizabethan and modern language in Rosencrantz: "The movement between Shakespeare and Stoppard not only raises questions of time and space, it also effectively creates a confrontation between Elizabethan English and the English of today. The transitions into the modern vernacular make the twentieth century look lame, inarticulate and rather stupid in comparison with the Renaissance" (1977:43). Hayman points out that the vocabulary of the Elizabethan theatre is not necessarily always represented as superior and quotes the Player who, when Guildenstern queries the purpose of the

dumbshow, answers: "We are tied down to a language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style" (in Hunter, 1977:43).

Andrew Kennedy (1979) presents us with a fairly explicit analysis of certain elements of the dramatic language of Rosencrantz. He explains:

> For his own dialogue Stoppard does not resort to pastiche Shakespeare. He writes an exploratory dialogue in a collage of styles for the two attendants and the Player, marked by a short staccato form of stichomythia with echoes of Waiting for Godot. And this dialogue encircles the host play, probes it and swallows it... the dialogue points to itself: tells of its failure to sustain structured action and laments its own decay (in Hunter and Rawson, 1979:50-51).

In contrast to most other critics, Kennedy feels that the language games employed by the two courtiers in an attempt to make some sense of their desperate and confusing situation constitute one of the weakest features of the play. He continues: "... the dialogue of language games... at no point seems to centre or even settle on personal exchange proper. The play's own ideal dialogue is the question-question-question- question model... as in the question set that follows the rapid elimination of statement, repetition, grunts, synonyms, and rhetoric; all are 'fouls' in the round of the game" (p.51).

Hunter (1982) feels that "to Stoppard language is an aspect of human life" (1982:94). It appears that Stoppard's view of language itself is simultaneously humorous, affectionate and troubled, a view which evidently finds expression in plays such as Rosencrantz and Travesties. Hunter continues by analysing Stoppard's affection for language and his delight in it, while also paying attention to how he "dissects its treachery" (p.95).

Hunter feels that in Rosencrantz the two courtiers have few problems with language, "though they meet difficulty in almost everything else. They voice their perplexities fully, Guil with eloquence and traces of a philosophical training, Ros more colloquially but still with relative ease" (p.95). He summarizes his thoughts on Stoppard's integral concern with language as follows: " Stoppard's respect or enjoyment of language appear in traditional rhetoric, in languages as codes to be learnt, in sound-music, in 'foreign' patterns within a single language, in the variety of linguistic register, and in the creative suggestion of words" (p.108).

Brassel (1985) draws attention to the kind of dialogue which has become a hallmark of Stoppard's style, viz. characters talking at cross-purposes with strong tautological under-currents. This kind of conversation is evidently extensively present in Rosencrantz.

The most extensive study of Stoppard's association with the Theatre of the Absurd was undertaken by Victor L. Cahn (1979). In his introduction he draws attention to the similarity between Stoppard's use of language and that in the plays of the Absurd. Language in a play such as Rosencrantz reminds one strongly of that in the absurdist plays where it "... is not a cohesive force, a bond linking civilized man. Rather it is the ultimate entropistic force, isolating each

man in a vacuum of words. Man is a prisoner of his own inability to communicate and of society's inability to communicate with him" (1979:22).

According to Cahn "Rosencrantz is a significant step in moving theatre out of the abyss of absurdity" (p.35). He draws extensive comparisons between Stoppard's play and Beckett's Godot, Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author and Shakespeare's Hamlet, and draws the conclusion that two main varieties of absurdity emerge from Rosencrantz, viz. "man in a void, alone and left to his own devices" and "the image of a man lost in a society of mysterious comings and goings, a society impossible to comprehend" (p.55). Cahn reflects that Stoppard "begins his play in the world of traditional absurd theatre... But he brings his characters into a new world, one where elements of absurdity are disguised under a mask of order and reason worn by a society which Stoppard has made us come to see as perhaps absurd itself" (p.64). In conclusion he points out that, in Rosencrantz, Stoppard has created two levels of absurdity, viz. "the recently traditional one, where men have no role to play and must fabricate reasons for their existence, and a second one, within an incomprehensible society, where men play a role that is strictly defined but still hopelessly unfathomable. This double layer provides a dimension new in absurd theatre... (pp.64-65).

Stoppard himself has commented upon Beckett's influence in his work. He says: "I can see a lot of Beckettian things in all my work, but they're not actually to do with the image of two lost souls waiting for something to happen, which is why most people connect Rosencrantz with Waiting For Godot..." (in Gordon, 1968:23). He also refers to the delight he finds in Beckett:" I find Beckett deliciously funny in the way that he qualifies everything as he goes along, reduces, refines and dismantles. When I read it I love it and when I write I just guess it comes out as other things come out" (p.23).

Jim Hunter (1982) comments that "Stoppard both celebrated Waiting for Godot, and largely got it out of his system, in Rosencrantz. His play is based on the scheme of Godot as much as on Hamlet, and Godot is the more travestied" (1982:149). He also points out that Rosencrantz contains simple affectionate jokes towards Beckett such as the taking-off of belts to catch Hamlet at which Ros's trousers slowly slide down. Stoppard, however, still makes his own contributions to such scenes.

Brassel (1985) feels that Stoppard and Pinter are two of the most important British writers,

> ... who have taken the imaginative boldness of the Absurdists and something, perhaps, of their philosophy to heart in pursuing their own paths of formal experimentation along non- naturalistic lines. They have a largely instinctive grasp of theatrical tension and imagery, a studied awareness of what language can and cannot do, ...and, on occasions, a sense of the nightmarish abyss that underlies our precarious existence (1985:33).

Brassel does not agree with Cahn when he says: "Stoppard confronts absurdity head-on and at the same time takes the initial steps towards moving beyond absurdity" (in Brassel, 1985:61). He feels that it would be more accurate to see

Stoppard "as starting 'beyond absurdity', having digested the movement's bold, dramatic adventurousness and turned it to his own, unique advantage" (p.61). In his conclusion Brassel makes a significant observation when he points out that even though many critics are eager to align Stoppard with the Theatre of the Absurd,

> ... the debt to Godot is less significant than the play's ingenious and original structure, dovetailing the uncertainties of the courtier's apparent plight with the fixed and familiar certainties of Hamlet, and the passing of time has made it ever clearer that only here is Stoppard's debt to Beckett any stronger than a shared sense of dramatic boldness. It is this kind of adventurousness... that he drew from the Absurd, an adventurousness subsequently captured in his fascinating succession of ingenious, artfully patterned structures... (p.259).

It thus appears that Rosencrantz remains Stoppard's most widely acclaimed and popular play although it has frequently been criticized for being too long, tedious and drawing too extensively upon the creations of other authors. It is quite simply a remarkable achievement within the context of contemporary drama

2.3 The Real Inspector Hound

The Real Inspector Hound is a one-act play which was first produced in London at the Criterion Theatre on 17 June 1968. Although it is something of a detective story, it has often been likened to Rosencrantz as far as such elements as allusion, parody and the meta-fictional status of the characters are concerned.

Stoppard himself has explained that this play is not about theatre critics: "If one wishes to say that it is a play about something... then it's about the dangers of wish-fulfilment...the whole thing is tragic and hilarious and very very carefully constructed" (in Page, 1986:27).

Most critics agree with Stoppard that this play is extremely cleverly structured. Robert Chetwyn wittily remarks that: "Perhaps it was much too clever for most of the critics to see at a single viewing - a wonderful Chinese puzzle of a play, and desperately funny as well" (in Page, 1986:28). Sheridan Morley comments: "In its intricacy and its ambition ... and in its sheer hilarity it seems... a wonderfully successful treat... What follows is a masterpiece of mixed metaphors, mistaken identities, and contorted revelation, but Stoppard's final triumph is that in the closing five minutes he can actually make retrospective sense not only of the previous five but also of the entire play" (in Page, 1986:28).

We can thus already determine that TRIH[1)] is acclaimed mainly for its masterly and intricate use of structure and for its farcical effects which are both distinctive elements of Stoppard's work in general.

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1) TRIH refers to Stoppard, T.1968. The Real Inspector Hound. London: Faber and Faber.

Stoppard has referred to this play as an attempt to bring off a "comic coup in pure mechanistic terms" (in Bradbury and Palmer, 1981:110). Ruby Cohn feels, however, that it is "adroit rather than mechanical" and that "Stoppard leads us through a rollicking labyrinth of pastiche and cross-conversations. Only the humourless will dig for ideas" (in Bradbury and Palmer, 1981:110).

June Schlueter (1977) relates Stoppard's play to the concept of meta-fiction and argues that his characters acquire meta- fictional status by virtue of the device of play within play. In the case of TRIH she argues that "this 'play' is formalized into a structural demand. The characters, who are made to function within two structural units, acquire one identity in the frame play... But the distinction between the identities, and, indeed, between the plays, remains less than absolute" (1977:91)

She continues by arguing that TRIH is about "'the nature of identity', its central concern being that of a fundamental or role-playing self" (p.95). She then adds that this play is not only about identity, "it is about art as well. The dichotomy between the real and the fictive self which his metafictional characters embody extends as well to the relationship between art and reality" (p.96).

Hayman (1977) also comments on this play's unusual structure and feels that "of all the ingenious mechanisms in Stoppard's plots, the one in The Real Inspector Hound has the most tightly coiled mainspring... He concentrates on contriving an intricate and richly comic pattern which will allow plentiful opportunities to his talent for parody" (1977:69). Hayman makes another significant observation when he points out that the fact that certain themes repeat themselves from play to play does not reflect a lack of inventiveness on the part of the playwright but "on the contrary, only a writer of rare resourcefulness would possibly ring such effective changes on the same ideas" (p.69).

Bigsby joins these critics in commenting upon Stoppard's use of parody and themes in this play. He feels that Stoppard gives "free reign to his considerable talents as a parodist, mocking both the conventions of antiquated drawing-room whodonnits and the critical styles of drama reviewers... But once again he is concerned with raising more fundamental questions about the nature of truth and theatricality..." (1976:17). He compares TRIH to Rosencrantz and indicates that Birdboot is strongly reminiscent of Rosencrantz, and Moon of Guildenstern. Through these characters Stoppard reveals his intense concern with the fundamental themes of "the nature of reality, the relativity of truth and the fluid nature of identity" (p.17)

Bigsby draws the conclusion that

> The Real Inspector Hound is not a wholly satisfactory play. It is more adroit than it is convincing. The parody, though at times brilliant, is too often facile; the metaphysical dimension, deliberately underplayed, is nontheless too often sacrificed to the witty remark. A confessedly light-weight comedy, the play finally

stops annoyingly short of examining the implications of its central premise (p.18).

Cahn (1979) makes the observation that in TRIH Stoppard attempts to depict "a world of artificiality, where masks substitute for reality while the inner man lies hidden" (1979:100). In addition, "the drama is intended to reflect the unimportance of life, as both art and life are turned into absurd enterprises" (p.101). Cahn compares Moon and Birdboot to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and feels that they are "two observers who are caught up in an action that exists beyond their control, and who are likewise destroyed by it. They never quite comprehend their roles, even as they die" (p.101). He concludes that even though this play contains unmistakable farcical elements, the death of the protagonists is both moving and shocking. "The final sensation is one of nervous wonder, as those on the outside of the turmoil await the moment when they shall be drawn irrevocably into an action that destroys them" (p.101). Cahn thus chooses to view TRIH in terms of absurd drama where the characters know what their end will be but are unable to do anything about it.

Whitaker (1983) ties in with Cahn when he reflects that TRIH is simpler and more tightly organised than the dialectic of Rosencrantz and that "this game of mirrors invites us to recognise the anxious and inhumane pretensions of our usual ego- life, to relish their absurdity as we slough them off, and to identify ourselves for the duration of the performance with that playful process of liberation" (1983:75).

Brassel (1985) likens TRIH to Rosencrantz and feels that both these plays are concerned with the nature of the theatre. While Rosencrantz extracts characters from Hamlet, TRIH utilises the idea of the "play within a play". He also comments on Stoppard's unique ability to employ parody and allusion functionally in his plays. He explains that the various details in TRIH "are pieced together with an uncanny instinct for parody which incorporates the stage business, the furniture, the props, the choice of characters, the kind of language they use and the thriller's tendency to convey pieces of necessary information directly to the audience without pretence of subtlety" (1985:94).

Brassel points out that it is of integral importance to distinguish between Stoppard's parody of the critics and his parody of the thriller,

> ... because the relationship between the two becomes increasingly complicated as the thriller progresses... However, in establishing these two levels of parody, Stoppard is only preparing the ground for a far more disturbing assault on theatrical convention by ingeniously confusing the two levels and leaving the audience to contemplate which level of statement (if either) can claim to relate to 'truth' or 'reality' (p.96).

Subsequently, "two separate planes of theatrical reality are established, as with Rosencrantz" (p.97). Brassel concludes that the plot of TRIH is both ingenious and complex and that "by showing, through the shape of his play, how one man's fate is another man's fiction Stoppard leaves us begging the inevitable, logical question: whose illusion is our reality?" (p.101).

2.4 Jumpers

Jumpers is Stoppard's first full-length play after Rosencrantz and is regarded by many as his greatest achievement in the theatre. It was first performed at the Old Vic Theatre in London on 2 February 1972. From its first performance critics have been baffled by the apparent confusion and incomprehensibility which mark the greater part of this play. According to Frank Marcus his "only regret is that the purpose of the exercise should have remained so obscure. Still, it will keep people arguing: I predict that there will be many exotic interpretations" (in Evans, 1985:185).

John Barber presents us with a negative view of Jumpers:

> It is another comedy as erudite as it is dotty, with some dark philosophic meaning buried under the fantastications. You could say it was stark raving sane... it lacks the firm underpinning of a sober and powerful myth. Here the substructure is a tortuous who-dun-it. Word games and metaphysical speculations decorate it like paper streamers on a paper gazebo. The result is inevitably flimsy (in Evans, 1985:186).

Stoppard himself has admitted that Jumpers derived its beginning from the moment in Rosencrantz when Ros says: "'Shouldn't we be doing something constructive?' and Guil asks him, 'What did you have in mind? A short blunt human pyramid?'" (in Page, 1986:34). Stoppard comments:

> I did begin with that image...I thought: 'How marvellous to have a pyramid of people on a stage, and a rifle shot, and one member of the pyramid just being blown out of it and the others imploding on the hole as he leaves'... At the same time there's more than one point of origin for a play, and the only useful metaphor I can think of for the way I think I write my plays is convergences of different threads. Perhaps carpet-making would suggest something similar...it's the work of a moment to think that there was a metaphor at work in the play already between acrobatics, mental acrobatics, and so on. Actually it's not a bad way of getting excited about a play (in Page, 1986:34-35).

In an attempt to determine the central concern of Jumpers, Stoppard comments:

> One does find that people accept horoscopes, not with any sort of firm conviction or absolute belief, but the very fact that horoscopes exist at all in a world which is said to be...over sixty per cent non-churchgoing at best, suggests that everybody has a repository of a 'mystical' awareness that there is a lot more to them than meets the microscope... I think that almost everybody would admit to having this sense that some things actually are better than others in a way which is not, in fact, rational. That, roughly, is the central concern of the play -Jumpers (in Page, 1986:36).

Many comments concerning the elements of farce or comedy and those dealing with serious moral concerns in Jumpers have been voiced. Some critics refuse to recognize the existence of such diverse elements in one play while others praise Stoppard for his remarkable versatility as a playwright. Alan Brien remarks that "the fencing matches between the two branches of philosophy are often more showy than significant" while John Weightman indicates that "according to my antennae, quite a few bits of the play have not been brought fully into intellectual or aesthetic focus" (in Brassel, 1985:116). Jonathan Bennet takes these comments a step further when he criticizes Jumpers for being "a mildly surrealistic farce ...which lacks structure and lacks seriousness" (in Brassel, 1985:116). Michael Billington shows more insight, however, when he chooses to recognise that "under the guise of a madcap farce, Mr Stoppard has written a deeply moral play" (in Brassel, 1985:116). The question arises whether "in utilizing many of the mechanics of farce, Stoppard has blurred or even buried his serious intentions" (1985:116).

Michael Billington has commented on the two "worlds" around which Jumpers finds its existence:

> ... what is remarkable about him as a writer is the way in which he makes the imagery and the ideas interact. To take an obvious instance, the logical positivist who so spectacularly pops it in the first scene believes, so we learn, that murder is not inherently wrong. He is thereby both the victim of his own philosophy and the trigger of a very funny farce-plot in which his corpse swings listlessly from a cupboard door (in Page, 1986:40).

John Weightman calls Jumpers "A Metaphysical Comedy" (1972) and regards it as being a "delightfully Absurdist play, more successful in some respects than Rosencrantz, although still a bit too scrappy and incoherent..." (Weightman, 1972:45). Commenting on the basic pattern of this play, he feels that "the comedy of the intellectual at work has not often been done, and this is one of the more successful attempts" (p.45). He adds that all movement is a great mystery and that there is "a kind of seriousness lurking behind the Absurd surface. Somewhere inside Mr Stoppard is a Deist, who regrets the hygienic relativism of common sense and has a nostalgia for the metaphysical absolutes that the modern world has abandoned..." (p.46)

Eric Salmon follows Weightman's line of thought and indicates: "... Stoppard turns out to be a mystic who is fascinated by the way in which our mystical sense of what is, our metaphysical understanding of the world, comes within reach of our comprehension through the probing of that sharp instrument, the human mind" (Salmon, 1979:215). Salmon chooses to compare Stoppard to a playwright such as Bernard Shaw and feels that "both of them delight in the intellectual process. Both celebrate it in their plays. But beyond it they celebrate that mystery which the intellect can apprehend but not explain, the inexplicable fact of life before which the intellect bows and acknowledges fiefdom" (p.215).

In dealing with Jumpers, Cahn (1979) asserts that whereas Stoppard's earlier plays fit into the dimension of the absurd, Jumpers moves beyond the absurdist

void and that "George's extended disquisitions are a positive step out of the disjointed world of playwrights such as Beckett and Ionesco" (1979:117). In addition, George is, at times, like all Stoppard's protagonists, a comic figure. Cahn thus regards the absurdist and comic characters of Jumpers as of primary importance. He concludes: "... the play is a reaction against modern man's denial of all values and a reaffirmation of the belief that something within us makes us human, something which makes us believe in goodness and beauty. And that something must never be dismissed or forgotten" (p.123). Cahn points out, however, that regardless of this play's intellectual interest and its significance as a turning point in Stoppard's career, "...it is not wholly successful as drama" (p.123). He quotes Harold Clurman who indicates that "its point or 'theses' is not revealed through action: it is only stated. There is no basic confrontation, conflict, or delineation of real characters" (in Cahn, 1979:123). Cahn asserts, however, that despite such limitations, Jumpers remains "fascinating and important" (p.124):

> In what stands as his boldest step in moving beyond absurdity, Stoppard dispenses with this limitation of human activity, and he begins to confront world issues directly. The difficulty of life on earth is now accepted. What matters here and in the plays to follow is how to live under those conditions (p.124).

Whereas most of the critics regard Jumpers as a contemporary comedy, Ruby Cohn (1981) chooses to relate this play to the genre of satire. She says: "Jumpers belongs to an old genre - satire - in which, to quote Webster, 'vices, abuses, or follies are held up to scorn, derision or ridicule'" (in Bradbury and Palmer, 1981:116). Cohn also pays some attention to the plot and structure of Jumpers and attaches some importance to Stoppard's use of allusion in this play. She does not, however, regard the use of allusion here as totally successful and says that

"In parodying mysteries, crooners, and Shakespeare, Stoppard is on sure ground, but his footing slips in his play-long parody of philosophy. Physical gymnastics is a witty metaphor for mental gymnastics in a play that purports to jump to no conclusion, but polysyllables are dull weapons with which to cut at logical positivism" (p.116).

She concludes that despite certain limitations where the protagonist is concerned, George "...is still our only Moon in a world of wicked jumpers, and he shines more or less brightly" (p.116).

Bigsby (1976) indicates that Jumpers finds its existence within a comic framework and asserts that "it is a play about the growingly materialist base of modern society and the desperate attempt by its protagonist to establish the existence and reality of transcendent values" (1976:19). Seen within the context of Stoppard's development as a playwright, "the real advance in Jumpers is not merely that Stoppard succeeds in fusing a comic approach with metaphysics, but that he begins to control the resources of theatre with greater confidence and skill than before" (p.23). Bigsby continues that "even the word-games, the ambiguities, the puns, which are all recognizable marks of Stoppard's work, are entirely functional in a play which is in large part concerned with the inadequacy of attempts to capture reality with words, the palpable absurdity of measuring

with a rule whose length obstinately varies from moment to moment" (p.23). He concludes by indicating that "the moral dimension of Stoppard's work appears at times to suffer from his own commitment to farce" (p.24). He feels that Stoppard does not take himself seriously enough, "hence his penchant for parody rather than satire, his technique of building scenes through contradiction" (p.24).

Hayman (1977) asserts that "Jumpers is, by any standards, an extremely big play" (1977:97) and continues by commenting upon Stoppard's use of allusion in this play, particularly in regard to alluding to his own plays. He points out that he approves of Stoppard's "self-plagiarism", explaining that "the advantage of returning to areas that have already been explored is that one has learnt which routes lead most directly to the points of interest. Even in territory which is not autobiographical, there is always an excitement in exploring" (p.98). Hayman feels that when looking at Stoppard's development as a playwright, it is clear that his plays "grow richer by economizing and economize more as they grow richer" (p.99). He presents us with an analysis of various significant aspects in Jumpers and stresses the "pathos of the human situation" in this play (p.108).

> It is an oceanic play with a glistening surface and chillingly profound undercurrents, but bobbing stubbornly about, like survivors clinging to the driftwood of a shipwrecked culture, are Dotty and George... When they reach out towards each other, they fail to make contact; when they reach out elsewhere, they are pathetic... (p.108).

Michael Hinden (1981) ties in with various other critics when he comments extensively on the use of allusion in Jumpers. He indicates that "much of Stoppard's work...may be viewed as a comparable assault on the history of theatre... Stoppard finds himself in the predicament of having to succeed not only classical tradition (Shakespeare), but the newly defined (and therefore defunct) tradition of absurdism, as well" (Hinden, 1981:2). This is in line with Stoppard's use of allusion, seeing that his allusions to both Shakespeare and Beckett constitute a significant part of his work in general. Hinden asserts that Stoppard does not "feed on" Shakespeare, Beckett and Pirandello, but rather "dines with them" (p.2). In addition, "...with Jumpers... Stoppard truly extends the boundaries of his art. The play represents a quantum leap in theatre history... No longer is the Renaissance or even the nineteenth century a useful frame for Stoppard's meaning; in Jumpers his foil becomes the theatre of the recent past" (p.4). Hinden regards Stoppard's use of allusion as a means of paying tribute to the theatre of his contemporaries, especially Beckett. He concludes by pointing out that the "overwhelming feeling of the play is one of irony and deep frustration" (p.12). In addition, "... Stoppard achieves a new level of awareness in the theatre. In Jumpers he plays against the text of the absurd as a condition of his creativity... By his bootstraps... Stoppard tries to climb beyond the theatre of the recent past" (p.12). Subsequently, Hinden finally asserts that "Jumpers stands as one of the most energetic plays of the seventies, a triumph of theatrical self- consciousness celebrating its own despair, amusement, and resourcefulness" (p.13).

Eric Salmon (1979) feels that the metaphysical elements in Jumpers are of primary importance as indicators of Stoppard's delight in the intellectual

process. Salmon compares Jumpers and Travesties, indicating that "...both reflect the twentieth- century dilemma of the divorce of the artist from society and of a sense of reality from everyday activity" while "Jumpers adumbrates three facets of experience - the moments when humanity faces and grapples with its sense of things (George); the moments when humanity caves in and cries for help (Dotty); and the moments when it denies its sense of things and sells out to the charlatans and mountebanks (Archie and the politicians)" (Salmon, 1979:219). Salmon also relates Jumpers to contemporary comedy in general and indicates that despite all its seriousness of artistic purpose, the play "...ripples with endless laughter; it delights by the intelligence and the variety of its comic invention..." (p.224). He concludes that although this play alludes to the Absurd it cannot truly be called an Absurdist play in that it does not reveal the Absurdist mistrust of reason and of language, nor its "...translation into visual metaphor of the dominance of mere physical matter and the dislocation of man from his universe" (pp.231-232). In addition, Jumpers reflects nothing of the calm, despairing acceptance of rootlessness which is the very essence of Absurdism. It is, rather, a notable example of a "new breed - the post-Absurdist piece. It takes account of Absurdism; it puts it in perspective; it regards it and then, with a wry and tentative optimism, dismisses it" (p.232).

Roger A. Shiner (1982) claims that Jumpers is a truly philosophical play in which the philosophy is not of purely instrumental significance. He points out however, that this play should not be dismissed as purely philosophical. Subsequently, he indicates how philosophical points are made in Jumpers mainly by means of the "technique of showing". Shiner further explains that "the process of reminding us about the values which we recognize and which philosophical skepticism obscures but cannot take away" (Shiner, 1982:640), forms an integral part of the overall process of showing in Jumpers. In addition this play shows "the reality of the moral despite the fact that morality has no source but the human form of life" (p.641). Shiner concludes that Jumpers is a "modern morality" and "metaethical" play (p.643) which "shows the existence and nature of moral value by its endless comparisons and contrasts. These comparisons and contrasts are used to bring out by the technique of showing themes of moral and metaethical seriousness" (p.643).

In commenting upon the worlds explored in Jumpers Irving Wardle indicates that the play is primarily concerned with "the existence of God and the definition of goodness; both of which, Stoppard implies, have been brought further into doubt by space exploration" (in Page, 1986:41) while Nightingale regards this play as a

> ... courageous attempt to move beyond the social criticism that mainly preoccupies the contemporary theatre into a realm of metaphysics almost entirely ignored by it, to relate the two, and, doing so, to raise the issues of rare size and import; and this is achieved not only with a theatrical extravagance that verges on the outrageous, but with a nice sense of individual character (in Page, 1986:41-42).

Whitaker (1983) argues that Jumpers causes us to experience the interplay of three modes of interpreting life. These three modes are "an agnostic empiricism", "an anxious religious demand or faith", and "a spontaneous and

compassionate ethical response that helps to guide us through the play's action. Each mode has its own kind of jumping - amoral, anxious, or theatrical - which contributes to the kaleidoscopic whirl of performance" (1983:102). Whitaker also points out that Jumpers uses the traditional tension in farce between a vision of great disorder and a style of heightened and accelerated order thematically which causes the play to become a "kind of anti-farcical farce" (p.106). He concludes that this play "allows us to understand and surmount each madness by means of a sane and implicitly ethical wholeness of apperception" (p.107). Subsequently, it embodies what Stoppard has considered the most important quality of serious art, viz. that art "is important because it provides the moral matrix, the moral sensibility, from which we make our judgements of the world" (p.107). Thus, "Jumpers remains his richest and most compelling exploration of the ethical issues we must face as we act in a human world" (p.107).

Having considered a variety of critical responses to Jumpers we can conclude that the crucial elements in this play include those of farce, comedy, satire, and serious moral concerns. Critics appear to agree that it is a diverse play which moves beyond the void represented by the absurd.

Like most of Stoppard's plays it is marked by a distinct sense of the intellectual, and allusion is of integral importance as it enables him to extend the boundaries of his art. In addition, Jumpers reveals an important quality of serious art, viz. the provision of a moral matrix from which one can judge the world. Jumpers is a truly intellectual, metaphysically probing and philosophical play and is without doubt one of the greatest achievements of Stoppard's playwrighting career.

2.5 Travesties

Travesties was first produced in London on 10 June 1974 and has since become one of Stoppard's most widely acclaimed plays. In the programme note to this production Stoppard remarked that this play "...is a work of fiction which makes use, and misuse, of history. Scenes which are self-evidently documentary mingle with others which are just as evidently fantastical. People who were hardly aware of each other's existence are made to collide; real people and imaginary people are brought together..." (in Page, 1986:45). These comments already indicate some sense of the integral diversity and idiosyncrasy of a play which has variously been regarded as "bizarre", "energetic" and "brilliant".

Travesties consists of an unbroken series of allusions which is, subsequently, the distinguishing characteristic of this play. Michael Billington asserts that it is "a dazzling pyrotechnical feat that combines Wildean pastiche, political history, artistic debate, spoof-reminiscence, and song-and-dance in marvellously judicious proportions. The text itself is a dense Joycean web of literary allusions, yet it also radiates sheer intellectual joie de vivre" (in Page, 1986:48).

Bigsby (1976) indicates that Travesties "attempts to examine the whole question of the role of the artist" (1976:22) and debates the idea that since "art takes notice of something important, it's claimed that the art is important" (p.24). He quotes

Stoppard who says that "'it puts the question in a more extreme form. It asks whether an artist has to justify himself in political terms at all', whether the words 'revolutionary' and 'artist' are capable of being synonymous or whether they are mutually exclusive, or something in between" (p.24). We can subsequently agree that Travesties is a play which is bound by various extremes and opposites. Bigsby draws attention to the fact that the inherent and inevitable clash of ideas in this play causes the characters to become "mere performers in a Wildean comedy which jolts along with all the manic energy and manifest dishonesty of a bogus memoir" (p.25).

He comments on the extensive use of allusion in Travesties, particularly that connected with Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest, indicating that Stoppard has drawn dialogue and characters from Wilde's play and has even restructured history so as to conform to the requirements of high comedy. Thus the title of this play is exquisitely apt since Stoppard presents a travesty of both literary styles and historical events.

Bigsby draws the conclusion that Stoppard achieves an integral sense of dislocation in Travesties which places it firmly within the context of contemporary drama. Stoppard's distinguishing mark, viz. an "absolute lack of certainty about almost anything" (p.27) essentially provides him with the freedom to criticize whichever issues he deals with. This is achieved, to a great extent, through the use of allusion. Bigsby also relates Travesties to contemporary comedy and points out that "the assumptions of farce come up against the moral presumptions of comedy, and the resulting clash disturbs not merely stylistic unity but also the momentum of the humour" (p.28).

Hayman presents a fairly extensive analysis of the use of allusion in Travesties, paying particular attention to Stoppard's use of Beckett, Wilde and Joyce. He asserts that in this play "Stoppard goes on to devise a method of incorporating the distortions of memory into the picture of the past" (1977:115), and continues by observing that The Importance of Being Earnest is used in more or less the same way than Hamlet in Rosencrantz. Stoppard evidently employs allusion here in order to evoke a sense of a conflict of style which is, subsequently, a prominent subject in Travesties. "The action is built around a series of collisions between contrasted styles of behaviour, conflicting artistic programmes and conflicting views on whether style is in itself something to be valued" (p.119). Hayman continues with an in-depth analysis on the conflict of style and the use of parody and allusion in this play and concludes that "with Stoppard we feel a relaxed confidence that the flow of words, jokes, parodies, ideas is inexhaustible. The effort behind the writing remains invisible" (p.128).

In Tomfoolery: Stoppard's Theatrical Puns (1979) Hersh Zeifman makes a detailed analysis of Stoppard's use of language, in particular the use of puns in Travesties. He feels that in this play Stoppard is at his most verbally dazzling. It is "brim- full...with puns of all manner and description, ranging from the ridiculous to the sublime, from the groaningly obvious to the diabolically subtle. And however many one thinks one has detected, there are always others somewhere in the shadows; rereading a Stoppard text means constantly being startled by fresh discoveries" (in Brown, 1984:85-86). Zeifman asserts that Stoppard is obsessed with puns and has "an undeniable talent to amuse" (p.86) and makes a valuable observation when he points out that Stoppard does not

employ puns with the sole purpose of amusement but rather in order to fulfil various other functions. These include using puns as structural devices, as an integral part of the play's basic meaning and in order to "mirror" content.

After having commented on the use of puns in various of Stoppard's other plays, Zeifman observes that Travesties "...is probably Stoppard's most sustained work of theatrical punning. Henry Carr is a punster's dream...if language is a feast of words, then Carr arrives prepared with fork and knife in tongue, his double-edged and often cutting puns tumbling forth in an unstoppable flow" (p.103). Zeifman variously refers to these puns as "outrageous", "ingeniously subtle", and "sneaky" (p.103). The effect of these puns is one of "helpless, giddy laughter" (p.103). He points out, however, that even though Stoppard frequently employs puns "...for their sheer verve and verbal wit", the playwright here uses them "...structurally to shape our response to the play's larger issues..." (p.104).

After having analysed the use of puns in various of Stoppard's plays, Zeifman draws some valuable conclusions. Although puns partly fulfil the function of creating laughter and amusement, they are also essential elements employed in order to draw the audience into the very heart of the play, structurally and thematically speaking. They are thus only partly comic devices at which level they evidently function brilliantly and are, generally speaking, controlled with dazzling skill by the playwright. Zeifman feels that "...what is even more impressive is the way Stoppard uses his puns both as a comic device and as an integral part of what his plays are trying to communicate" (p.107). Stoppard's plays thus communicate on various levels including the actual words spoken by the characters and the way those words are formulated, "...or the characters' gestures, or setting, or the very shape of the play" (p.108). Thus we can assume that the dramatic "message" of a Stoppard play is "...bodied forth in every aspect of the play..." (p.108). Zeifman concludes that "...Stoppard's puns may be said to constitute a truly theatrical language, in that their presence encapsulates ... the essence of what his plays are all about... in Stoppard's drama, punnology recapitulates ontology" (p.108). Thus Zeifman pays tribute to Stoppard's linguistic ambiguities which he substitutes as a metaphor for metaphysical ambiguity.

Ruby Cohn (1981) pays particular attention to Stoppard's use of comic devices and allusion in Travesties. She feels that in this play the comic devices of the playwright's earlier plays are refined and that it is in particular by the use of allusion that Stoppard here "... moves into his highest comic gear" (in Bradbury and Palmer, 1981:117). The elements of allusion and comedy are thus perceived to be inextricably linked in Stoppard's plays. Cohn continues by pointing out that "Travesties feeds on literature - Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Tennyson, La Rochefoucauld, Gilbert, a litter of limericks, the question-and- answer mode of the Eumaeus chapter of Ulysses" (p.118). In addition, "...the first act of Travesties displays Stoppard at his most scintillating - puns, games, jargon, pastiche, sight gags, limericks, vaudeville, misquotations, cross-conversations, mistaken identity" (p.119). She differs from Zeifman, for instance, in that she concludes that although "Stoppard's puns, parodies, and performance strategies are inventive, ... they serve no purpose except entertainment in the light drama that constitutes the bulk of his work" (p.120). Cohn concludes that "failing to achieve 'a perfect marriage between the play of ideas and farce or

perhaps even high comedy', Stoppard belabours ideas - aesthetics, politics, philosophy - until they resemble funeral baked meats that coldly furnish forth the marriage tables of farce or perhaps even high comedy" (p.120).

In contrast to Cohn's fairly negative tone of criticism, Clive James bestows only praise on Travesties when he says that this play to him "...seemed not an exotic indulgence, but the stuff of life. Its high speed was not a challenge but a courtesy; its structural intricacy not a dazzling pattern but a perspicuous design; its fleeting touch not of a feather but of a fine needle" (James, 1975:69). James comments on various of Stoppard's other plays and makes an important observation when he says that even though people tend to dismiss Stoppard as an intellectual and coldly calculating playwright, these qualities do not indicate the entire exclusion of creativity. He compares Stoppard to Einstein, pointing out that they share an "...intellectual love for the objects of experience... such a love... is at work in Stoppard's writing, lending it a poetry which is as far beyond sentimentality as his ebullient detachment is beyond the arrogant solipsism which commonly passes for commitment" (p.76).

Coppélia Kahn presents us with an extensive analysis of Stoppard's allusion to The Importance of Being Earnest, aptly titling her article Travesties and the Importance of Being Stoppard. This critic relates Travesties to contemporary comedy in that she regards it as a "...paradoxical mixture of the serious and the comic" (Kahn, 1978:187). She points out that for Stoppard, style is substance and it is thus not surprising that this playwright chooses to travesty various styles in Travesties. It should be borne in mind, however, that Stoppard's "travesties of style" are inseparable from his "travesties of ideas" (p.191). One of the central concerns of this play is with the entire concept of art and the artist and in particular with the role of the artist in society. The conversations about art in Act I subsequently question art's validity or seriousness in the context of World War I. Thus Travesties poses a serious question, viz. "...what right has [art] to exist when men are dying by the millions and whole societies are turning upside down?" (p.191). Kahn asserts that both in form and content, this play mirrors play itself and concludes that, to a great extent, all Stoppard's plays play with ideas, raising questions without answering them. She finally remarks that "...in Travesties, the medium of the debate is its message, part and parcel of what [Stoppard] means to say about art. The puns; the collages of historical, farcical and fantastical action; the shifts of spokesmen, adversaries, contexts, and styles may convey his central proposition that art must be uninhibited, speculative purposeless play" (p.197).

In his article Faith in Tom Stoppard Eric Salmon draws a comparison between two of Stoppard's major plays, viz. Jumpers and Travesties. He indicates that "Jumpers postulates the truth of intuitive sense, the probability of a metaphysical reality: Travesties asserts that, if such a reality does exist, its one chance for being given expressive form lies in the arts and that the arts are to the world of the spirit what the pure sciences are to the physical world -..." (Salmon 1979:224). In addition, intellectually speaking, "Travesties takes up the argument where Jumpers leaves it..." (p.224). Salmon then joins the ranks of other critics who regard the use of allusion as one of the integral aspects of this play. He feels that Stoppard employs this device both for sheer fun and as a means of echoing the basic meaning of the play. Furthermore, the works of the

artists of the past cannot be ignored and have to be dealt with. Allusion is evidently the appropriate method of doing so.

Salmon asserts, however, that it is precisely because of allusion that Travesties is marred, to a certain extent, by a sense of imbalance of design seeing that although the allusion to The Importance of Being Earnest is brilliantly funny, it "...proves in the long run to be a less-than-perfect scaffolding for the play because too much of the play has to exist outside it" (p.230). Subsequently, although the plot in Travesties is "highly ingenious" and "diverting", it lacks the essential quality "...of being an organic metaphor which reflects in itself something of the central sense of the play" (p.230). Salmon concludes that "... Jumpers is aided and abetted by Travesties, because the latter play signals a second, albeit tentative, optimism, namely, that art still functions, can still be relied on...to enshrine our senses of an eternal beauty" (p.232).

Tim Brassel offers a lengthy discussion of Travesties and mainly chooses to comment upon Stoppard's relationship with Wilde and Joyce. He asserts that this play "... breaks with Stoppard's previous custom by treating historical figures in an historical setting" (1985:136). The three central figures of Lenin, Joyce and Tzara evidently provide the play with its main themes and characters although Stoppard does not really treat them historically "... and their individual lives and achievements serve chiefly as the pretext for a playfully disrespectful comedy which, as its title suggests, makes 'travesties' of the characters which it presents" (pp.136-137). Brassel contends that Stoppard employs allusion with "...considerable ingenuity and dexterity..." (p.139) and that "...the concept of setting characters within borrowed cultural patterns plainly owes much to Joyce, since Ulysses ...provides the archetype for this kind of structure" (p.139). In Travesties the point of using the play- within-a-play concept "...is the absence of any real mutual dependence of the one on the other" (p.140). Thus, Stoppard uses Wilde's play as a means of providing "...a steadily identifiable but essentially bogus focus, unifying the otherwise disparate strands of Stoppard's complicated subject and creating a narrative thrust that Carr alone cannot offer" (p.140).

After having analysed Travesties in detail, Brassel concludes that this play "...provides the clearest example yet of Stoppard's rich inventive powers, exceeding even the verve of Jumpers" (p.161). In addition, "...the fertile use of Carr both as eccentric narrator and participant in his own mêlée and the structural dovetailing of the various transmogrified scenes from The Importance of Being Earnest combine to create a carnival atmosphere of stylish and joyous comedy" (p.161). Subsequently, it can finally be seen as "a plea for tolerance of the individual artist in pursuing his chosen path" (p.161).

Cahn (1979) points out that in Travesties Stoppard pursues a variation of historical theatre by means of the use of travesty which prevents the main characters from being powerful or noble figures. "Here they are reduced to a most human level, a level where they, too, are confronting the world's absurdities and struggling to counteract them" (1979:128). Cahn thus attempts to relate Travesties to the Theatre of the Absurd.

He indicates that this play diverges sharply from all other history plays in that historical events are not presented chronologically and none of the participants recount an orderly procession of events. Instead, Stoppard uses Carr in whose

confused memory events are replayed. "The technique of dramatizing through such a frazzled mind offers many theatrical possibilities" (p.128). In Travesties, then, "...this phenomenon is developed to such an extent that the entire narrative structure is subject to the vagaries of memory, and the complications become bewildering" (pp.128-129). Another main characteristic of this play is the "...dichotomy of attitude about the role of the artist" (p.132), which is also a significant aspect of Stoppard's work in general. "In the course of his plays he has moved from a passive resignation in the face of absurdity to a desire to struggle against absurdity and move beyond it" (p.132).

Cahn then attempts to place Travesties within the framework of the Absurd and points out that in the course of his work Stoppard has constantly struggled with the question of how man can oppose absurdity. He maintains that in Travesties "...he seems to have reached a reconciliation with absurdity. The human condition is immutable. To a great extent the social, political, and religious order of an individual society is irrelevant. Through art, and through the development of his own consciousness, each man must come to grips with his world" (pp.140-141). Subsequently, Henry Carr can be likened to other absurdist characters in that he fits into the tradition of Stoppard's protagonists, "...a series of inconsequential figures who are lost in the world but who attempt to formulate understanding and act accordingly" (p.142). Moreover, Carr thus serves to reinforce the main theme of the play which deals with the difficult and uncertain roles of the artist and the revolutionary. "Perhaps Carr's uncertainty represents our own uncertainty as to how we should establish meaning in our lives" (p.143).

Although, as we have seen, most critics praise Travesties as one of Stoppard's major achievements in the theatre, there are those who regard this play as essentially unsuccessful. One such critic is John Weightman who says: "I don't think the extravaganza quite comes off as an autonomous creation. For instance, the character of Joyce is a failure, a sort of blank, because it is easier to show how non-art is silly and political dogmatism limited than it is to explain how good art comes to be good" (in Page, 1986:49). It is thus evident that because of his essential idiosyncrasy as a playwright Stoppard will remain a fairly controversial figure.

We can assume that the single most distinguishing characteristic of Travesties is its use of allusion which Stoppard employs in order to attain a variety of dramatic purposes, including as a means of criticism, as a structural element as a comic device, for sheer fun and in order to echo the essential meaning of the play. Stoppard evidently controls allusion with dazzling and brilliant skill. In addition, although he strikes one as being too intellectual, at times, he remains an essentially creative and energetic playwright.

In Travesties Stoppard presents us with a travesty of literary styles and historical events which evidently contributes to the underlying sense of dislocation and conflict of style with which the audience is confronted. This is achieved without visible effort and reveals Stoppard at his most verbally dazzling. In addition, it illustrates how Stoppard employs every aspect of his plays in order to convey his dramatic message.

Travesties can also be viewed as a series of conflicting statements which raise unanswered questions. This has led critics to regard this play as being marred by an imbalance of design which evidently constricts its successfulness as drama. Travesties remains a vivid example, however, of Stoppard's rich inventive powers illustrated by his exceptional and scintillating use of language. It is thus difficult to agree with a critic such as Weightman who argues that this play does not come off as an autonomous creation. After all has been said it remains a remarkable and brilliantly conceived play.

2.6 Professional Foul

Professional Foul is a play for television written for Amnesty International's Prisoner of Conscience Year and was first broadcast in September 1977. Although it is regarded as a successful play and is saturated with various true Stoppardian qualities, it does not appear to have elicited quite the extensive critical response of the plays dealt with thus far.

Stoppard has commented upon the genesis of Professional Foul by indicating that: "I'm as Czech as Czech can be. So you can see that with my desire to write something about human rights, the combination of my birth, my trips to Russia, my interest in Havel and his arrest, the appearance of Charter 77 were the linking threads that gave me the idea for Professional Foul" (in Page, 1986:59). In addition, Stoppard, similar to various other critics, compares Professional Foul to Jumpers, regarded by many as his greatest ever achievement in the theatre. He maintains that

"Professional Foul and Jumpers can each be described as a play about a moral philosopher preoccupied with the true nature of absolute morality, trying to separate absolute values from local ones and local situations. That description would apply to either play, yet one is a rampant farce and the other is a piece of naturalistic TV drama..." (in Page, 1986:58).

Professional Foul, together with Night and Day and Every Good Boy Deserves Favour, represents plays in which Stoppard has turned his attention to immediate social and political concerns, "...with a consequent diminution in the stature of the resultant plays" (Salmon, 1979:216). Salmon regards Professional Foul as the best of these three plays. It deals with "... the denial of the right of individual expression and the compulsion towards expediency in Stoppard's native Czechoslovakia" (p.216). Salmon quotes Stoppard where he says that there are times "...when I feel that I should stop compromising my plays with the whiff of social application. They must be entirely untouched by any suspicion of usefulness. I should have the courage of my lack of conviction" (p.216). Salmon points out, however, that "...it would be naive of us to assume that, because he usually has the good sense as an artist not to allow personal convictions to swamp the poetry and pattern of his work, he is therefore indifferent to the pain and struggle of the world" (p.216). Salmon thus contends that the subject matter of this play diminishes its stature to a certain extent but continues to regard Stoppard as a sensible and sensitive artist.

Gabbard (1978) indicates that Professional Foul "...concerns itself with the mysteries of ethical conduct. The perspectives shift from football to politics to philosophy, the standards involved in each helping clarify those in others. Football is the basic metaphor for explaining the professional foul - a deliberate violation of the rules for the high purpose of team victory" (1978:59). In addition, Gabbard observes that this play illustrates the protagonists' contention that "...language is as capable of obscuring truth as of revealing it" (p.59), a notion central and true to Stoppard's work in general. Gabbard draws some valuable conclusions about Stoppard the playwright.She says that his convergence on human confusion is particularly noticeable and that he succeeds in exposing "...the psychological and physical flaws in man's perception, and the unfathomability of his character, his life, and his art" (p.60). In addition, he essentially provokes thought by teasing the intellect and satisfying the need for delight. Finally, Stoppard carries forth the thematic heritage of the pacesetters of his time, mainly through the use of allusion. He couches his observation in enough laughter to seem to say with T.S.Eliot:

> Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh,
> The worlds revolve like ancient women
> Gathering fuel in vacant lots (p.60).

Cahn (1979) likens Professor Anderson to Professor George Moore in Jumpers. He indicates that both are philosophers and "...each is confronted with conflicts and conundrums that demand commitment and resolution" (p.148). However, Anderson's world is marked by an absurdity which "...takes the form of an intense evil in the face of which intellectual speculation can no longer exist in splendid detachment" (p.148). Cahn continues by relating Professional Foul to the Theatre of the Absurd and maintains that it contains the two levels of absurdity which have long dominated Stoppard's theatrical world. "On the one hand, is the interior level, personal involvement with questions of identity and meaning. Then there exists the second layer, where all personal values must be adjusted to the circumstances that the world presents" (pp.150-151). Anderson is evidently trapped between these two levels and attempts to resolve a fundamental point, viz. "...the conflict between the rights of individuals and the rights of the community" (p.151). This issue is also dealt with in Jumpers where George Moore "... seeks a universal truth, something permanent in a world of ever-changing values" (p.151).

Cahn concludes that more than any Stoppard protagonist, Anderson surmounts his world. "He resolves personal questions, and he uses his solutions to encounter the buffetings of a brutal society that takes little pity on individual man... In Professional Foul rationality and morality triumph, if briefly. But it is triumph nonetheless" (p.152).

According to Brassel (1985) Professional Foul differs sharply from the more or less domestic setting of Stoppard's earlier work in the medium of television. A distinguishing characteristic of this play is the way in which a variety of themes are woven "...into a superstructure as rich and dense as any he has yet created" (1985:190). As in Jumpers the language used to portray these themes is based on the everyday language of philosophical discourse: "...its cautious step-by-step logic, the regular use of improbable or extreme examples, the refusal simply to accept what may seem perfectly obvious - all provide boundless

opportunities for parody..." (p.192). According to Brassel the "play of ideas" is the kernel of Professional Foul and the central dilemma in this play has both emotional and intellectual roots.

> Professional Foul is not a piece of simple didactic writing. It is, on the contrary, as accomplished a work as any Stoppard has yet given us, passionate, technically immaculate and replete with the fast, witty humour of the mature Stoppard. Like many of his earlier plays its thrust is thoroughly moral and, like Jumpers, its central argument is expressed by the direct philosophical discourse working hand in hand with the momentum of the plot (p.200).

Brassel concludes that what is finally most impressive about Professional Foul is not the argument it contains, "...but the character of Anderson which he creates as a living fulfilment of it. For the first time in any of his plays, Stoppard brings to life a character in which there is authentic development in the course of the play" (p.202). Considered together, Every Good Boy Deserves Favour and Professional Foul "...represent a distinct but not drastic advance in Stoppard's work, in particular a new readiness to take a definite stand on certain political issues" (p.202). In addition, his characterization becomes more rounded and naturalistic.

Brassel subsequently refers to a number of other critical responses to Professional Foul and quotes Henry Fenwick who asserts that "it is significantly different from most of his previous work" and Sheridan Morley who feels that this is the first time "...that he has climbed down off the Scrabble board of his own remarkable linguistic talents and tackled a tangible issue" (p.203). In addition, Michael Church observes that the play "...seemed to suggest that Stoppard himself might be breaking through a creative barrier" (p.203). Brassel asserts, however, that these are overstatements which may have arisen from the familiarity and topicality of the subject-matter of Stoppard's plays. Furthermore, in comparison with a play such as Travesties, both Professional Foul and Every Good Boy Deserves Favour "... offer a steadier, more impassioned view of their chosen subjects, in which the plays themselves become acts of protest, expressions of the author's own moral outrage" (p.203). Subsequently, the success of Professional Foul has led to a more widespread recognition of Stoppard as a serious writer, "...but the formula - of integrating argument into an effective, entertaining and adventurous dramatic form - has remained consistent" (p.203).

Whitaker (1983) proposes that Professional Foul brings to the popular medium of television a subtle exploration of a problem posed in Jumpers: "How can we justify ethical action in a time distrustful of all claims in behalf of absolute values and sceptical of language itself?" (1983:143-144). The protagonist of this play subsequently presents us with a significant observation, viz. that "...language is not the only level of human communication, and perhaps not the most important level. Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we are by no means silent" (p.146). This is a witty allusion to a famous sentence at the end of Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. In addition, "... Anderson justifies the light of his conscience with an axiom that, strange as it may seem, underlies all of

Stoppard's own linguistic jugglery: 'There is a sense of right and wrong which precedes utterance'" (p.146).

Hunter (1982) proposes that Stoppard's television plays tend to be his most conventional and include one great popular success, viz. Professional Foul. He comments that "this play manages to combine, without a hint of strain, Stoppardian intellectual and moral concerns...with humorous twists developed slowly enough to be grasped by an audience unaccustomed to the usual Stoppardian quick-fire or overlap...and a walking-bass of traditional story line of a kind familiar to modern television audiences..." (1982:72). Hunter also points out that, to Stoppard, language is an aspect of human life and that it can variously be humorous, affectionate and troubled and "...finally there is a faith beyond it; through language Stoppard argues that there is an abstract reality beyond language, which cannot be damaged because it 'precedes utterance...'" (pp.94-95).

Thus, even though Professional Foul is not widely regarded as one of Stoppard's greatest achievements, it does represent a move in perspective and shows, according to Hinden, that Stoppard has increasingly moved "...from post-absurdism toward a combative political stance" (Hinden, 1981:12). It is essentially a play which reflects Stoppard's social and political concerns and clearly reveals his preoccupation with basic human rights. The true Stoppardian qualities of morality, rationality and philosophy are firmly embedded in Professional Foul. Moreover, this reflects the delight Stoppard derives from teasing his audience's intellect. This is achieved by means of more realistic characterization and the use of elements such as parody and allusion, which are, in turn, key elements in all of Stoppard's work. As in all of his plays, language is essentially viewed as an aspect of human existence which is not the sole means of communication between humans and can be employed both in order to obscure and to reveal reality and the truth.

2.7 Dirty Linen and New-Found-Land

The one-act combination of Dirty Linen and New-Found-Land was first produced on 6 April 1976 after having been commissioned by the expatriate director, Ed Berman, for a series to celebrate his British naturalisation during the American Bicentennial year. Stoppard has commented that "Dirty Linen works nicely. But I don't think anybody would pretend it was naturalistic...I wouldn't have written the play at all but for the necessity to fulfil a promise... Dirty Linen is a play in which a sexy dumb blonde walks on and is utterly patronized, and the play ends with the entire committee adopting the resolution which she said they ought to adopt on page four or whatever it is" (in Page, 1985:53). It is thus evident that the playwright himself does not regard this play as one of his best. There are critics, however, who feel that Dirty Linen does have some merit. John Simon indicates that it is "...just good, clean - or not-so-good and not-so-clean - fun with very simple concepts, pleasantly painted puppet characters, and occasionally quite sophisticated verbal structures" (in Page, 1985:54).

John Peter refers to Dirty Linen's connection with comedy:

> Dirty Linen is a hilarious diversion... With this play Mr. Stoppard emerges as a social satirist. Gogol would smile with approval if he could see him animating these marvellously observed marionettes. It's a battlefield: we behold panic- stricken respectability besieged by panic-stricken sexuality. And throughout Mr. Stoppard keeps a watchful eye... (in Page, 1985:52-53).

Hayman asserts that Dirty Linen and New-Found-Land are "lightweight" plays which efficiently function as "laughter- raisers" (1977:129). He wittily remarks that it seems as if Stoppard "...had set himself the task of finding out how many minutes of comic dialogue he could write without introducing a single phrase of straightforward English" (p.129). Brassel follows the same line of thought when he comments that here "... Stoppard shows a readiness to follow any path that offers opportunities for comic capital" (1985:224). He regards the play as "extremely funny" (p.225) and draws our attention to the "extended and ingenious pastiche" Stoppard employs in order to achieve farcical effects. He feels, however, that although the comedy is "...so emphatically verbal...the constant fertility of the images themselves and the inventiveness with which they are brought together maintains theatrical tension with consummate ease" (p.227).

Brassel suggests that Dirty Linen differs, to a certain extent, from conventional farce. The play is saturated with "...theatrical and verbal manipulation" in which "Stoppard parades the obviousness of his techniques with enormous relish in order to engage the audience's complicity in his theatrical game- playing - an approach quite distinct from that of conventional farce, where the author seeks to engage the audience's sympathy in his characters' embarrassments and misfortunes" (p.231). Brassel subsequently concludes that this play can be regarded as a parody of farce seeing that "...a variety of telling details are accurately observed, only to be drawn into a richly ironic frame as Stoppard gently mocks or exposes the ridiculousness of his subject: the vainly distorted self-image of America, the crass mechanics of the thriller, or here, the furtive naughtiness of the farce" (pp.231-232).

The use of language in this play is of some significance in that it contains a variety of elements, amongst others "...streams of punning, game-playing...elaborate verbal patterns...Travesties- like mimicry of Wildean style, ...parody of rival newspaper styles...snippets of foreign languages" (p.232). According to Brassel these elements serve to further the "deliberate sense of festive contrivance" (p.233) and he quotes Billington's suggestion that the play's "...cumulative effect is of language being sent on a roller-coaster ride" (p.233). Brassel observes that the "...hiccup in the roller-coaster ride" derives essentially from the strange relationship between "...Dirty Linen with its genial social satire, and New-Found-Land with its cascade of allusions and digressions" (p.233). This is both effective and pleasurable since it provides an excellent illustration of "...Stoppard's habitual upending of traditional theatrical convention" (p.233).

Cahn regards Dirty Linen as "a linguistic farce about a postulated sex scandal in the British Parliament" (1979:101). He contends that it can be placed firmly

within the context of pure - farce tradition and that its most outstanding characteristic is its "verbal fireworks" (p.103). In addition, in true Stoppardian fashion, a politician to whom language is usually a defence mechanism, becomes the victim of language which forces him to reveal that which he attempts to hide. This is, of course, something which frequently happens to Stoppard's characters. Apart from this Stoppard "...also indulges in his favorite pastime, nonsense lines..." (p.104) and, as in various of his other plays, "...complications, both linguistic and circumstantial, pile up insanely in this play" (p.104). Cahn concludes that Dirty Linen and New-Found-Land join other Stoppard plays through the fact that the main characters struggle to communicate and are uncomfortable and that it is only when they are able to "...escape into their make-believe visions that they are content. Even in this brief playlet Stoppard again develops one of his important themes: theatrical form as respite from the pressures of daily existence" (p.106).

In his article Grotesque Drama in the '70s, Michael D. Miner likens Dirty Linen to Grotesque Drama in general. He maintains that, in this play, Stoppard "...uses the grotesque as a decorative embellishment which functions by reductio ad absurdum to reflect the political and moral chaos evidenced by the British and American political sex scandals of the 1970s" (Miner, 1980:108). He proposes that although the grotesque is not essential here to thematic development it does serve to further that development whenever it is used. Miner then cites various examples of grotesque images employed by Stoppard and contends that these are used, in certain instances, in order to reflect "...the chaos of identity which lies at the thematic heart of Dirty Linen" (p.108).

Whitaker (1983) comments upon the farcical elements in Dirty Linen and says that this play "...treats as farce a situation that arises easily enough in London or Washington when our political, sexual, and journalistic games collide" (1983:132). In addition, he feels that both "visually and topically, this play may be the 'undergraduate satire' that one New York reviewer, Martin Gottfried, declared it" (p.134). He also quotes the well-known Walter Kerr who has referred to Dirty Linen as "slovenly" and "altogether intolerable" (p.134). "Stoppard himself was rather deprecatory: 'My director thinks he's got a profound comment on British society', ... 'What he really has is a knickers farce'" (pp.134-135). It is thus clear that, in general, Dirty Linen is regarded as superficial and gross. Whitaker does see some merit in it, however, and makes a significant comment when he says that "it uses low farce as a field within which to explore our chronic intoxication with language" (p.135).

Hunter points out that the true disappointment of this play derives from the fact that it provides little, if any, intellectual stimulus, something inevitably associated with Stoppard's best plays and which the audience has become accustomed to expect from him. He states that it is "...a satyr- play, a romp, not too choosy about its jokes..." (1982:244). He adds, however, that the play is "... threatically original and deft, its glancing points are humane and tend in the general direction of wisdom: the dumb blonde turning out to have far more sense than her masters..." (p.244).

It is thus evident that although Dirty Linen has been the object of much negative criticism it does contain some of the distinguishing characteristics of a distinctive Stoppard play. Its most noteworthy element is the variety which

marks its use of language and, in particular, its "cascade" of allusions and parody of farce. Similar to many other Stoppard plays Dirty Linen incorporates truly contemporary characters who frequently find themselves in a battle of communication, portraying, simultaneously, one of Stoppard's favourite themes, viz. the search for meaning and identity which marks practically all human lives. Although it does not provide much intellectual stimulus it remains an integral part of Stoppard's writing in general.

2.8 Every Good Boy Deserves Favour

Every good Boy Deserves Favour differs from Stoppard's other plays in that it is a play for both actors and orchestra. It was first performed at the Royal Festive Hall on 1 July 1977 with the London Symphony Orchestra and essentially reflects Stoppard's growing concern with political and social issues. Another distinguishing characteristic of this play is its exploratory use of the theatre itself. Stoppard has commented that "the play is written for severe physical limitations... It's really very simplified as a piece of playwriting, because it had to be quite short, you couldn't have any setting and you couldn't have any movement" (in Page, 1985:55).

Various critics have commented upon the supposed "imbalance" between the elements of comedy, and tragic irony and emotion in this play. David Cairns proposes that although it reflects sincere and deeply serious intention, "...it only toys with its subject... Stoppard has allowed himself to be carried away by his own comic invention... Perhaps if Previn's accomplished, anonymous score had provided something more positive than background music and interludes for reflection, the drama's tragic ironies would have struck home; but I doubt it, given the emphasis of Stoppard's writing"(in Page, 1985:56).

Bernard Levin comments on Stoppard's ability to make his audience laugh at something as serious as evil and remarks that the content of this play "...is the incarceration in Soviet madhouses of sane dissidents" and its form "...is a fiery comet of wit, of verbal felicities, of the most delicate irony and the ripest comic misunderstanding...its eternal truth...is that the gates of hell shall not prevail..." (in Page, 1986:57).

EGBDF[1] thus contains strong elements of dark comedy and relates significantly to the drama of the Absurd. Cahn comments that with this play "we are presented with an absurd world, or rather two halves of an absurd world: the 'hospital' and the classroom... But amid the bizarrely comic vision emerges a new element: an extraordinary compassion and anguish..." (1979:144-145). Thus Stoppard here presents us with a truly confusing and terrifying absurd world which is concretized in the shape of a Soviet regime. Throughout the play one is struck by the intense sense of comic-horror, something which has become a hallmark of contemporary drama.

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1) EGBDF refers to Stoppard, T.1979. Every Good Boy Deserves Favour. London: Faber and Faber.

Cahn adds that EGBDF "...is as openly passionate and full of rage as anything Stoppard has ever written, as he seems to be tossing aside that intellectual detachment so long intrinsic to his work" (pp.145-146). Thus, where a play such as Dirty Linen is criticized for containing too little intellectual stimulus, EGBDF is actually praised for being directed at our emotions rather than our intellect. This play evidently reaffirms some of Stoppard's fundamental theatrical precepts:

> Man is a victim of an absurd world, which he must try to understand and to which he must try to adjust. Oppression, cruel and unsympathetic, intrudes on his existence... Still, the play is filled with verbal fireworks...A witty, yet tragic, one-act play, Every Good Boy Deserves Favour is a reflection of Stoppard's ever more refined technique and sensibilities (pp.147- 148).

Brassel indicates that EGBDF and Professional Foul are closely related as far as their subjects are concerned and both "...seem to have their genesis in the political exploration first provoked by the character of Lenin in Travesties" (1985:179). Brassel shares Cahn's line of thought as he comments that this play's "...comedy works within a brutally serious situation for the first time in Stoppard's work" (p.180). He proposes that EGBDF's truly special element derives from "...the uneasy combination of a comic madman with an injured innocent..." (p.182). Brassel then analyses various integral elements in the play, particularly those related to Stoppard's use of comedy. He feels that Alexander's dilemma, i.e. between principle and instinct, "...is the fulcrum of the entire play and its success is very largely dependent on the power with which that dilemma is evoked, intellectually and emotionally, for the audience" (p.186). He also comments on Stoppard's use of the theatre itself, citing as example the sense of Sacha's powerlessness which is amplified by the way in which he is isolated in a separate acting area.

Brassel comes to the conclusion that EGBDF must "...finally be regarded as a less than satisfactory piece of dramatic construction by Stoppard's usual, exceptionally high standards" (p.189). Stoppard's interest centres too closely on Alexander's plight. There is, however, "...some felicitous wordplay...and some witty and dext manipulation of logic..." (p.189). In addition, the play, at times, appears to be split in two halves, "...with Ivanov, his imaginary orchestra and the comedy on the one side, and Alexander, Sacha and the state-orchestra on the other" (p.189). This could be due to the apparent failure of the orchestra image to effectively unify these two main strands of the play and to "Stoppard's choice for his hero of a deeply serious man without a single funny line in the entire play" (p.189). Brassel adds that the weakest parts of EGBDF "...are those between characters conceived in incompatible moulds...Though there is, as always, a fertile technical and linguistic resourcefulness throughout, the play has more power as a moral statement than as an example of Stoppard's dramatic brilliance" (p.189).

Whitaker feels that EGBDF is marked by a subtle "...pattern of lunacy" (1983:137) which is amusing, ominous and poignant. In addition, the "...inventive language is pure Stoppard" (p.137) and the ultimate question is: "On what authority do we decide not to treat our neighbour with love or respect but to define him as 'mentally ill' and lock him up in a plane area bordered by high

walls?" (p.139). With regard to this question, Whitaker feels that EGBDF strongly reminds of Pinter's The Birthday Party and Orton's What the Butler Saw. Moreover, "...Stoppard himself has always been fascinated by the languages of withdrawal, hysteria and rebellion" (p.140). Whitaker concludes that this play is marked by an inherent sense of darkness and although it is evidently simple in outline, it is remarkably complex in its inner form.

Hunter calls EGBDF "funny" and "moving" but feels that its overall success is marred by two inherent problems, viz. the fact that where music and speech are combined the one always tends to dominate the other and the notion that "... the orchestra symbolizes the totalitarian State in which improvization and individual thought are not permitted, yet it tries also to offer a lyrical and intensely sympathetic commentary on the action. There is no way round this problem and the play cannot resolve it" (1982:192).

Yet, despite much negative criticism, EGBDF remains a worthwhile part of Stoppard's writing in that it reflects his inherent obsession with language and his concern with the Absurd and the comic. Furthermore, it clearly fits into the sense of fatality and helplessness which marks contemporary drama and gives vent to the playwright's seriousness concerning evil and anguish.

2.9 An assessment of the major trends in Stoppard criticism

Three distinct lines of thought emerge from a survey of Stoppard criticism. These deal with Stoppard and his relationship with comedy and farce, his connection with the Theatre of the Absurd, and his use of dramatic language, in particular the element of allusion.

To Stoppard language is perhaps the essential aspect of human existence and we often find that his characters attempt to take refuge in the fumblings and clichés of contemporary language. Stoppard frequently aims to achieve linguistic flourish while, simultaneously, exploring language as a facet of human behaviour. What emerges, however, is the notion that language itself is insufficient as a means of establishing and maintaining relationships and significance. Stoppard is thus evidently part of a "new breed" of playwrights who have rethought and remodelled the conventional aspects of themes and language in order to provide an adequate vehicle for the thoughts and aspirations of a modern age. Subsequently, language is primarily employed with the purpose of bringing to our attention the essential loneliness and isolation of the human condition, a notion which is at the very heart of Stoppard's plays. Furthermore, he reveals a deep- seated scepticism of language as a means of communication. Thus it emerges that communication itself is difficult, if not impossible, and social connections untrustworthy: man is alone in a miserable and hostile world. Language is no longer the sole or even a trustworthy means of communication. From these notions Stoppard's archetypal theatrical situation arises: man is confronted by an essentially absurd world and, subsequently, desperately seeks refuge from it. His loss of control is mirrored by the inevitable fragmentation of language which, in its turn, emerges as the ultimate entropistic force in that it both obscures and reveals truth in the process of communication.

Allusion emerges as the single most important element in Stoppard's use of dramatic language. Although some critics feel that his use of allusion is at times somewhat forced because of a loss of control, no-one can dispute its significance as an element which finds its existence at the very core of Stoppard's work. Through the use of allusion, the notions and words of other authors inevitably gain a new slant in a new environment, simultaneously providing a forceful vehicle for the expression of concepts integral to the playwright's work.

Stoppard's connection with the genre of comedy remains undisputed. He employs traditional farcical elements in order to reveal the central concept of man as a being irretrievably bound, fettered and irrational, frequently incapable of communicating. Furthermore, through the use of farce, Stoppard leaves his audience essentially confused, alarmed and uneasy. This is achieved, partly, through a reversal of the conventional structure of farce which implies movement from the credible to the incredible. Stoppard's plays move from the incredible to a logical situation back to the incredible. This evidently implies that farce reflects a permanent state of being. What is of importance, however, is that the use of farce does not diminish the underlying seriousness of Stoppard's plays. This notion inevitably places his work firmly within the context of contemporary comedy. Moreover, the fusion of comic and tragic elements in his work evidently challenges the twentieth century view of the representation of the concepts of violence, confusion and self-alienation.

Generally speaking, all of Stoppard's critics have connected him, in one way or the other, with the Theatre of the Absurd. His plays portray man as searching, his fate controlled by unknown forces and a chaos of identity is subsequently found at the heart of his work. One of the main subjects in his plays is the connection between an overwhelming sense of absurdity and the contingent nature of truth. This subject is found in plays such as Rosencrantz, EFM, TRIH, and Jumpers. Moreover, we find that the theatricalism of Stoppard's plays is in itself a clue to the playwright's intense concern between role and identity which grips his characters as they attempt to determine the forces behind a bewildered and hostile world. Ambiguity is subsequently employed as a crucial device to suggest the essentially deceptive nature of reality as we perceive it.

The sense of the absurd which governs practically all of Stoppard's plays reflects the suffocating condition of man faced with the unrelenting malignancy of incomprehensible cosmic forces which govern him. Life becomes a game which is, simultaneously, sinister, savage, pathetic, compassionate and, to Stoppard, ultimately comic. As is the case with contemporary comedy in general, Stoppard's plays tease and trouble the audience while making it laugh. In the end we can agree with Combrink (1979:198) who feels that Stoppard ultimately reveals an essentially compassionate view which mitigates the harshness of the final implications.

Stoppard thus emerges as an idiosyncratic playwright whose best qualities as a dramatist include a mastery of language, a distinct sense of style and rhythm, and wit with both verbal and visual dimensions. The structure of his plays allows him to employ parody, allusion, farce and puns without disrupting the unity of his dramas. These elements, at times, even become part of the themes of his plays as in Rosencrantz and TRIH. Furthermore, his plays are marked by a

distinct sense of subtlety in the integration of themes, structure, language and characterization.

Stoppard is a witty, intelligent and sophisticated playwright who reveals a genuine concern for the plight of his characters. He reflects a sense of delight and exuberance of spirit intensified by the intellectualism embodied in his work. His characters, however, do not escape from a life which is an endless struggle. Some critics regard him as crude and obvious while some plays supposedly lack intricacy and fire of imagination. In addition, it has been argued that his characters are marred by a lack of development and are forced and artificial. Nevertheless Stoppard is clearly a dazzling and compassionate playwright who is simultaneously bold and clever. His plays are distinctly original and fascinating, partly as a result of the intricacy of structure which marks practically all his work. Stoppard himself has likened his thought process to carpet-making which reveals that his plays are formed by a series of conflicting statements. Subsequently, his dramas have been referred to as bizarre, energetic and brilliant.

It is evident that Stoppard employs all the elements in his plays in order to communicate with his audience. The three main elements in this process of communication are comedy, language and allusion, and the Absurd. The remainder of this survey will be an attempt to define Stoppard's exquisite manipulation of these elements in his plays.