

Man's freedom manifests itself in laughter, his necessity in crying; today we have to demonstrate freedom. The tyrants of this planet are not moved by the works of poets, they yawn at their lamentations, they consider their heroic lays silly nursery tales, they fall asleep over their religious poetry, there is only one thing they fear: their mockery. So parody has crept into all genres...

-Friedrich Dürrenmatt

3 COMEDY: A GENRE BEFITTING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Comedy seems to be assimilating and usurping other forms, displacing tragedy, as the spiritual environment at the moment is intrinsically hostile to tragedy - as tragedy deals with grandeur as rooted in the individual, and as this grandeur is explicitly and emphatically if regretfully denied in contemporary drama (Combrink, 1979:257).

Comedy, in brief, is criticism. If through laughing at others we purge ourselves of certain spiteful and ungenerous instincts - as through tragedy we achieve a higher and more publicized catharsis - that is not quite the whole of it... Comedy is criticism, then, because it exposes human beings for what they are in contrast to what they profess to be (Kronenberger in Felheim, 1962:195).

Seeing that it is partly the purpose of this study to determine Tom Stoppard's place and merit within the context of twentieth-century drama, and in particular, modern comedy, I have deemed it necessary to dwell briefly on the history, nature and function of comedy in general.

The word "comedy" is often used in everyday conversation with the intent that it must be something "funny" with a happy ending. Thus a comic play is expected to make us laugh and should end with everyone "living happily ever after". On closer consideration, however, it becomes evident that both these popular assumptions pose serious problems.

Concerning the first misconception: it does not take a genius to realize that there are comedies which rarely invite laughter. Are these plays then to be regarded as badly written, misunderstood or disliked? A play can evidently not be classified as a comedy on the basis of the amount of laughter it evokes. The second fundamental belief concerning comedy is equally untrustworthy. We may ask what in fact does the happy ending consist of in comedy? A play obviously cannot be regarded as a comedy merely because of its happy ending.

It is thus evident that a definition such as: "comic plays make us laugh and have happy endings" is inadequate as an interpretation of comedy as a whole and as twentieth-century comedy in particular. Furthermore, it has often been pointed out that many substantial problems face the critic of comedy, including the fact that we possess no challenging formulation of the essence of comedy such as Aristotle's *Poetics* provides for tragedy with sufficient authority to make it the undisputed starting point for any theoretical inquiry concerning the fundamental nature of the comic. The student of comedy is thus immediately confronted by endless theories and speculations on the nature of the comic, usually consisting of little more than considerations of laughter as a purely human phenomenon and the contrasts and similarities between comedy and tragedy. Furthermore, various critics have found it easier to point out what comedy does not do rather than considering what it actually is.

It would consequently be unwise to attempt to formulate an all- encompassing theory of comedy within a few pages where so many better minds have failed. Therefore, to my mind, it would be more useful to consider some of the undisputed and most basic elements of the genre of comedy in an attempt to reach a better understanding of contemporary comedy.

... the distrust of traditional generic distinctions has been engendered because some of these have become practically ossified. It is not possible to define a contemporary play in terms of a definition evolved to fit Shakespeare or Congreve. This is not a denial of the fact that certain universal aspects of the concept of comedy will remain in any definition, but what is needed then is a new definition, not the discarding of a useful critical concept (Combrink, 1979:47).

3.1 Issues integral to the concept of comedy

3.1.1 Reception theory: a new direction

Much has been said, both in traditional and modern comic theory, about the social nature of comedy. Some critics feel that the comic could not exist but for society and that a joke is not a joke unless it is shared by two or more people. The association of comedy with society is an essential condition for its existence.

The modern world is evidently one of rapid and significant change and thus intellectual disciplines including literature and music are inevitably influenced by such developments and changes. What is important, however, particularly within the field of contemporary literature, is that modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem sufficient to fit the reality experienced by the present generation. Thus a hitherto unknown search for new directions, particularly within the context of literary theory, has developed. There appears to be an integral need for new methods of analysis and new forms of explanation and concretization within the framework of contemporary literature. Subsequently, new concepts of literary forms and modes have actually been proposed including new notions of literature itself and how it communicates. Communication has become a key concept in modern literary society, giving rise to the fact that many a modern author has endeavoured to find new and more effective ways of communicating with his audience, including employing "new" forms of comedy in an attempt to concretize the trends within contemporary society itself. Hence the change within the framework of comedy itself. "Comedy is a social form. It strives to reflect the age from which it springs. As an age irrevocably changes, so will that which may properly be regarded as comedy. Thus, a new descriptive theory has to be developed inductively for each succeeding age" (Combrink, 1979:57-58).

This need of new ways of communication and explanation has opened the way for the advent of Reception theory, which has left no area of literary endeavour untouched. There are, however, some discrepancies as to what exactly the term Reception theory implies. According to Holub:

... 'reception theory' refers throughout to a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader. It is used, therefore, as an umbrella term and encompasses both Jaus's and Iser's projects as well as empirical research and the traditional occupation with influences (Holub, 1984:xii).

Reception theory must be distinguished clearly from reader-response criticism. The former is seen as a more "cohesive...and collective undertaking" (1984:xiii). In addition, it developed from a reaction to social, intellectual and literary changes in West Germany during the late nineteen-sixties. Reception theory may also be distinguished from reader-response criticism on the basis of lack of mutual influence, seeing that the indications are that exchange between them 'has been non-existent.

One of reception theory's main contributions to the field of literary interpretation is that it provides a new technique for understanding and explaining central concepts, including the mediation and actualization of past art. Jauss outlines the requirements of a new paradigm:

This specific accomplishment [of a literary paradigm] ...is the ability to wrest works of art from the past by means of new interpretations, to translate them into a new present, to make the experiences preserved in past art accessible again; or, in other words, to ask the questions that are posed anew by every generation and to which the art of the past is able to speak and again to give us answers (in Holub, 1984:3-4).

Perhaps even more important than being able to renew the past, an adequate theory should be able to relate to the present. Reception theory is not amiss in either area; hence its significance concerning contemporary literature. In addition, its importance is enhanced by its relationship with pressing contemporary concerns such as the notion of catharsis. Aristotle's Poetics can evidently be considered as the earliest illustration of a theory in which the audience response is of integral importance because of its explicit reference to catharsis as a central category of aesthetic experience.

Contemporary criticism has subsequently attached increasing importance to the reader's response to a specific literary work. Within the context of reception theory the role of the recipient is of primary significance seeing that, in a certain sense, it is the perceiver who determines the artistic quality of the work. "Perception and not creation, reception, not production, become the constituent elements of art" (1984:17). Subsequently, perhaps the most important activity undertaken by the reader is the concretization of the text, defined as "removing or filling out the indeterminacies, gaps or schematized aspects in the text" (1984:26). Concretization is thus an individual activity and is subsequently subject to vast variation. When considering this notion closely it becomes more apparent why it is such a tremendously strenuous task trying to define and determine the true nature and function of an art form such as comedy, albeit traditional or contemporary. Elements such as personal experiences, moods and various other contingencies can evidently affect each concretization with the result that no two concretizations are ever precisely identical, even when experienced by the same reader. Thus, a new perspective is presented as to the inability of great critics to reach agreement on a concept such as comedy.

Reception theory also has connections with the concept of allusion which evidently occurs in all literature. Within the context of reception theory art is outlined as a dynamic signifying system. Thus, each individual work of art is a separate structure which has integral references to what has preceded it inhering in its very essence, a function adequately performed by allusion. Structures can subsequently never be totally independent of those that have preceded them. Structures, i.e. literary works, should thus be seen in relation to other works which have already become part of history and which were written by the same author. They are not independent, self-sufficient entities.

Reception theory also contains some reference to the integral association between literature and society. General receptiveness concerning a specific art form is not a constant quality but something which alters in the course of time, between cultures and even inside societies. Thus, also within the context of interpretation of comedy, it is no longer the author with his oeuvre which stands in the foreground but rather the "consumer and the conditions under which consumption occurs" (1984:50). It subsequently becomes of some importance to determine the "taste" of a given period which is defined as "a relationship to art in which a man's entire philosophy of life is mirrored or at any rate one where the inmost being of the man himself is involved" (Schücking in Holub, 1984:50).

One of the most integral notions of reception theory is expressed by Jauss in his theory the "aesthetics of reception" in which he maintains that literature should ideally be treated as a dialectical process of production and reception rather than by one merely attempting to elucidate the historical essence of an art work by examining only its production or by simply describing it. Thus the interaction of author and public becomes of fundamental importance. In addition, Jauss points out that the literary work must be received and evaluated against the background of both other art forms and the experience of everyday life, hence the influence of contemporary concerns on the interpretation and evaluation of modern comedy. We should, however, keep in mind that while society influences the interpretation of literature, society itself is, in its turn, influenced by literature.

As we have seen, various traditional and modern critics have felt that one of comedy's primary functions is to provide pleasure and enjoyment. The aesthetics of reception theory also reflects upon literature's "duty" to "reintroduce" pleasure to the reader's experience of a literary work. "While aesthetic experience was once considered to possess a legitimate cognitive and communicative function, more recent art and theory have stripped it of these roles and consigned pleasure to cultural attitudes associated with the narrow-minded, pretentious middle classes" (Holub, 1984:73).

Reception theory has, to a certain extent, attempted to restore primary aesthetic experience to its supposedly rightful place at the centre of literary theory. In addition, twentieth-century theory has devoted some time to the question of pleasure and art. Jauss maintains that the three fundamental categories of aesthetic pleasure are poiesis, aisthesis and catharsis. Poiesis refers to the productive side of aesthetic experience, in other words the pleasure derived from the application of one's own creative abilities. Aisthesis is defined as aesthetic perception and refers to the receptive side of aesthetic experience. Catharsis, which is of fundamental concern to the study of contemporary comedy, is ultimately "the communicative component between art and the recipient" (1984:78). Thus, integrally, the notion of catharsis ties in with communication through the work of art.

It is important to keep in mind that aesthetic identification is not a passive receiving on the part of the audience but "rather, like all communicative processes, it entails a back and forth movement between the aesthetically freed observer and his irreal object in which the subject in its aesthetic enjoyment can run through an entire scale of attitudes" (in Holub, 1984:78).

The notion of interactive patterns between the reader and literature is thus an integral concern within the concept of catharsis. In addition, the cathartic identification is characterized by its emancipatory function for the spectator. According to Jauss, it occurs in both tragic and comic situations and involves aesthetic distance: "The spectator is allowed the tragic emotion or sympathetic laughter only to the extent that he is capable of detaching himself from the immediacy of his identification and rises to judgment and reflection about what is represented" (Jauss in Holub, 1984:81).

As has been mentioned before, reception theory does contain some reflections on the concept of allusion and, in addition, it displays a certain amount of contact with the notions of textuality and intertextuality. According to Holub, allusions can turn into a barrier rather than an aid to reception (this notion is dealt with more fully elsewhere). Another integral notion is expressed by Iser when he deals with the question of how and under what conditions a text has meaning for a reader, indicating that meaning is essentially the result of an interaction between text and reader as "an effect to be experienced" not an "object to be defined" (in Holub, 1984:83). The text itself is viewed as a function of its readers and its reception while its meaning is constituted by the interaction between text and reader. Subsequently, in Jauss's aesthetics of reception the text "is grasped in its becoming rather than as a fixed entity" (1984:149). Thus the text, in reception theory, lives through the reader and the history of the reader's involvement with it.

With a critic such as Stanley Fish the onus of interpretation is shifted onto the reader, which leads to the notion that the text does not contribute to interpretation at all because everything depends on what the reader brings to it. According to Holub this leads to unanswerable questions such as what does the reader then read and what does the critic interpret? Thus Fish's concept cannot be accepted uncritically and should be considered as relatively one-sided.

It is evident that reception theory is a direction in contemporary criticism which endeavours to assist in the interpretation of both older and modern literary works and thus has to be taken into consideration in any attempt to define contemporary comedy in terms of its appeal to an audience/reader/receptor.

3.1.2 Comedy and communication

For many playwrights, including Stoppard and Pinter, comedy has become an effective and essential means of communication. Throughout the years various genres and art forms have been employed in order to communicate with the audience or reader, culminating in modern times, in amongst other forms, contemporary comedy, as an effective means of coping with and expressing despair and disillusionment which are so characteristic of the modern world.

Within the framework of reception theory some attention has been devoted to communication between the author and his literature on the one hand, and the audience or reader on the other hand. When dealing with the communicatory structure of fiction in general, Iser defines what he calls "the asymmetry between

text and reader" (in Holub, 1984:92). This consists of two deviations from the norm, viz. firstly, that it is not possible for the reader to test his understanding of the text and, secondly, that no regulative context exists between the text and reader to establish intent and, consequently, this context has to be constructed by the reader from textual clues or signals.

In addition, the communicatory process between text and reader is marked by a unique give-and-take structure. Seeing that the text is unable to respond to remarks or questions by the reader, the latter has to be controlled and guided, to a certain extent, by the text and, subsequently, the manner in which the text exerts control over the dialogue is one of the most significant aspects of the entire communicatory process.

According to Iser, negations and blanks are the fundamental means by which communication takes place seeing that they form a kind of nexus that derives from the text without being identical with it. The "basic force in literary communication" is, however, negativity which cannot be defined but only experienced.

It is like a deep structure of the text, an organizational principle whose 'abstract manifestations' are the blanks and negations the reader perceives... from the point of view of reception, negativity is 'the nonformulation of the not-yet- comprehended'. It is the structure that enables the reader to transcend the world in order 'to formulate the cause underlying the question of the world'. In assisting us to disengage ourselves temporarily from our own lives, negativity enables us to assimilate others' views and thus is the fundamental component of communication (Holub, 1984:95-96).

Writing is thus an author's way of communicating and, in reading, the reader "makes" the work communicate itself, seeing that the work itself is communication. For Stoppard, modern comedy is ultimately a means of communication.

3.1.3 Laughter and catharsis: a spiritual cleansing?

When dealing with comedy the question of laughter inevitably comes to mind. Although comedy and laughter most certainly are not synonyms and the one cannot explain the other, they are inextricably linked. In addition, the concept of laughter has always presented some difficulty to comic theorists and many great critics have failed in their attempts to explain the nature and function of laughter. Part of the problem the student of laughter appears to be the fact that comedy is invariably expected to produce laughter, a notion defined again and again in contemporary terms: a literary work need not evoke laughter in order to be a comedy. Nevertheless, the role of laughter in comedy cannot simply be dismissed. "Some of the funniest lines in history have been the agonized attempts by the world's smartest people to define the nature of laughter... The

philosopher trying to define laughter is as hopeless as a doctor trying to take an elephant's pulse by holding its toe" (Kroll *in* Combrink, 1979:65).

Wimsatt has drawn attention to the fundamental danger facing the critic of the comic, viz. that he is easily led astray from the real object by theories of laughter. Thus we can assume that it is fundamentally incorrect to approach comedy merely through laughter

Heilman points out that not everything laughable is comic and that, likewise not all comic experiences are laughable. It is thus of primary importance to distinguish comedy from that which is laughable. In addition, laughter does not reveal much about comedy itself seeing that people laugh at a variety of things including the accidental, surprising, shocking, incredible, reassuring, fortunate and grotesque. Furthermore, laughter comes in many guises, for example, hearty, polite, nervous, exultant, sneering, snickering and so forth. It is thus clear that laughter is not something which is planned ahead, it rather emerges instantaneously and spontaneously from within a human being.

Having established something about the elusive nature of laughter, it is of some importance to note that, according to Rodway, the stress on laughter theory has diminished to such an extent that "it is now critically respectable (and even commonplace) to object to the bad effects of 'identifying comedy with laughter'" (Rodway *in* Combrink, 1979:66). In addition there appears to be little doubt as to the proposed significance of the concept of catharsis to the overall function and effect of comedy. This notion has gradually attained more importance in comic theory especially within the framework of contemporary comedy.

Great thinkers and critics have, throughout many ages, expressed their views on the nature of laughter: "Laughter is the indication of an effort which suddenly encounters a void" (Spencer *in* Hatlen, 1972:110); "Laughter is the result of an expectation which of a sudden ends in nothing" (Kant *in* Hatlen, 1972:110); "The essence of the laughable is the incongruous, the disconnecting of one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another" (Hazlitt *in* Hatlen, 1972:110).

Although most views on comedy and laughter present some shortcomings there are clearly some points of general agreement, amongst others that comedy as such implies a certain contrast as a result of the juxtaposition of the normal and abnormal, and the expected and unexpected, and that comedy invariably includes a sudden change or contrast. It is fairly obvious that both these elements of comedy inevitably lead to laughter on the part of the audience. Various critics have expressed concern about the need for distinguishing comic laughter from all other kinds of laughter although few have been able to present us with a truly functional definition of comic laughter as such. Smith feels that

Laughter is a physiological phenomenon, a repetitive and rhythmical interruption, consisting of alternate contractions and releases of certain muscles of the larynx, the diaphragm, and the face, generally accompanied by unique sounds of an explosive nature. The psychic antecedent of this physiological phenomenon is the contrast between a perception and an image, which frequently takes the form of a disproportion between an

end and the means by which its attainment is sought. With the consciousness of disproportion occurs a release of the amassed, but now superfluous, nervous force, which discharges itself in the spasmodic contractions we call laughter (1976:179).

In addition Smith proposes that comic laughter is distinguished from all other kinds of laughter by its stimulus "... which is a combination of an emotion of superiority and a perception of contrast, springing from the display of an individual character flaw against a normal social background" (1976:179). Thus comic laughter is seen to involve a moral cause, arousing both an intellectual and an emotional reaction.

A strong case has been made, amongst others, by Feiblemann, for the significance of comic laughter in relation to the central contemporary concerns of limitation and acceptance. "Laughter is sometimes the reaction to insuperable obstacles in the way of a goal, by which means the observer is thus reconciled to defeat. Life is not so bad after all, when we can laugh at disaster... It is the final difficulty of human life which comedy accepts because it cannot change, and in this psychological sense we may see clearly the vistas of affirmative value inherent in comedy" (Feiblemann, 1970:189). According to this view, comedy and laughter should thus not be regarded as criticism but rather as an expression of the acceptance of the limitations of actuality. In addition, laughter is seen as a form of escape which "...consists in the recognition of the limitations of actuality of the ridiculous and ludicrous aspect of existence" (1970:191). These ideas invariably tie in with the notion of catharsis in that laughter is seen as an escape or release from the essential limitations of human existence and "...a kind of emotional purgation" (1970:192).

Koestler also presents us with some significant ideas on the concept of catharsis, especially in his comparison between tragic and comic catharsis. In the former a climax is reached after the increase of tension whereafter it gradually ebbs away in a catharsis while in the latter the expected climax after the mounting of tension is never attained in that tension is relieved and exploded in laughter. Koestler's theory of the comic ties in with his concept of the creative process. He regards "comic effect" as being the bisociative culmination of two formerly incompatible matrices: "When two independent matrices of perception of reasoning interact with each other the result... is either a collision ending in laughter, or their fusion in a new intellectual synthesis, or their confrontation in an aesthetic experience... the same pair of matrices can produce comic, tragic, or intellectually challenging effects" (Koestler in Robinson, 1980:13).

It has been pointed out, however, that although Koestler has provided us with useful thoughts on the function and beneficial effects of catharsis, his ideas cannot readily be accepted as literary criticism seeing that he generally deals with "the comic" rather than with literary comedy. A key phrase in his work appears to be that "...comic discovery is paradox stated" (1980:14). R.W. Lewis reflects on this paradox when he says:

...the really significant development in the comic mode, both at home and abroad, over the past century or so has been the development of comedy as a way of registering artistic and human defeat, and the use of the clown figure as a means of living

with despair. And yet a note of something more than sheer endurance... a note even of positive joy, these too are inherent in the comic tradition (1980:14).

The concept of "paradox stated" is of particular significance when dealing with contemporary comedy. Robinson says that "if modern literature, which is Lewis' subject, is obsessed with the darker elements of human life, comedy might be a way of keeping balance in the process of expressing that darkness" (1980:14).

As has been mentioned before, the concept of catharsis has attained a new significance within the framework of reception theory, mainly because of its emancipatory function for the spectator. Witnessing a hard-pressed hero in his struggle leads to sympathetic laughter and therefore comic inner release. Thus, within the framework of comedy both the nature of the response from the spectator and the role of laughter in that response are of integral importance. Hence the tendency to regard laughter as a peculiar aesthetic response which is essential to the definition of comic drama. Meredith's "the test of true comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter" (in Howarth, 1978:8) is representative of this view. At the other extreme we find critics and theorists who essentially deny the existence of any relationship between comedy and laughter. L.C. Knights states that "once an invariable connection between comedy and laughter is assumed we are not likely to make any observations that will be useful as criticism" (in Lauter, 1964:432).

W.D. Howarth makes a valuable point when he says that we should distinguish clearly between two separate and independent elements in comic drama, viz. the aesthetic principle animating comedy, in other words the comic impulse which determines the spectator's peculiar response, viz. one of the interest, curiosity, suspense and surprise. A critic should thus, ideally, be mindful of the distinction between the comic or laughter-provoking element of comedy and its non-comic or dramatic component.

We have, however, established that comedy and laughter are inextricably linked, for "...the characteristic attribute which defines the mainstream of comedy...is without a doubt what Meredith calls the comic spirit: the desire to present human experience not plain and unadorned but in a stylized, imaginative or caricatural manner in order to arouse laughter" (1978:11).

Laughter theories, on the whole, can be divided into mainly two groups, viz. the "subjective" or "moral" theories and the "objective" or "intellectual" theories. Although a strong case could be made for the apparent "inappropriateness" of abstract inquiries into the nature of laughter when considering the actual appreciation of comic drama, it is also true that theoretical attitudes at a given time can provide us with some insight as to the expectations of the spectators for whom the playwright was writing. It appears evident that, within the context of theatrical laughter, fashion or popular taste is of some importance. Christopher Fry reminds us, however, that comedy "is not a drama with the addition of laughs. It is a world of its own..." (in Howarth, 1978:18).

Smith presents us with some insight when he says that the conception of laughter as a release of nervous force or repressed desires is closely connected with the

conception of laughter as play. In addition, in terms of response, laughter could be defined in three ways, viz. as an overflow of nervous energy, as a release of inhibited desires, and as an expression of the play instinct. Thus, according to this view, laughter should be regarded as a corrective. He points out that it is possible, however, to see laughter functioning as redirection rather than release whereby it becomes a means of introducing harmony to the individual character of man and is, subsequently, no longer a safety-valve or a mere blowing-off of potentially dangerous nervous energy.

Smith maintains that the catharsis of comedy is neither so immediate nor so direct as that of tragedy mainly because of the fact that comedy has less concern with intrinsic morality and because comedy does not touch us so directly and produces less illusion. Thus comedy can effect a purification and spiritual cleansing and shares with tragedy in the ethical function of catharsis

Thus we can agree that "...one has to acknowledge the presence and the function of laughter and catharsis in comedy and assign them their proper places" (Combrink, 1979:86). The elements of laughter, catharsis, stimulus and response all seem to tie in together and, keeping in mind the fact that each individual witnessing the actions of a comedy is confronted by a wide diversity and complexity exhibited within the framework of comedy and each, in his turn, interprets these actions differently because of a different framework of reference, one starts to sense the immense variety of relevant elements within the context of comedy itself. As an effect of catharsis, the person who has undergone it is, to some extent, different from the one who has not and, according to Heilman, the elimination of the emotion evoked implies a minutely altered responsiveness which reduces the limitations inherent in a non-experience of comedy.

It seems needless to deny the existence of any of these prominent and functional characteristics of comedy as many critics have evidently endeavoured to do. Particularly within the context of contemporary comedy, laughter can be seen as a basic though inessential element, effecting various functions including acting as a means of accepting limitation, of criticizing, of recognizing the prevalent sense of absurdity so integral to modern society, and of escaping, albeit from truth or despair.

In much modern comedy the laugh as follow-up to the induced state of mind of the audience has disappeared, and has been replaced by a sometimes sickening and breathless awareness of a yawning void or abyss, a sort of spiritual vertigo. The sobbing intake of breath, the stunning metaphorical blow to the solar plexus, the abrasive touch - these have become the physiological manifestations of an awareness that is raw, unshielded, uncompromising, but still somehow, forlornly but illimitably compassionate (Combrink, 1979:88-89).

Schilling reminds us that, when dealing with comedy and response, we should keep in mind that laughter relies on personal response, seeing that everyone's comic sense is his own, thus not everything is equally funny or comic to everyone. The function of laughter is essentially to condemn and thus act as a corrective force. Within the context of contemporary comedy, the notion of sympathetic

comedy has attained newfound importance. Through laughter such comedy appears to alleviate the sorrow of existence by emphasizing that each man has his share of a common fate. Thus, paradoxically, in tragedy man seems great after all, while in comedy, he seems little after all. In addition, if comedy and laughter exposes man for what he is, it demands a reconciliation between man and what he laughs at as well.

Howarth endorses the idea of a functional catharsis within the context of comedy, pointing out that as the tragic poet arouses the emotions proper to tragedy, viz. pity and fear, in order to purge the excess of such emotions, so his comic counterpart arouses the appropriate emotions of pleasure and laughter, with the object of purging them of harmful excess.

The cathartic process, so defined, depends on both the comic and the non-comic or dramatic elements of comedy; and, as with tragedy, disruptive analysis gives way to harmonious synthesis. The comic exposure of folly - what Aristotle calls the 'ugly' - to the critical analysis of our laughter produces discord and incongruity; it corresponds, *mutatis mutandis*, to the violence and the shock of the tragic catastrophe. But in both cases the dénouement brings reconciliation and restores harmony; and, ...a stable social order is restored to the little world of the comedy by the weddings, the feasts and the celebrations which end so many plays (Howarth, 1978:20).

3.1.4 Incongruity

Incongruity is one of the central constituent elements of comedy and presents a close relationship with laughter theory in that comic effect is most frequently achieved by means of the recognition of some incongruity, whether it be in speech, action or character revelation. Hatlen defines it as follows:

Incongruity is the result of the tension or dissonance set up by the juxtaposition of two objects or people that expresses a risible contrast... The contrast usually depends on the establishment of some kind of norm so that discrepancy is emphasized. There is a gap between the expected and the unexpected, between the intention and the realization, between the normal and the abnormal, which results in comic discord and inconsistency (1972:119).

Marie Swabey maintains that incongruity arises either from a transgression of commitments, for instance where we deviate suddenly from the accepted code of conventions, or when we become aware of an infringement in the content of thought of the basic inclusive logic. Thus incongruity is characterized by ideas and marked by a lack of harmony, consistency and compatibility. It is therefore apparent that "incongruity" is a key term within the context of the comic. Swabey points out that incongruity often appears either in weakened form of varying degrees for example as a matter of contrast, as lack of relevance, as an inappropriateness or as a contrariety. In addition, it may require a knowledge

of special information in order to be detected. This includes acquaintance with literary allusions, familiarity with fashions, politics and historical landmarks. In other words, the reader or audience has to share a certain prerequisite knowledge with the author in order fully to grasp and appreciate the comic in his work. This is particularly true of a contemporary dramatist such as Stoppard where the reader is confronted by a dazzling spectacle of intellectual puns, travesties and allusions, all contributing to the overall funny effect of most of his plays.

Swabey also refers to Spencer and Darwin's concept of incongruity, pointing out that although they mention incongruity as a common cause of laughter, by translating it into psychological and somatic terms, they seem to rob it of logical efficacy. "In their hands, logical distinctions are existentialized: incongruities are viewed as feelings of contrast, as phenomenal events in the experience of human perceivers, but without implications of intellectual insight or objective axiological significance" (1970:208). She stresses that not all incongruities cause laughter and that "the most intense feeling may be aroused by the perception of quite non-ludicrous incongruities" (1970:208). This view is shared by Styran who also notes that incongruity is not necessarily laughable.

Incongruity may evidently assume various forms including that within character, situation and dialogue or language. A comic situation based on incongruity usually maintains a contrast between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, for example where a character is placed in unfamiliar surroundings. Incongruity of character usually involves a contrast between the ideal and the real or appearance and actuality, hence the notion that we laugh at people who are exposed for what they really are, stripped of all pretence. Incongruity of language occurs when the dialogue is in contrast to the social context such as sudden vulgarity in polite conversation, or when the language has the opposite effect of that intended by the speaker. It is thus not difficult to see why incongruity is generally regarded as a basic element of comedy in that it appears continuously in one form or another throughout the course of most comedies. Subsequently Hoy, in The Hyacinth Room, says outright that incongruity is the very essence of comedy.

It is thus evident that the term "incongruous" is generally used within the context of comic theory in order to indicate the disparateness and diversity of human life as it is portrayed in comedy and we conclude with Hatlen's statement that "incongruity in its various forms suggests imbalance and disproportion; there is the implication of an upset equilibrium, 'the disconnecting of one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another'" (1972:120).

3.1.5 Comedy and society

Whereas tragedy is first and foremost an expression of man's individuality and greatness, comedy is primarily an expression of man as a social being, intensely concerned with his littleness and insignificance. Comedy originated from festivals involving drink and erotic ritual by way of sympathetic magic to aid the gods in their task of renewing the fertility of the earth which is a task essential to society.

Henri Bergson's essay on laughter remains the best and most influential social theory of comedy. He proposes that, in order to understand laughter, it should be placed within society, its natural environment. In addition, its function is of social nature and we generally laugh at the faults of others, "... provided we add that they make us laugh by reason of their unsociability rather than their immorality" (Bergson in Clark, 1965:391). Thus we see that Bergson's commitment to laughter leads him to endorse a view of comedy as social in nature because the natural environment of comedy is society. In addition, because society is its natural environment, laughter "must have a social signification" (in Robinson, 1980:4). Bergson comments on the nature of the comic:

The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events (1980:5).

Robinson presents us with valuable comments on Bergson's essay and its preoccupation with the social nature of comedy when he says:

The human condition itself can be seen as comic, above and beyond the exigencies and impulses of society. What is 'encrusted' on us, the living, is our intellect, which perceives in fixed products a reality that is in constant process. The natural, the adaptable, the pliable, the creative, are not strictly social ideals, but the very life of things. So that when we discover the comic, we are not always correcting mechanical behavior, we can be observing an aspect of human behavior that is beyond correction, that is universal. In this sense the comic has a broader range and a deeper resonance than the satirical thrusts of comedies of manners...or the overcoming of social inhibitions... (1980:8-9).

On the whole Bergson seems to maintain the view that comic deviations in behaviour are measured against the very stability of the relevant society. Subsequently, it has been pointed out that he mainly deals with the comedy of manners in which society is depicted as the factor maintaining order.

In addition to Bergson, various other critics have focused attention on the close relationship between comedy and society. Lehman's view ties in with Bergson's when he says that "...the vision of comedy fixes its eye on separateness, on *diversity, even on oppositions, but it insists at last on togetherness for lovers and on the restored social fabric, on solidarity for the group...*" (in Robinson, 1980:11). Potts asserts that the primary function of comedy is to satisfy human desire, viz. the desire to understand the behaviour of people towards one another in social life. In his turn Northrop Frye feels that the true theme of comedy is the integration of society.

These views evidently exemplify the significance of the concept of society within the framework of the comic. It is, however, important to keep in mind that comedy also has reference beyond the social and, according to Robinson "...it can be argued that comedy is most profoundly comical when it has reference beyond the social" (1980:12). This view is evidently an attempt to attribute an element of seriousness and enduring significance.

Rodway comments upon the ability of comedy to adapt itself to the changes of society, stating that particular sets of ideas of ways of life and "... the styles used for expressing them, tend to persist (though with lessened vitality) when the social situation that called them forth no longer prevails. These styles run alongside more pertinent comedy, and may even provoke a new 'literary' comedy designed to hasten the ruthless course of evolution - parody being the commonest means to this end" (1975:24).

He deals with the notion that different phases of social integration produce different types of comedy. "During phases of satisfactory social integration we should expect the best comedy...to be mainly conserving...during the hardening phases, we are likely to find the best comedy innovating..." (p.27). Rodway thus comments upon the notion that certain periods in history produce specific types of drama. In addition, according to Combrink, while tragedy is mainly produced during times of political and social stability, comedy "... flourishes in times of social flux, as it deals more comprehensively and effectively with evanescence" (Combrink, 1979:93).

We can thus assume that, on the one hand, comedy exhibits certain continuities while, on the other hand, it endorses different styles and characteristics with different social contexts. In addition, it provides ample opportunity for diversity in the nature and function of comic drama. Subsequently, comedy should be viewed primarily as a social product, its continuities being closely related to the continuities in human social organisation. Thus it is of some importance to form some idea of the social content of particular comedies so that we can discern in what way they are products of their societies which, in turn, leads to a deeper understanding of the play as a whole.

We may assume that the nature and function of comedy may vary to a certain extent, depending on the specific social contexts of particular plays. Thus it may be that in certain instances comedy expresses a view or wish held by an entire society. On the other hand it may also endorse the values of one social group as opposed to those of another. Subsequently it may also be that consciously or unconsciously, a comedy may be part of the ideological rivalry between competing sections of society. Thus a comedy may be employed in order to express views held by those who are in power or as a means of subversion by those who are not, which may, in turn, detract greatly from the artistic merit and quality of a particular comedy. The social implications of a certain play may, in other words, justifiably affect our sense and interpretation of the overall value of the play.

We can conclude with Combrink's statement when she says: "...one could accept as a commonplace of comic theory, as one of the permanent ways of comedy,

that comedy and society are indivisibly linked and in fact that comedy finds its raison d'être within the society of men" (1979:98).

3.1 6 Comedy and tragedy

Much has been said throughout the ages about the essential relationship between tragedy and comedy and many critics have attempted to define comedy by differentiating it from tragedy. It is evidently a study of vast magnitude which cannot be covered within a few pages. It is, however, of some importance to this study to consider briefly the interdependence between these two genres, especially with regard to contemporary drama.

Many critics view tragedy and comedy as siblings or twins. This notion is expressed by Christopher Fry who says: "I know that when I set about writing a comedy the idea presents itself to me first of all as a tragedy" (in Barnet, Berman and Burto, 1962:69). In addition, he compares the tragic and comic experiences in philosophical terms: "Comedy is an escape... into faith. It believes in a universal cause for delight, even though knowledge of the cause is always twitched away from under us, which leaves us to rest on our own buoyancy. In tragedy every moment is eternity; in comedy eternity is a moment. In tragedy we suffer pain; in comedy pain is a fool, suffered gladly" (p.68). Fry feels that the difference between tragedy and comedy is found in the difference between experience and intuition: in experience we fight the condition of our "animal life" (p.69) while, in intuition, we "trust the arduous eccentricities we're born to" (p.69). Fry concludes by commenting on the closeness of these genres explaining that "we find ourselves in one or the other by the turn of a thought" (p.69).

Ronald Peacock ties in with Fry when he attempts to reaffirm the closeness of comedy and tragedy. He feels that they originate and exist together seeing that they both "...spring from the tension between our imperfect life and our ideal aspirations. They exist together in their dependence on the contradictions of life. They are parallel expressions, in different keys, of our ideas of what is good" (in Heilman, 1978:274). In addition, they both refer to good and evil and are both initiated by an essentially moral experience. Peacock concludes by indicating that as long as imperfection exists, tragedy and comedy will flourish side by side as they have done throughout the previous ages.

Kelsall contributes further to this notion when he explains that although comedy and tragedy remain separate genres, it is doubtful whether it is really worthwhile seeking to define genres too precisely. He adds: "There are no easy answers. Conventions exist. Not to recognize them is to misread. To see only the conventions is to be blind to the individual hand of the craftsman" (Kelsall, 1985:30).

Crow explains that, according to popular conception, tragedy is supposed to be everything comedy is not, although, in reality, the supposedly characteristic features of tragedy are also essential features of comedy. His views thus tie in closely with those we have already examined in that he cites that comedy is also concerned with the "dark" or "serious" side of life and when we witness suffering

and violence in tragedy we experience traditionally serious emotions while, when we witness them in comedy, we laugh. Crow regards this as sufficient proof that "...tragedy and comedy stand in the closest possible relationship to each other" (1983:138). He thus suggests that we should regard comedy and tragedy as essentially complementary genres instead of mutually exclusive. This view is of particular significance in contemporary terms seeing that comedy and tragedy appear to have fused into one entity in modern drama: they are virtually indistinguishable. Tragic and comic elements are blended in plays such as Godot and Rosencrantz.

Ellen Leyburn extends this view when she argues that tragedy and comedy have actually become transposed. She suggests that these terms have "lost their old distinctness" (in Barnett, Burman and Burto, 1972:649) and that comedy and tragedy now endorse each other's functions. "Whereas comedy has for centuries displayed man's weakness, this now seems to be the function of tragedy... Whereas tragedy has in earlier eras looked at man in 'boundary situations', it is now the comedies of Beckett and Ionesco which show man in extremity..." (p.649). Leyburn adds that tragedy and comedy have changed in terms of perspective, substance, effect and nature. She maintains that "the shifts in the nature of both tragedy and comedy reflect the convulsion of society and of man's sense of himself which characterizes the world which the dramatists inhabit" (p.650). Thus "the contradictions of pain and amusement in the best comedies of the absurd are evoked with clear intention and the most deliberate finesse" (p.652).

Leyburn cites the comedies of Pinter, Beckett and Ionesco as examples of the "new" comedy in that "the plays as wholes present comic incongruity raised to tragic proportions and effecting in the audience tragic involvement and the tragic feelings of pity and terror... Waiting for Godot and The Chairs are both funny and terrible" (p.652). She concludes her argument by quoting from Plato's Symposium : "the chief thing which he remembered was Socrates compelling the other two to acknowledge that the genius of comedy was the same with that of tragedy, and that the true artist in tragedy was an artist in comedy also" (p.653).

Rodway indicates that while the writer of comedy appears to be disinterested, the writer of tragedy really is. He explains that, subsequently, tragedy has less of a social function than comedy. Tragedy is "concerned not to demonstrate absurdity but to reveal human capacity" and "it deals with what man can be" (1975:15). Comedy, however, "deals with what he too often is but - it mockingly implies - ought not to be. Tragedy thus keeps closer than comedy to deep emotive levels ... the essence of both modes lies in profound human needs" (p.15).

In addition to these critics, Kerr has commented most significantly on the changing perspectives of tragedy and comedy. He essentially discredits the apparent misconception that tragedy is pessimistic and comedy optimistic and adds that laughter as such is an inadequate response to what is really amusing. Kerr feels that twentieth-century comedy has turned black which is, in turn, a reflection of the insanity of the age. He argues:

Comedy, it seems, is never the gaiety of things; it is the groan made gay. Laughter is not man's first impulse; he cries first. Comedy always comes second, late, after the fact and in spite of it or because of it. Comedy is really the underside of things, after the rock of our hearts has been lifted, with effort and only temporarily (1968:19).

Kerr appears to echo Fry when he indicates that he has to approach comedy through tragedy. He stresses both the interdependence and interrelationship of tragedy and comedy and argues that comedy could survive the assumed death of tragedy "... or maintain itself in any very fit condition during one of tragedy's cyclical silences" (p.266). Kerr's ideas tie in with the concept of existentialism when he maintains that it is doubtful whether tragedy is really dead and that we may be recovering a sense of freedom and responsibility and even of the arrogance supposedly required in tragedy. He adds that black comedy exists as a direct result of the absence of tragedy which, in turn acknowledges the disappearance of affirmation. Thus he argues that comedy is assuming the "burden" and function of both traditional tragedy and comedy.

Feiblemann indicates that "...there is nothing which does not have its tragic as well as its comic aspect. Comedy and tragedy are both members of the same class of objects, and are known to bear some close relation to each other" (1970:198). He attempts to define both comedy and tragedy. Comedy is "the indirect affirmation of the logical order by means of the derogation of the limited orders of actuality" while tragedy "is the direct affirmation of the formal logical order by means of the approval of the positive content of actuality" (p.198).

He then offers some points of contrast between these two genres. While "comedy is an intellectual affair, and deals chiefly with logic, ... tragedy is an emotional affair, and deals chiefly with value" (p.199). In addition, "comedy is negative" and is "a criticism of limitations" while "tragedy is positive" and is "an uncritical acceptance of the positive content of that which is delimited" (p.199). He maintains that comedy is "by its very nature a more revolutionary affair than tragedy" and "is occupied with the termini of things and events: their formal limitations, as opposed to tragedy which is occupied with their positive stuff or content" (p.200). Subsequently, "comedy leads to dissatisfaction" (p.200) and "in periods of social change, we may expect to see the role of comedy assume an increasing importance, although ... both are always and eternally omnipresent" (p.201).

Feiblemann concludes that comedy "witnesses the limitations of actuality, just as tragedy witnesses the fragmentary exemplifications of the logical order" (p.201). "Comedy and tragedy emerge from the same ontological problem: the relation of the logical to the historical order" (p.203).

Olson presents an extensive comparison between comedy and tragedy in The Theory of Comedy. He maintains that "tragedy develops out of the grave view as comedy does out of the lighthearted" (1968:35). In addition he feels that "tragedy endows with worth; comedy takes the worth away. Tragedy exhibits life as directed to important ends; comedy as either not directed to such ends, or unlikely to achieve them" (p.36). Olson argues that the primary difference

between these genres can be found within the context of quality seeing that they consist of the same number of parts but still differ from one another. It appears to be somewhat of a misconception, however, to attempt to differentiate between tragedy and comedy in terms of quality: genres of different kinds do not necessarily differ in quality.

Olson also explains that serious action which evokes pity and fear is not necessarily tragic, "only the kind which cathartics these emotions" (p.37). In addition, "not every worthless action, even when involving laughter, is comic, but only the kind which effects katastasis or relaxation, i.e., by affording the perfect object for this emotion" (p.37). Olson maintains that "tragedy and comedy are contraries ... in that the former sets something before us as supremely serious, and evokes our extremest concern..." (p.39). It is thus evident that Olson regards tragedy as a superior art form to comedy, claiming that it is of better quality than comedy. Many of his comments can obviously not be applied to contemporary comedy since, within this genre, we no longer detect mere frivolousness or lightheartedness.

One comes to the conclusion that "for the moment comedy holds centre-stage, being the only voice that can adequately translate the spirit of the times" (Combrink, 1979:174). Contemporary comedy endorses many qualities traditionally regarded as tragic. Within comedy we find an embracing of life, however futile or desperate it may seem. Because of the absence of belief in life hereafter and absolute values, man's search for meaning has become desperate. Contemporary comedy has irrevocably then become very distinct from traditional comedy as exemplified by Olson and others.

3.1.7 Relevant varieties within the context of comedy

3.1.7.1 Tragicomedy

Mercury What's that? Are you disappointed
 To find it's a tragedy? Well, I can easily change it.
 I'm a god after all. I can easily make it a comedy,
 And never alter a line. Is that what you'd like?...
 But I was forgetting - stupid of me - of course,
 Being a god, I know quite well what you'd like.
 I know exactly what's in your minds. Very well.
 I'll meet you half way, and make it a tragicomedy
 (Plautus in Hirst, 1984:3).

It has frequently been pointed out that, in order to comply with the changing needs concerning both the nature and function of comedy, and the term "comedy" itself, the "hybrid" tragicomedy is now used popularly.

According to Hirst, Giambattista Guarini's Compendio della Poesia Tragicomica, published in 1601, "was the first and remains the most substantial analysis of the tragicomic form" (1984:3). In this essay Guarini challenges the

validity of Aristotle's theory of catharsis and subsequently formulates the aim of tragicomedy as follows:

... to imitate through the *mise en scène* a contrived action which combines all the tragic and comic elements which can believably and decorously coexist, regulated within the framework of a unified dramatic form whose aim is to purge with delight the sadness of the audience. In such a way that Imitation... is a mixed one, because it represents a combination of tragic and comic elements. Whereas Purgation... is a single one because it reduces this combination of elements to one basic concept: the liberation of the audience from melancholy (in Hirst, 1984:5-6).

Thus tragicomedy is a mixed genre utilizing both tragic and comic elements. Already at the end of the seventeenth century, leading English critics were voicing their thoughts on this genre. Amongst these was Addison who referred to the mixing of sorrow and mirth in English tragicomedy as a monstrous invention. Nevertheless, although tragicomedy appears to have been discredited by critics, which caused the term to fall into disrepute, the audience clearly continued to enjoy and demand laughter with their tears which is, in turn, the basis of modern tragicomedy.

Despite its uncertain beginnings, tragicomedy has survived and has become the backbone of modern drama as a whole. It provides the playwright with a freer form as demanded by contemporary taste while still retaining links with traditional tragedy and comedy. Subsequently, many critics maintain that most of the best plays of our century are best described as tragicomedies. Combrink has pointed out, however, that "to describe the works of Pinter, Stoppard, Orton, Gray, Simpson and Nichols as tragicomic is misleading... The fact is that this term can fruitfully be used to describe a hybrid, but then should acknowledge that it stands on a middle ground between two defined modes" (1979:53). She continues by arguing that to describe the work of these playwrights as tragicomic "really amounts to a denial of the presence of either tragedy or comedy in the present age..." (p.53).

We cannot deny, however, that these playwrights' work contains elements which are distinctly tragicomic. In addition, contemporary comedy exhibits a far bleaker vision of existence and man's perception of his littleness and insignificance than was the case with the traditional tragic vision, in which human magnificence was at least acknowledged. Subsequently, contemporary comedy has been called "joyless" and Ionesco accurately describes the world's reaction to this bleak vision:

The fact of being astonishes us, in a world that now seems all illusion and pretense, in which all human behaviour tells of absurdity and all history of absolute futility; all reality and all language appear to lose their articulation, to disintegrate and collapse, so what possible reaction is there left, when everything has ceased to matter, but laugh at it all (in Barnett, Berman and Burto, 1972:19).

Beckett's Godot has frequently been cited as a play saturated with tragicomic elements. It can be said to "modify" or "undercut" a recognizably tragic or comic impression with the result that it cannot be regarded as true comedy or tragedy since it departs too radically from the traditional impression created by either. The final scene of the play effectively illustrates this notion: the two tramps have been waiting endlessly for Godot and, even at the end, they appear to be doomed to go on waiting. They consider committing suicide and promise they will hang themselves tomorrow, as if this were a consolation or a hope of something better. In the meantime Vladimir reminds Estragon to pull up his trousers which have fallen around his ankles.

This episode clearly contains tragic elements, viz. the terrible yet resigned despair experienced by the tramps, and their desperate yearning for Godot who never comes. This tragic aspect co-exists with what is generally regarded as "low" comedy, viz. the tramps' involuntary clowning. Subsequently, we find ourselves witnessing suffering without heroism and pain without nobility as expected from the traditional tragic hero. Thus a distinct blend of tragedy and comedy is seen to characterize almost the entire play.

Generally, the modern tragicomic effect is produced by means of the portrayal of pain and suffering in the absence of a sense of heroism or nobility and without acknowledgment of the ultimate significance of existence and affliction. In addition, there is no purification or regeneration - instead this has been replaced by an overwhelming sense of futility without end and of a future which is in no sense better than the present but, possibly, even worse.

An important aspect of the overall effect of tragicomedy is linked with the diminishing of active religious faith in the Western world. Subsequently, for many intellectuals and others, God is dead or never was alive. It has been argued that this loss of faith is the single most influential factor in the development of modern tragicomedy. It is felt that, since there is no God, there is no meaning in existence or the suffering and pain so unavoidably part of it. Thus it is practically impossible for heroism and nobility to exist and survive in the modern world.

Crow points out that modern tragicomedy has assumed various forms and agrees with Combrink when he says: "It may even be time to stop using the term tragi-comedy for this variegated drama, and to recognise that, different though it is from traditional tragic modes, it constitutes the ways in which modern Western man perceives and articulates his sense of tragedy" (1983:141).

3.1.7.2 Dark comedy and savage comedy

In addition to the term tragicomedy, new terms devised in order to attempt to describe and qualify the particular kind of drama written in modern times, include the terms "dark comedy" and "savage comedy".

Styan points out that many modern plays "refuse to be pigeon-holed as comedies or tragedies" and "we are being forced to re-think some of the long-accepted categories which have traditionally helped us to evaluate the play" (1968:1). He maintains that the terms "farcical tragedy", "pathetic comedy" and "tragicomedy" are not adequate in describing the drama of contemporary theatre. Some critics argue that dramatists such as Joe Orton and Tom Stoppard ultimately produce tragic farce and display the ability to "move from the older kind of exuberant, energetic farce into the newer type of metaphysical, grotesque, and tragicomic farce" (Charney, 1978:105-106).

Charney argues that "'terribly serious, even savage comic humour' would be a good way to define 'tragic farce', provided that we avoid the middle-class paradox of 'serious' comedy. Tragic farce is serious only in the strength of its philosophical and existential commitment, not in any directly moral sense" (p.107). Charney claims that comedy is the only dramatic form suitable to an absurd universe, seeing that the possibility of tragedy no longer exists because belief in a rational order has been lost.

Dürrenmatt ties in with these notions when he says: "Comedy alone is suitable for us... the real problem is how to find what used to be called tragedy in the new, all-pervasive form of farcical comedy: But the tragic is still possible... We can achieve the tragic out of comedy" (in Charney, 1978:107). He thus argues that comedy may include tragedy but not vice versa and that, through comedy, we may possibly still discover some of the experience traditionally associated with tragedy.

According to Styan, within the context of contemporary drama, we should "recognize a distinction between form and formula" (1968:3) and proposes that, because of the inadequacy of existing terminology, modern drama should be termed "dark comedy".

In addition to the terms mentioned thus far, some critics prefer to use the term "savage comedy". White explains that "savage comedy implicitly confronts the idea of the universe with its imperfections" (1978:5). Moreover, he says that "savage comedy is a very recent idea. It interprets a wide mode of theatre, ranging from Beckett's stasis - harassed dramas to the outlandishly wild social fireworks of Mrozek's *Tango*, the fierce plays of social revolution in Italy, or surrealist puzzles for the stage" (1978:pp.6-7). In attempting to define "savage comedy" White maintains that "savage comedies are clubs to reverse the invasions of emptiness, the queasiness of cosmic disequilibrium... Once tragedy is eclipsed, comedy remains to translate desperation" (pp.10-11). White concludes:

More than anything else, riposte characterizes savage comedy. Its efforts are those of an epee flailing in half-darkness against what may be monstrous, ...what is cruel to the end, possibly amorphous. Death, like a brutish animal, like rhinoceroses over the land, is rampant, unstoppable. Savage comedy, at times almost nether-human, counterattacks the invasions of brutishness (p.13).

Dasgupta investigates the notion of the amoral universe of savage comedy and points out that in endeavouring to come to terms with the concept of savage comedy, one is confronted by the question of how it is possible to laugh at something savage and brutal. He adds that "in comedy, the value system honored by the majority wins", while "in savage comedy, all value-systems become morally inactive" (in White, 1978:61). Thus it becomes apparent that "savage comedy situates itself in a world beyond morality" (p.61). He concludes "that the correlation between the savage and the comic rests on an aesthetic equation. And this equation can only be formulated by a faith, however amoral, in a universe without reprieve, and be solved, however uneasily, by a humor that grows out of a world where human laws have ceased to operate" (p.63).

It is thus evident that the terms "dark comedy" and "savage comedy" are attempts at defining the idiosyncratic nature of contemporary comedy which finds its being somewhere between tragedy and comedy or farce. Contemporary comedy is the concretization of modern playwrights' vision, "a vision that has its matrix in the comic mode" (Combrink 1979:56).

3.1.7.3 Farce

If comedy's their theme, 'tis ten to one
It dwindles into farce, and then 'tis gone.
If farce their subject be, this witty age
Holds that below the grandeur of the stage
(in Hughes, 1956:272).

As has already been mentioned, farce has had an extensive influence on contemporary comedy which is popularly regarded as a "marriage" of farce and tragedy. Davis defines farce as follows: "... broad, physical, visual comedy, whose effects are pre-eminently theatrical and intended solely to entertain; comedy which is slapstick, if you like, in a more or less coherently funny narrative..." (1978:1). She adds that "farce came late to the canon of dramatic terminology. Unlike the terms comedy, tragedy and even satire, its usage was not sanctioned by classical authority" (pp.1-2).

Hatlen calls farce the "counterpart of high comedy" (1972:137) and points out that its purpose is mainly to entertain, the appropriate response to it being unrestrained laughter. In addition, he attempts to define farce as follows: "Farce has little intellectual content or symbolic significance, is not concerned with presenting a message, makes no pretense of demanding serious consideration, has slight residue of meaning" (p.137). Hatlen ascribes farce's popularity to man's inherent enjoyment of laughter which is evidently the direct and unquestionable response evoked by this kind of comedy. He distinguishes farce from other forms of comedy by arguing that "it demands no intellectual insight, no awareness of a social norm, no linguistic sensitivity in finding nuances of meaning - all of which are necessary for understanding other forms of comedy" (p.138).

Charney adds to Hatlen's comments by stating that "farce may be the purest, quintessential comedy, since it so rigorously excludes any sentiment at all, especially feelings of sympathy, compassion, or empathy for the characters. It is also unintellectual, unpsychological, and uncomplex, with energetic, dream-like characters pursuing their impulses and gratifications with an amazing singleness of purpose" (1978:97).

The framework and plot of farce allows for practically anything to happen and contains rapid action, seeing that the characters rather act than think. The playwright evidently sets out to invent a series of entanglements usually by making use of the comical techniques of derision, incongruity, automatism, teasing, inversion and the unfamiliar. Subsequently, critics have often seen farce in a negative light. Potts states that farce is "comedy with the meaning left out" while Hurrell observes that "farce... has continually been taken for granted as something if not actually beneath criticism, at least beneath the need for critical discussion" (in Davis, 1978:6).

In writing about the status of farce, Hughes points out that "while farce as a distinct genre was gaining its hold on audiences - a hold it has never relinquished - it had no success in winning the esteem of critical writers" (1956:272).

When considering the elements of farce we find that it usually deals with simple stock characters, and, as has been pointed out, the aim of farce usually appears to be an attempt to divert the audience's attention by means of a specific pattern of comic behaviour. In order to write successful farce, a playwright must exhibit an accurate sense of theatre so as effectively to pace his dialogue, use repetition and misunderstanding and realize the inherent incongruities in everyday speech patterns. One such an author is Tom Stoppard who shamelessly makes use of essentially farcical devices with hilarious results.

Thus, although farce has been regarded as inferior to "true" comedy, its importance in relation to contemporary drama cannot be denied since it has exerted an integral influence on the idiosyncratic, hybrid nature of modern comedy in particular.

Comedy has meaning in terms of - not of content but effects: elation, acceptance of the world, of the fundamental disparateness of all the elements of the world. The test is, it makes one, if not laugh, at least consider laughing. One feels one can push on.

- Anthony Burgess

For the comic is not demonstrable; it climbs no logical staircase into consciousness, but flies instead, through the window, instantly, like sunlight into a darkened chamber when we raise the blind, and, like the sunlight, it eludes the grasping hand. You are in it; it pervades and suffuses you in its warm glow. Shut your eyes, and still you can feel it.

- Willard Smith

3.2 Comedy in the twentieth century

3.2.1 The nature of contemporary comedy

It has frequently been noted that the twentieth century is hardly an era which lends itself to the production and creation of traditional comedy. Nevertheless, we have witnessed a vast output of comedy during this century: albeit an idiosyncratic kind of comedy, moulded to fit the needs of a modern era.

We have already determined that comedy appears to have "replaced" tragedy in contemporary theatre although unmistakable tragic elements have been absorbed by modern comedy. Since drama is the product of a certain kind of society, it is not difficult to perceive that modern society lacks the qualities essential for the production of tragedy. We no longer embrace a view of man as heroic, noble and ideal, a view which constitutes the backbone of tragedy. When considering the structure of society itself we see that loyalty has become outnumbered and aristocrats are merely people with a "handle" to their names. In addition, the only difference between the rich and the poor is that the rich have more money. Thus we can assume that this disappearance or blurring of absolute distinctions between people of supposedly different classes has given way to an essential blurring of genres within the context of contemporary drama. Comedy has evidently been less prone to these changes than tragedy. Thus we find that comedy is the genre which lends itself to the needs and notions of twentieth-century man.

An important aspect to consider is the fact that a new comic response has come into being in the twentieth century. This has happened mainly as a result of the loss of distinction between different genres. Subsequently, the different branches of comedy are seen to mingle with one another: high comedy with farce, or low comedy with satire. These are only examples since many more kinds of comedy have been perceived to mix with one another, hence the particularly idiosyncratic nature of modern comedy.

In addition, different genres, such as comedy and tragedy, now, share certain territories, or they coalesce. This has essentially given rise to new descriptive terms such as savage comedy, black comedy, tragicomedy, and so forth.

It has already been pointed out that tragicomedy is a genre true to the modern age and that a play such as Godot contains essential tragicomic elements, although many will dispute the claim that it is a tragicomedy in the fullest sense of the word. A critic such as Styron calls a play containing a mixture of tragic and comic elements "dark comedy" which he defines as follows: "Dark comedy is a drama which impels the spectator forward by stimulus to mind and heart, then distracts him, muddles him, so that time and time again he must review his own activity in watching the play" (1968:262).

The Theatre of the Absurd is, then, regarded as a "variant" of this dark comedy. It has partly been derived from surrealism and has been clearly defined by

Esslin (1964). Brandt distinctly relates this type of comedy to the twentieth century when he says:

... the Theater of the Absurd may be comic, but it carries a powerful charge of anguish. If drama is a mirror of life and the images in this mirror are undecipherable, it follows that the life whose reflection is so baffling must itself be baffling. This bafflement is felt to be painful; our world of traps, pitfalls and delusions is basically unfriendly - a world of menace (in Howarth, 1978:172).

Subsequently, comedies by a contemporary author such as Harold Pinter have been labelled as comedies of menace, for example, The Caretaker. Within the context of this menacing world we find that modern man is subject to an altered self-image in that he sees himself as involved in an essentially complex society. In addition, he is more of an individual than before. This new sensibility has resulted in a new kind of laughter and, instead of portraying the individual as the target for laughter, contemporary dramatists frequently direct laughter at the social framework itself.

Thus, within the framework of modern drama, both the cause and target of laughter have been shifted drastically. Laughter no longer provides the spectator with an essential feeling of safety but rather establishes itself as the expression of an inherently sick society and as a means of insight into social contradictions.

Another significant aspect of contemporary drama is its relation to the notion of man as something essentially mechanical. The modern world is filled with robots and man himself is perceived to have become an automatic machine, one that more often than not seems to be out of control. Brandt adequately depicts man's mechanical lifestyle when he says:

Twentieth-century man lives in vast malfunctioning concurbations; he eats processed food and swallows processed ideas; he is socially engineered; his leisure is packaged; he works in huge factories run by faceless combines, turning out tiny components of products which are trivial, unsaleable or deadly; and all his life he is pushbuttoned - at school, at work, in the army or caught up in the machinery of the state... this reduction of man to a robot... can be seen in a tragic light (in Howarth, 1978:179).

Expressionist drama, in particular, sees human existence as depicted above. In addition it reminds us of Bergson's assertion that laughter is caused by perceiving the living behaving like the mechanical.

We can thus assume that contemporary drama is a genre in its own right and displays certain recurrent features although a wide variety of forms are detected within the context of modern drama. Modern comedy is, at times, bold, but still poetic, although "...it rarely exhibits the unqualified gaiety of more confident ages. Its vision of man as clown or puppet tends to reduce the role of the word as against the physical side of stage action. Farce and

tragedy reach out towards one another in a world that no longer makes sense in the old terms. Comedy views present-day society with a quizzical eye" (Brandt in Howarth, 1978:185).

3.2.2 A brief survey of twentieth century playwrights

The foregoing notion of contemporary comedy has served as a basis in order to make a selection of contemporary playwrights and plays which should, ideally, lead one to a better understanding of contemporary comedy in general and of Stoppard's place within its context. The playwrights chosen include Harold Pinter, Simon Gray and Peter Nichols, who evidently share with Stoppard an integral concern with comedy and well-crafted dramatic language and thus finally an intense concern with the concept of communication. Their plays have been widely acclaimed critically and have attained resounding popular success.

3.2.2.1 Harold Pinter

Harold Pinter is one of the most widely acclaimed contemporary playwrights although criticism of his plays has ranged from comments such as: "What all this means only Mr Pinter knows, for his characters speak in non-sequiturs, half-gibberish and lunatic ravings" (in Evans, 1985:63) to "The Birthday Party is absorbing. It is witty. Its characters...are fascinating. The plot...is first-rate. The whole play has the same atmosphere of delicious, impalpable, and hair-raising terror which makes The Turn of the Screw one of the best stories in the world" (in Evans, 1985:84).

Nevertheless, although Pinter's plays have given rise to a variety of critical comments, the superb idiosyncrasy of his work cannot be disputed. Combrink (1979) has pointed out that "...there is a definite developmental trend in his comic vision. From the earliest comedies of menace his vision has consistently been developing and his style changing to that of the comedy of manners" (1979:261).

Pinter's characters exist in a hostile and menacing world and the author is primarily concerned with fundamental issues such as the need for love and friendship, for attention, respect and status, for a place to sleep, eat and be secure, and for influence, power and dominance. In addition, his characters tend to be possessive, both of people and of territory, as a result of being in constant danger of being deprived of the things which matter to them. Hence the jealousy, competitiveness, fear, hostility, and anger which frequently characterize their encounters. Many of them are, in Pinter's own words, "at the extreme edge of their living, where they are living pretty much alone". Nevertheless, his characters are usually seen to communicate fairly effectively, although the level on which they communicate is not necessarily the obvious, surface one. Pinter himself has pointed out that the speech we hear is an indication of that which we do not hear.

Pinter displays an uncommon interest in language and dialogue in the theatre. First points out that the hallmark of his style is precision and that "he has shown an uncanny ear for dialogue which has led to the suggestion that he must have a tape recorder in his head" (1979:67). He adds that the speech in Pinter's plays exhibits an unmistakable resemblance to everyday speech which, in turn, forces itself on our attention with the result that distortion in the writing and a dislocation in our approach to it charges the situations with elements of both comedy and menace. It is important to note that, generally speaking, much of contemporary comedy itself has evolved from the essential style of the comedy of manners.

Pinter is distinctly contemporary in his concern with language and it has been noted that he is concerned with a language of obfuscation, existential survival and divisive strategy. "In Pinter words are not bridges: they are barbs to protect the wired enclosure of the self" (Almansi and Henderson, 1983:12). Moreover, Pinter allows his characters to employ a language marked by perversity and defiance, continually aiming to conceal reality itself. Subsequently, it has been argued that Pinter has essentially acquired a language of deceit, meretriciousness and corruption which is still explicitly human.

The effectivity of Pinter's dialogue has often been questioned by those who regard it as dull and nonsensical but on closer consideration, it becomes evident that the excitement and interest evoked by this playwright's language essentially derive from the mental speculation it provokes and not from the text itself. Subsequently, as is the case with various other contemporary authors, Pinter's texts require a specialized kind of reading and the audience has to be alert continuously "for the unexpected twist, the shameless contradiction, the dazzling non sequitur, which are smuggled into the territory of a slow and apparently dull conversation" (1983:19).

Pinter's essential trademark appears to be the fact that that which is expressed by his characters is not, in reality, a faithful reflection of an emotion but is, in fact, the reflection of an adjacent emotion, with the result that sounds and images become distorted. Pinter is essentially concerned with the concept of communication and, somewhat paradoxically, in his plays, language essentially becomes a form of non-communication. Thus, when reading a Pinter play one tends to assume the conviction that communication between human beings is, at the best of times, difficult and even dangerous and that man is, ultimately, alone in a miserable world, marked by despair and futility. Thus, we can assume that Pinter concerns himself with the way in which people fail to avoid the very communication from which they endeavour to run. The playwright himself has explained:

We have heard many times that tired, grimy phrase, 'failure of communication'; and this phrase has been fixed to my work consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate only too well in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves... (in Burkman, 1971:8).

Pinter adds that he has struggled with communication and that words both please and discourage him, almost to the point of nausea, a notion which is evidently reflected in his plays themselves. Still, his work appears to contain some suggestion of hope and he seems to evoke rather than depict certain situations in his plays. Pinter himself has pointed out that he "is very concerned with the shape and consistency of mood" of his plays and that he cannot write anything which is loose and unfinished. "I like a feeling of order in what I write" (in Hinchliffe, 1967:165). Much of Pinter's success evidently rests on this sense of order which is an essential key to his work.

We can thus assume that Pinter's work in general is distinguished by an integral fascination with the ambiguity of language, the power of forever-changing contexts and tones in order to alter meaning, and the evocative effect of non-verbal communication. Pinter's fundamental theme is evidently the struggle for survival, communication and meaningful existence in an explicitly hostile universe. His characters expect the worst and accept their apparently bizarre circumstances, expressing little surprise when faced by irrationality.

Another fundamental quality of Pinter's work is the unfamiliar effect which derives from the combination of strong and, at times, deadly feelings and an almost palpable sense of mystery. This contributes to the notion that "no matter how fiercely you assault his plays, how thoroughly you shake out their dust with a carpet-beater, hoping to catch the fluttering mote of a meaning, the speck of dirt of a message, you get nothing except the few truisms we all knew before we started" (Almansi and Henderson, 1983:15). Thus it is evident that Pinter's dramas evolve in an atmosphere of mystery on which he has commented that: "If you press me for a definition, I'd say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism" (in Burkman, 1971:3). Pinter's style is thus marked by its mixture of the real and the surreal and a precise portrayal of life on the surface combined with a powerful evocation of life beneath the surface.

Because of this sense of mystery within which Pinter's plays find their existence, the playwright has often been accused of needlessly withholding essential information from the audience, but, as Nightingale has pointed out, this should rather be seen in terms of a refusal, on the part of the playwright, to penetrate inside his people as far as might be allowed even by his own respect for their privacy.

The Birthday Party has been classified in popular parlance as a "comedy of menace" and is Pinter's first full-length play. It is concerned with the subjugation of Stanley Webber, a man living an apparently mundane existence in a seaside guest house. Apart from him the play deals with two intruders, Goldberg and McCann, who act as agents for an unknown individual or organisation. They succeed in intimidating Stanley and yet, as they reduce him to impotent silence and remove him from the house, it is evident that they, too, are caught in a struggle for dominance and also experience some of the fear which has gripped Stanley from the beginning of the play. This fear has social, political and metaphysical implications. Pinter is thus, already at the outset of his playwrighting career, concerned with

people who live at the edge, gripped with fear and uncertainty which is, in turn, an essentially contemporary concern.

Another link with contemporary drama in general, and comedy in particular, is found in Stanley's piano-playing past which haunts him in a way similar to that in which other contemporary heroes are haunted by their past. This adds significantly to the inability of these heroes to move forward into the future in the traditional way of comic heroes. "The time-context of traditional comedy is usually present/future; that of contemporary comedy is past/present, with paralysing implications for a present so hopelessly compromised by the detritus of the past" (Combrink, 1979:268). This also ties in with the notion that the idea and chance of redemption has disappeared irretrievably within the context of contemporary drama.

Pinter's concern with communication, or rather the lack of it, is effectively illustrated by a typical skirmish such as the one in Act I where Lulu and Stanley develop a pattern of evasion and rejection in discussing the bleakness of Stanley's person and surroundings. Lulu comments that it is stuffy, whereupon Stanley asks:

Stanley	: Don't you believe I scrubbed the place out with Dettol this morning?
Lulu	: You didn't scrub yourself, I suppose?
Stanley	: I was in the sea at half past six.
Lulu	: Were you?

(Methuen, 1960:26).

Lulu senses that she is getting too involved and subsequently starts attacking when she says:

Lulu	: ...what do you do, Just sit around the house like this all day long? Hasn't Mrs Boles got enough to do without having you under her feet all day long? (p.27).
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Stanley counters the attack by saying:

Stanley	: I always stand on the table when she sweeps the floor (p.27).
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This typical encounter between two Pinter characters lends credence to the playwright's notion that the apparent lack of communication between people is, in reality, rather a deliberate evasion of communication.

The Caretaker is another of the plays illustrating Pinter's use of the comedy of menace. His primary method and a theme central to his work is effectively displayed in this play: the ambiguity of reality and the inadequacy of language provide the context for a play which simultaneously concerns itself with the fundamental problem of sustaining identity and meaning in a world which appears to demand conformity as the price for survival. The protagonist in this play is Davies, an elderly tramp, who is essentially a man whose isolation and social insecurity are implied in his situation. He is, like many of Pinter's

characters, aware of fear, but, despite this and his precarious hold on existence, his desire for refuge is matched by a human need to see relationships as a battle for dominance and by an unwillingness to acknowledge and accept an identity which may define the limit of his possibility. This play also deals with fundamentally contemporary concerns, including the pain and fear of existence and an integral quest for identity.

The Homecoming has become institutionalized as a modern "classic" and when first performed, became notorious for its explicit depiction of a morally disgusting household and its delineation of a female both sexually exploited and, equally, aware of the power her subjection gives her. It is a puzzling and troubling play which, according to Combrink, "lies at the furthest end of the comic spectrum" (1979:338) and "stylistically it remains in the shape of the comedy of manners: thematically it plunges too deeply into darkness" (p.368). Various critics have pointed out that it is, in fact, a very shocking play and it has often been approached with extreme reserve because of its apparent lack of a coherent moral structure.

The setting is a large, sparsely furnished living room and the four men we meet in Act I are defiantly cold towards one another. This attitude is in fact part of Pinter's plan with this play, viz. the similarity between human and animal behaviour. As with most Pinter plays, the characters appear to experience some difficulty in communicating although, on closer consideration, it becomes apparent that they do communicate fairly effectively on a basic level. Typically Pinteresque, their indifference towards one another on the surface is simply an attempt to conceal a strange and almost frightening closeness. This is illustrated by their joint needs and aspirations which evidently override those of any individual member of the family, as Teddy then discovers when he comes home in the hope of displaying some degree of independence. In his turn, Teddy rejects his family, which can be regarded as "a sickening parody of the usual pattern of social integration in traditional comedy" (p.361). The Homecoming is ultimately marked by power struggles, evoking, paradoxically, both elements of savagery and comedy.

Betrayal was published in 1978 and can be regarded as a modern comedy of manners. Thus we have to recognise Pinter's development from his early comedies of menace to the comedy of manners. According to Hirst, "this development has been emphasized all the more by the corresponding shift in social environment from the working-class world of the early plays to the upper-middle-class setting of Old Times and No Man's Land (1985:68).

Although Betrayal deals with a familiar theme, its dramatic sequence is most unusual. Its plot revolves around the conventional triangle: Jerry makes a pass at his friend's wife while they are at a party in 1968. She responds and they embark upon an affair and rent a flat. Only in 1973, Robert, the husband, learns the truth but keeps this knowledge to himself. Two years later, the affair ends, having lasted seven years. In 1977, the marriage ends as well.

The dramatic sequence of this play consists of nine intricately interwoven and interlocking scenes which move backwards in time although accompanied by sporadic forward movement. What is of some importance here is that within

this play, as in contemporary comedy in general, the time pattern can be viewed as an interpretation of man's condition on earth, viz. that man is caught in a static present and has no significant hope for the future. In addition, the backward movement in time is towards disillusion seeing that the audience, fully aware of the end of the affair and its aftermath, understands how essentially transitory the lovers' feelings are towards each other during the early part of the affair. In its turn, the forward movement contains revelations of how Robert deals with Jerry after having discovered his wife's infidelity to him. Combrink comments on Pinter's use of structure in Betrayal when she says:

Pinter has...succeeded, through the highly ingenious use of structure, to suggest the inhibitory and compromising influence of the past on the present, in which context a future seems to be ruled out. This play could thus be seen in one sense as a culminating statement of a development that has been going on for two decades in Pinter's dramatic work (1979:464).

Viewed as a whole, this play contains some of Pinter's best-known comic devices, including the familiar use of repetition in order to create farcical effects, together with some familiar techniques and themes. Betrayal is exactly what the play is about and it has been pointed out that "betrayal resonates more widely than adultery; for Pinter it seems to be the irreducible fact of modern consciousness" (in Dukore, 1982:108). This theme also appears in other Pinter plays including The Collection and The Basement. Betrayal can thus be seen as a recapitulation of previous Pinter plays, although the playwright provides his last play with verification, something denied in his earlier dramas. In addition, the audience possess more knowledge than the characters, a situation rather unusual for a Pinter play. In this play the audience is thus less puzzled than usual about the past. It does end, however, with the customary dislocation and bewilderment, a situation familiar to both Pinter's plays and contemporary comedy in general.

It is clear that Pinter is a powerful and intuitively understanding playwright, truly part of a tradition of English comedy, although he writes in the contemporary mode. He has provided contemporary comedy with an extremely valuable contribution, particularly within the context of dramatic dialogue and craftsmanship marked by utmost precision. Although many critics regard Pinter's plays as tragicomedies, he clearly has not confined himself to one single mould, structure or genre. As we have seen with The Homecoming, his plays do tend to move away from the comic mode because of a too dark tone or theme thus differing from one another in form and focus, thereby demonstrating Pinter's unusual variety and quality as a playwright.

3.2.2.2 Simon Gray

Although Simon Gray's plays also constitute part of the domain of contemporary comedy, they differ vastly from those of other contemporary dramatists such as Pinter and Stoppard. Butley is Gray's most widely acclaimed play. It focuses on a central character, Ben Butley, who finds

himself in a prolonged series of crises. In this the play differs from most other comedies. The other characters in Butley find their existence only in direct relation to the main character, a lazy, cynical and witty University teacher.

Much of the humour in this play derives from Butley's attitude towards his work, colleagues and students. This constitutes a significant part of the main movement which is concerned with Butley's alienation from those around him, a process he is fully aware of but is not able to control to any extent. At the very beginning of the play one is made aware of Butley's unpleasant attitude towards his students when he says:

Oh. No, I can't give tutorials during the first week after the break, I'm afraid.
Too much administration (Methuen, 1971:8).

One soon realizes that Butley never has time for tutorials and that he is not only deliberately unpleasant, but also hardbitten, brilliant and devious. In addition, the play effectively explores the complex relationship between Butley and Joey, his former star pupil and now his colleague. Butley displays remarkable ability to simply shrug off issues important to those around him and he reveals determination to embarrass and alienate those he actually cares for. This ultimately causes Butley's entire world to collapse around him. He loses both Joey and his wife whom he finds out has been having a serious affair with a man he regards as "the most boring man in London" (p.39). Thus the familiar effect of dislocation and disintegration also pervades Butley, which ends with the main character shaken to the core.

Like most other contemporary dramatists, Gray displays an inherent interest in language itself. Subsequently, verbal humour forms an integral part of the appeal of Butley and is often achieved by one character interpreting another's incidental words literally and then querying their meaning in a pedantic or mocking fashion. Butley himself frequently employs language as an offensive weapon in the process of alienating himself. In addition, he deliberately pretends to misunderstand carelessly used relative clauses. For example, when Joey tells him that a student complained about Edna's lectures in a pub, Butley replies:

Edna holds her seminars in a pub? I shall have to report this (p.31).

Comic effect is often achieved by means of repetition, simultaneously revealing something about the characters concerned. When Butley's wife tells him about her intended marriage plans he repeats what she has said, only in question form:

Anne	: (pause). Joey hasn't told you, then?
Ben	: Told me what?
Anne	: He's known for weeks. His - what's his name - friend Reg must have told him.
Ben	: Reg?
Anne	: Tom told him. At least, he told me he had.

- Ben : Tom? Tom and Reg? What on earth have Tom and Reg got to do with us?
 Anne : He's asked me to marry him.
 Ben : (after a pause). Which one? (Pause). You're not. (Laughs). You can't be.
 Anne : Yes, I am, Do you mind?
 Ben : Yes, yes, I mind very much

(p.39).

As in many instances throughout the play, Butley employs repetition as a means of playing for time while thinking how to reply to an awkward remark. In addition, he deliberately pretends to misunderstand that Anne intends to marry Tom and not Reg, who is homosexual. In reality, this reveals that Butley still cares for his wife to a certain extent, although he has deliberately alienated her. He really does mind her marrying someone else but, upon realizing what he has said, he pulls himself together and gives a totally incomprehensible reason for his concern about the intended marriage:

After all, a man's bound to be judged by his wife's husband
 (p.39).

Butley completely rejects both his wife and child and endeavours to achieve an essentially sterile relationship which, according to Combrink, "if viewed in the traditional framework of comic relationships is rejective in the extreme. It is also in line with the contemporary trend in comedy"¹⁾ (1979:213). This theme is effectively explored throughout the play, employing language as an essentially offensive and alienating device. Butley even uses dislocated literary allusions and nursery rhymes as evasive tactics and in order to abuse those around him. When he learns about Joey's relationship with Reg he interrogates Joey about the notes in his briefcase:

- Joey : ...Kindly don't mess my notes up.
 Can I have it back, please?
 Ben : Notes to whom? Reg?
 What immortal hand or eye

- 1) Traditionally speaking, comedy has persistently maintained its close relationship with the notion of social involvement, thus leading to observations including the idea that the comic itself arises from human social relations seeing that comic characters are consistently set in a social situation and that comedy subsequently depends on change in social structures for its essential tensions. In addition, it has been maintained that the relationships of an individual are of more significance than the individual himself and that the essence of comedy derives from relations with others. It is important to note, however, that although contemporary comedy has retained its social nature, characters have been observed to move towards isolation and alienation. This is effectively illustrated by Butley who is more of an "individual" hero than is usually the case in comedy. The disintegration of society within contemporary comedy can ultimately be tied to the essential sense of dislocation and disintegration within the contemporary world.

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
 Ted is certainly quite symmetrical - in a
 burly sort of way.
 Did he who made the lamb make thee?
Laughs (p.12).

At the end of the play Butley's alienation is complete and he finds himself on the edge of the void, totally isolated through his own doing, but unable to rectify the situation. This isolation and bewilderment is in keeping with the trend in contemporary comedy, as is the note of hopelessness on which the play ends. Butley can be regarded as an attempt to portray the bleak unhappiness of contemporary man who finds existence in an unfulfilling and essentially hostile world, albeit of his own doing, at times unbearable. He thus often gives up the fight almost pathetically and turns himself over to the all-pervasive hopelessness and isolation which mark the world he inhabits.

In Dog Days Gray has created a protagonist who reveals essential similarities to Butley. Peter is an unhappy publisher with a schoolteacher brother whom he despises. Like Butley, he employs language as a means of discomfiting and upsetting his friends. In addition, he is explicitly rude and dissatisfied with his situation. It is thus easy to see why Gray himself has referred to this play as the source of his more familiar Otherwise Engaged. In the opening scene of Dog Days Peter already illustrates his remarkable cleverness and skill at employing language in order to unsettle and disorientate those around him. He shrugs off Joanna's true compassion by making fun of his parents and obviously uses language in order to conceal his own feelings and to avoid becoming involved in an honest relationship with another human being.

Although the characters and plot of Dog Days exactly parallel those in Otherwise Engaged, these two plays do exhibit certain significant differences including Peter's more open and honest hostility and his more explicit quarrels with his wife. Gray himself has remarked that there is no particular reason for the recurrence of certain characters and themes in his plays except that they are drawn from real life and thus seem to appeal to him. The structure of Dog Days is circular in that it ends up exactly as it began, with Peter and Joanna locked in conversation about Peter's marital status. In Scene One Joanna rejects Peter's advances because he is married but in the last scene the audience is left with the question:

Joanna	: What if that landlady of yours comes back?
Peter	: On a Wednesday?... It's her Sainsbury evening.
Joanna	: She's not your landlady, she's your wife, isn't she? You're married, aren't you?
Peter	: ... Am I?
	<u>Lights</u>

- Curtain (p.96).

Thus, the structure of this play effectively illustrates man's essential inability to escape from his dreary existence and apart from all the hostility and open rejection embodied in the play, it is in reality very moving and compassionate. This is evoked particularly through Charles who is mercilessly mocked by his brother. Charles and his wife do not believe in contraceptives with the result

that they already have four children within six years. Gray exploits their "ignorance" and uses it in order to achieve comic effect:

- Charles : ... And you also realize, because I've told you often enough, that we both happen to believe in letting them come as they please.
- Peter : Well, you certainly do please them, from the speed at which they keep coming.
- Charles : The important thing is that they please us. Anyway, now that you've chosen to raise the subject, Alison and I sometimes wonder what you two have got against having more.
- Peter : Contraceptives, and they work miracles

(p.18).

Similar to Stephen in Otherwise Engaged, Charles applies for an assistant Headmastership at Ampleside, a minor public school. Both are intensely aware of their own imperfection and limitations and are provoked endlessly by their brothers. It is subsequently to Hilary that Charles confesses. The play appears to reach an emotional climax as Charles describes how he overheard a conversation between the Headmaster and his wife:

- Charles : ... I was just about to squeeze through some shrubs, to let them know where I was, I didn't want them to think I was eavesdropping - when I heard Headmaster say: 'But there must be some way of keeping the pest out of my house'
- Hilary : ... Oh Charlie!
- Charles : And his wife said: 'Oh, I know he's an appalling nuisance, but I can't help having a soft spot for him'
- Hilary : Oh Charles!
- Charles : 'That's because he grovels whenever he sees you!' ...

(p.66).

Only then does Charles realize that they were discussing the dog, Alfonso, and he shows remarkable insight when he remarks that he actually expects people to talk like that about him. Because of his shattering insecurity, Charles has always admired Peter although he has continuously maintained a defensive attitude towards him. In the beginning of the play he refers to Peter as "a man whose sole ambition was to end up editing books he's discovered too late he despises and so is stuck as a Junior Editor.." (p.25), but later reveals to Hilary that he wishes he were like his brother.

Later it is quite a shock to Charles when he realizes that Peter is not as wicked and despicable as he has always believed him to be and that all the affairs Peter was supposed to have had were only fantasies, Charles' envy thus having been in vain. In addition, Peter confesses that he has always wanted more children

but that Hilary was against it. In his turn, Peter confesses that he actually advanced himself by drawing on Charles' example.

Charles is left completely disillusioned after having had to face some wrenching truths and leaves after calling his brother a bastard. The feeling of disillusionment and awareness of isolation and limitation conveyed through Charles are evidently some of the central concerns in contemporary comedy.

Like Charles, Hilary is also brought face to face with disillusionment and bewilderment. When Peter attempts to resume their marriage she rejects him without showing a shred of remorse or involvement. At first, it seems that she hankers for what Peter had once been, revealing another central issue in modern comedy, viz. the longing and nostalgia for a lost past. Hilary then, coldly and calculatingly, admits that the collapse of their marriage was not entirely Peter's doing and attempts to set Peter free from blame by saying: "... That it's all right really" (p.84). To her love is something for children, not adults. In addition, she has in reality been the faithless one, not Peter, ironically having embarked upon an affair some years before because she did not believe Peter would remain faithful to her. Hilary then reveals her own feelings of loss and disillusion when she asks:

But why did you think, why, that our marriage was
going to survive. Nobody else's has, that we know...
If only you'd been unfaithful I might have
managed it... Your dependence fills me
with a guilt I can't bear, life's too short...

(p.91).

This notion of the disappearance or collapse of a traditional backbone of human society, viz. marriage, is integral to the world of modern drama. Man is continually subjected to an existence within a shattered and strange world, left on the edge of an abyss.

The ending leaves the comic hero disillusioned and pathetically isolated. His last words, "Am I?" (p.96), reveal an acute sense of aimlessness and over-acceptance, not having found redemption or meaning. Like most of Gray's heroes, Peter is simultaneously witty, funny and sad. He has essentially been scarred by life and invites compassion from the audience.

With Dog Days Gray has once again succeeded in creating a play truly within the domain of modern comedy. The plot contains unexpected twists and turns which contribute to the audience's sense of surprise and disillusion. Like true contemporary comedy, the laughter evoked is edged with hysteria, fear, anxiety and compassion. Psychologically speaking, Dog Days is a clear, vivid and sharp portrayal of very human characters who have to deal with a changing, modern world and truly human emotions and desires, thus ultimately inviting compassion.

3.2.2.3 Peter Nichols

Peter Nichols has distinguished himself from other contemporary dramatists by mainly exploring unconventional subjects such as death, mental retardation and euthanasia in his plays. His best-known plays include A Day in the Death of Joe Egg and The National Health. In the former Nichols proposes a study of the reactions and emotions of parents faced with the fact that their only child is a severely afflicted spastic, while the latter deals with the progress, towards either death or recovery, of eight patients in a ward in a mediocre general hospital. Upon seeing this play, Hope-Wallace commented on its essence: "It had a pungency that Chekhov would have envied at times and it caught me between wind and water, half in tears and half with laughter" (in Evans, 1985:164).

Both these plays appear to reveal Nichols's notion that the best way to treat and survive in the face of suffering is to treat it boldly and laugh at it, thereby placing his comedies firmly within the context of contemporary comedy in general which is centrally concerned with laughter as a means of dealing and coming to terms with suffering and desperation in an essentially hostile universe. What is of importance in Nichols's plays, however, is that he aims to distinguish between laughing at suffering and laughing at sufferers, thereby giving form to the affirmation that the human race can rise above even the very worst that can possibly happen to it. Thus the final effect of Nichols's plays is that of optimism and compassion, and as Wardle puts it, no-one has his power to "send the spectators away feeling more like members of the human race" (in Evans, 1985:165).

Nichols has succeeded in creating an idiosyncratic style in various ways. Firstly, he delights in involving his audience to the fullest, thereby actually creating a silent partner witnessing the events on stage. His characters address the audience directly thus placing them in a position in which they are confronted with a confidence and are, at least mentally, obliged to react.

In accordance with other contemporary dramatists such as Pinter and Gray, Nichols employs language in order to achieve certain effects and purposes. He presents us with a new approach, however, in that he makes use of phrases which essentially define the speaker in social terms. This includes both those phrases popularly referred to as slang and the special language of bureaucracy, as employed by the hospital staff in The National Health. Language is used in Nichols's plays both to link and divide people, thus providing a valuable means of communication or non-communication.

Nichols employs the techniques mentioned thus far as a means of giving form and substance to his view of human life as we know it. In addition, his characters find their existence in a world marked by intense suffering, at times drifting between the pathetic and the tragic. Subsequently, some critics feel that his hallmarks are an obsession with illness and a penchant for black comedy. This is certainly so, as is illustrated by a play such as A Day in the Death of Joe Egg which contains an anguishing and forceful mixture of comedy and brutal reality. It is thus not surprising to find that suffering is a theme which surfaces in almost all of his plays, whether it is the suffering of a

spastic child or that of illness and subsequent death. Even though Nichols portrays this theme in an almost brutally honest manner, it is frequently marked by poignancy, clothing his characters' experience of suffering with a distinctive sense of the pathetic. To Nichols, suffering is thus an integral part of human existence.

Joe Egg¹⁾ was Nichols's first stage play and was intended "to show how when you have a disaster which is continuous in your household, it becomes ordinary like everything else..." (Nichols in Dietrich, Carpenter and Kerrane, 1976:678). This play contains a striking blend of deep human compassion and humour without becoming sentimental. In addition, it contains a startlingly effective theatricality, consisting of asides and vaudeville routines, plays within plays, and painful, though apt, irony. Subsequently, Goldman remarks on its brilliance when he says: "There is no way that Joe Egg can be warm and funny, which is why, since it is warm and funny, its achievement is so great. Personally, I didn't believe that such a play was possible; it expanded my view of the world" (1976:678).

The initial dialogue of this play reveals quite a number of its essential elements, amongst other things the parents' supposedly "jokey" relationship, their trendy lifestyle and Bri's desire for Sheila, who treats him coolly. An essential observation to be made about the entire context of the play is that Bri and Sheila have woven their lives about Joe, the main source of suffering, and deals with this despair and pain by means of weaving fantasies around the stark reality of the condition of their existence, acting out little charades, dramatizing the facets of their hopeless situation. In addition, this play-acting is a desperate attempt to disguise the fundamental difficulties in their relationship. Thus Joe functions both as a divisive influence and a personal tragedy shared by both parents. Bri and Sheila resemble many others in modern comedy in that they accept their situation, trapped as they are, meekly and forlornly. The question of choice or freedom has never even surfaced, although it does so later in the course of action when Bri starts contemplating euthanasia as a way out. He expresses his heartbreaking suffering when Sheila tries to comfort him by reminding him that school breaks up in two days time and he replies:

I broke up years ago (1976:683).

It is evident that like, for instance, Gray's heroes Ben Butley, and Peter in Dog Days, Bri exhibits remarkable insight into his weaknesses, giving rise to an intolerant and unsympathetic self-image. Part of Bri's problem appears to be the fact that he is somewhat of a mother's boy. Sheila reflects upon this when she confesses her feelings to the audience:

He thinks because he throws a tantrum I'm going to stay home
comforting him and miss the rehearsal and let them all down.

1) Joe Egg refers to Nichols, P. A Day in the Death of Joe Egg, in Dietrich, Carpenter and Kerrane, ed. 1976. The Art of Drama. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

He thinks he's only got to cry to get what he wants. I blame his mother. She gave him the kind of suffocating love that makes him think the world revolves around him but because he's too intelligent to believe it really, he gets into these paddies and depressions (p.693).

Sheila evokes pathos and sympathy, displaying something of the over-acceptance of the characters in modern comedy when she continues:

Everybody's damaged in some way. There's a limit to what we can do. Brian, for instance, he goes so far - and hits the ceiling. Just can't fly any higher. Then he drops to the floor and we get self-pity again... despair (p.693).

It is thus not surprising that Bri desperately acknowledges his intense awareness of the imperfection of his world and, to some extent, his inability to come to terms with it. Combrink explains that

...he looks at the rejective picture of himself and accepts it as the only true one, leaving himself precariously on the edge of the abyss, loathing himself and yet clinging to the remnants of life in a pathetic attempt to assert himself. His centre, however, is shattered and the centripetal movement of the fragments leaves him bereft and devastated, yet industriously attempting to plaster over everything with gallant if macabre attempts at wit and playfulness (1979:240- 241).

The first act of Joe Egg thus consists of a dazzle of jokes, farcical humour and the occasional confessional tirade. Both Sheila and Bri exhibit essentially warped concepts of love which evidently has a corrosive effect on their relationship. Sheila regards her wholehearted dedication to Joe as motherly love but it is, in reality, a selfish love. In addition, she believes that, in sacrificing everything for Joe, she is nobly self-sacrificing, while she is, in fact, destroying any chance she and Bri could have had. She confesses to the audience that she participates in the absurd joking both in an attempt to please Bri and to help him cope with the bleak situation they have to exist in. Bri comments on Sheila's "terrible sense of duty" (p.692) which has developed out of her feelings of guilt. She believes that Joe is the punishment for her youthful promiscuity. In addition, she was already pregnant with Joe before their marriage which, in Bri's words, "feeds the furnace of guilt"(p.695).

A great deal of modern comedy has been constructed on the notion that man has lost faith in God, the entire universe having gone awry. This theme is established in Joe Egg by means of a shatteringly bleak vision of faith. Bri reveals his awareness of a malevolent God when he recounts, shamefully, how he resorted to prayer while Joe's birth dragged on for fifty hours.

Act Two opens with the conversation between Bri and Sheila and another married couple, Freddie and Pam. During this scene the defective undercurrents in the relationship between Bri and Sheila are effectively brought to the surface and we are presented with a so-called "outsiders" reaction to their predicament. The tone of the play darkens considerably

when the question of euthanasia is aired. It is suggested that only euthanasia could have made Bri and Sheila's lives tolerable to some extent. In his customary manner, Bri jokes about having suffocated Joe, and Freddie, thinking he knows everything, preaches about the ten commandments: "...they're the only hope we've got against chaos" (p.721). Bri is not convinced and comments on the unfairness of it all: "The bomb-aimer gets decorated but anyone who lets Joe die gets ten years" (p.721).

Sheila and Bri's existence becomes increasingly disorientated and fragmented as they think about having tea while Joe's condition seems to become more serious by the minute. Even Grace is hardly aware of what is happening and calmly continues doing her face. Bri's desperation is reflected as he pretends to have killed Joe and then attempts to prevent Sheila from doing everything possible to save her.

Bri ultimately has no hope for the future and decides to leave Sheila. He frees himself from Sheila's embrace and, symbolically, from the desperation of his existence, thereby reflecting the desperate attempts of many other heroes in modern comedy, to escape the terrifying and ultimately dooming conditions of their miserable lives. The play ends with Sheila, ironically, planning a second honeymoon while talking maternally to her goldfish, bird and Joe.

Passion Play is one of Nichols's more recent dramas and is cast in a totally different mould and framework than Joe Egg and The National Health while bearing a strong resemblance to Pinter's Betrayal. The subject of both these plays is infidelity and adultery, although the two themes are treated in different ways.

On the surface level, Passion Play seems little more than simply another modern comedy about sex and infidelity. On closer consideration one sees, however, that through the strategic use of dramatic juxtaposition Nichols creates an unexpected perspective of faith and infidelity. Through clever manipulation Nichols uses adultery as a metaphor for the ultimate emptiness of a godless world, an issue true to the concerns of modern comedy as a whole. It has already been established that comedy and laughter are, to some extent, methods of dealing with an existence marked by a loss of direction and purpose mainly because man's faith in God has gone awry. It is thus interesting to see how Nichols deals with this issue by creating a metaphor for faithlessness and meaninglessness in a play apparently concerned with the contemporary issues of infidelity and adultery.

Through the dramatic device of double character/actor, Jim materializes as James's alter ego and Nell as Eleanor's. This enables the audience to be informed consistently about the main characters' thoughts while the others on the stage remain ignorant. What is of central importance is that Jim and Nell not only amplify and enrich the characters of James and Eleanor, but also acquire substantial lives of their own, thereby transforming the initial subtext of the play into the central action.

Passion Play is a drama in true contemporary style and is marked by a remarkable lack of trust which, in turn, reflects the ultimate unhappiness and degradation suffered by its characters. In the second part of the play the

major juxtaposition is clarified, viz. that of James's sexual obsession with the Christian Passion. Throughout the play Nichols hints at the essential connection between religion and sex which forms an integral part of the play itself.

As the action progresses one is aware of the increased fragmentation and desperation of the characters as they try to find meaning in life. Eleanor cries frantically: "They go mad. I'm going mad. I feel it. What shall I do?" (Methuen, 1981:77). Subsequently, the play moves on to the scene between Nell and her psychiatrists. She reflects the central juxtaposition when she comments on James's essential faithlessness:

He's always found religion silly. For some weeks as a child he was in the local church choir. One day during evensong he actually passed out trying to contain his laughter. Nowadays he thinks Christianity's no joke but a terrible disaster forced on the rest of us by madmen in the Middle Ages

(p. 79).

Eleanor is then dealt a shattering blow as she learns from Agnes that James and Kate have continued their affair. Agnes desperately tries to console her:

Well, at least you hadn't got your faith back. That's a sign of growing awareness. Faith is a luxury you can't afford now. Or ever again

(p.86).

This reminder that modern man cannot afford to have faith reminds one of Joe Egg, another of Nichols's plays in which faith fails to present an adequate answer for a fragmented and desperate, meaningless existence.

In Passion Play Nichols thus not only comments upon the essential contemporary issues of infidelity and adultery, but also examines the failures of a modern life in which faith is a luxury no-one can afford. It is a disturbing, yet, at times, very funny play in which the playwright has succeeded, through clever manipulation and skilful dramatic juxtaposition of characters, scenes and passions, in transforming infidelity into both a manifestation and a metaphor of an essentially faithless world.

3.3 Stoppard and comedy

3.3.1 Enter a Free Man

Enter a Free Man was Stoppard's first play but was produced in London only after Rosencrantz. Although many critics do not regard it as one of this playwright's best, it is still a solid piece of theatre which reflects much of what was to come. Shiner comments:

"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. It has a lot to say about human ambition, about the self-deception such ambition engenders, and about the moral pros and cons of undeceiving the self-deceiver" (Shiner, 1982:626).

EFM is evidently largely a conventional comedy and contains extensive allusion to Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman and Robert Bolt's Flowering Cherry, already illustrating Stoppard's remarkable fondness for allusion and verbal brilliance.

In many ways George Riley is the first of Stoppard's various modern comic heroes. Ultimately, he is a dreamer who imagines himself to be an inventor although each of his previous inventions has had an obvious flaw. These include a clock which plays "Rule Britannia", a pipe which will not go out when smoked upside down, a reversible envelope which can be used twice and an indoor watering system for plants. George's world is thus essentially one of illusion and even though his situation may seem totally hopeless, he still assumes a certain amount of dignity and grandeur even at the end of the play when he is forced to accept unemployment compensation.

In the stage directions George is described as "... a smallish untidy figure in a crumpled suit... He is certainly not mad but he is definately odd. Unsinkable, despite the slow leak" (Faber and Faber, 1968:9). George's "tattered dignity" is evidently exemplary of Stoppard's other comic heroes. These characters exist in a typically contemporary environment, viz. one marked by illusion, disillusion, disappointment and uncertainty. While Stoppard's heroes do not control their own destinies, they react to their desperate situations with vitality and persistence. The familiar theme of the uncertainty of identity immediately arises. As Bigsby puts it: "Even if their own identity is disintegrating or scarcely exists...they still pit their wounded psyches against a world which they despair of understanding" (1976:9).

Because of the inescapable awareness of imminent disaster attendant upon George's inventions, there is very little true tension in EFM. The audience rather finds itself waiting for the inevitable. Most of the farcical and comical effects are achieved by means of this situation. We can thus assume that George's dream is essentially an unusual version of the tragic flaw, viz. a "comic-tragic flaw", with George himself the comic protagonist. The play itself, as a whole, is a mixture of both comedy and farce. "In the former world, heroes, even those who can only deploy a 'tattered dignity', may not only survive but in doing so imply the survival of certain moral principles; in the latter the most they can do is inhabit an autonomous world of their own creation" (1976:9).

The title of the play reflects George's essential predicament: he is not really free, although that is what he dreams of being. It is ironic that both George and the audience sense, from the very beginning, that his dreams and ideals are doomed to failure. He enters the pub, announcing: "Enter a free man!". His entrance makes no impact while Linda sympathises: "Poor old Dad..." and Harry remarks: "It's him again" (p.10). According to all external standards George is not free at all, seeing that he exists on allowances from his daughter and his self-confidence has been carefully fabricated by his family. In a limited sense however, he is free because of his inherent ability to survive in spite of repeated blows. In the end one realizes that instead of being a set-back, his illogicality is in reality, a virtue seeing that it becomes his defence against an unreasonable world. Thus, even though George talks about stepping into freedom, something we know he will never do, he does maintain his sense of self- assuredness and

dignity. In addition, it is through the sustaining of George's "life-lie" that Stoppard explores, through comic displacement, the inherent anxiety associated with the uncertain fate of someone who quits his job and embarks upon a freelance career solely on the basis of verbal inventiveness.

The main theme in this play derives from the inevitable conflict which arises between being "ordinary" and being "different". This theme is explored to a certain extent through Persephone, George's wife. She understands this conflict and thus supports George in maintaining his dream world. At first, both Persephone and Linda appear to possess only limited insight, but it is revealed that they have sharper perceptions than George. In addition, the more "realistic" world of Persephone and Linda is set in ironic contrast to that of George who exists in a world essentially functioning as a defence against self-knowledge.

Persephone has shut herself up within a limited existence marked by a refusal to examine actions truly, both her own and those of the people around her. Subsequently, her life consists of an anxious routine of tidying up and playing servant for her husband and daughter, the point of which she is unable to explain. She evidently supports George because of inherent admiration for his being "different", although she has some difficulty in defining this "difference". She explains to Linda that "a safe man in a safe job" is not everything (p.57).

There's lots of people like your father - different. Some make more money, because they're different. And some make none, because they're different. The difference is the thing, not the money

(p.57).

Linda is more realistic in her perception of the situation and sarcastically replies:

Well, that's nice, isn't it? What am I doing in a rotten shop? I could stay at home and be different. Starving, but different. Terrific

(p.57).

Stoppard uses this essential contrast in perception to create much of the comic irony in the play. Linda is unsentimental, lively and self-ironic, and rebels against both her mother's passive and dreary "sameness" and her father's totally irresponsible "difference". She does not realize, however, that George's self-conscious role-playing is inherently a survival technique. She remarks to her mother:

The point is, what's he like? I mean when we can't see him. He's got to be different - I mean you wouldn't even know me if you could see me - ... And that goes for everyone. There's two of everyone (p.10) .

Riley realizes that his daughter is also projecting a dream although she herself does not. She is deceived even more seriously than her father in that the thirty-year-old motor-cyclist with whom she proposes to elope deserts her

since he is already married. Thus, at the end of the play, Linda experiences the true disillusionment of many characters in contemporary drama and remarks to Persephone:

All those times. All that talking and loving - I thought I knew him - I thought I knew everything about him... I didn't even know his name (p.81).

Linda's rejection and pain evidently enable her, in the end, to be more tolerant towards her father and thus the play ends with her sympathetically collecting water in buckets since it has started raining and George's indoor watering system has started functioning. The ending of this play is, however, not that of a traditional comedy seeing that the disappointment of both the characters and the audience is intensely painful as they witness Harry's demonstration of the obvious futility of George's invention. It is, rather, an end which is typical of contemporary comedy since it is marked by disillusionment, pain, hopelessness and utter futility. The audience is ultimately left with mixed feelings, partly that of sympathy and satisfaction in seeing father and daughter closer to a meaningful relationship than ever before, and partly that of doom and futility since one clearly senses the inevitability of George's failure. The circular structure of the play intensifies this awareness seeing that, apart from the limited measure of insight gained by both father and daughter, the play ends as it began: with George's hope for a better future, his almost pathetic belief that he will taste success one day and that the world will be a better place to live in. Although George agrees to register for unemployment pay, one clearly senses that he has not given up his dream entirely.

Already in this, his first stage play, Stoppard reveals a remarkable flair for verbal inventiveness and it contains some foreshadowing of what would become a hallmark of his later plays, viz. the lack of contact between characters. A clear example is found when Harry, Carmen and Riley attempt to attack the essential symptoms of modern civilization. This leads to an entire anthem of clichés:

Riley	: ... Dreams! The illusion of something for nothing
	No wonder the country is going to the dogs
	Personal enterprise sacrificed to bureaucracy. No
	pride, no patriotism. The erosion of standards,
	the spread of mediocrity, the decline of
	craftsmanship and the betrayal of the small
	inventor.
Harry	: It's terrible really. I blame youth.
Carmen	: Education.
Harry	: The church is out of touch.
Carmen	: The family is not what it was.
Harry	: It's the power of the unions.
Carmen	: The betrayal of the navy.
Harry	: Ban the bomb.
Carmen	: Spare the rod.
Harry	: I'm all right, Jack.
Carmen	: The little man goes to the wall.

Harry : Supermarkets.
 Carmen : Everything's plastic
 Harry : Country's going to the dogs. What happened to our greatness?
 Riley : Look at the Japanese!
 Harry : Look at the Japanese!
 Riley : The Japanese look after the small inventor!
 Harry : All Japanese inventors are small.
 Carmen : They're a small people.
 Harry : Very small. Short.
 Riley : The little man!

(p.15).

This conversation is an excellent example of comic misunderstanding where language assumes a strength of its own, something Stoppard makes full use of in order to attain farcical effects in his plays. In addition, this "not being sure" what the characters are talking about has become the main quality of some of Stoppard's best plays, amongst others, Rosencrantz which essentially illustrates the playwright's ingenious ability to manipulate both events and characters.

Generally, the language of EFM is not quite as elegant or as sophisticated as that in Stoppard's later plays although it clearly foreshadows the boldness and brilliance of plays such as Jumpers and Travesties. In three pages Riley moves from "...course I always go home later, I've got to, you see, because of my work..." (p.34) to "... indoor plants have withered and died on a million cream-painted window-sills, attended by haphazard housewives bearing arbitrary jugs of water..." (p.36) The second example is evidently closer to true Stoppard.

Stoppard is clearly fond of clichés and Hunter remarks that "If the limits of our language mark the limits of our thought, then cliché is pseudo-thought, an opting-out, sometimes at the moment when honest thinking is most needed" (1982:110).

In addition, Stoppard is fond of using stale clichés to create surreal mixtures of metaphor. A clear example occurs when George tells Florence:

...look at me. You see a man standing on the brink of great things. Below me, a vast plain stretches like an ocean, waiting to receive my footprints, footprints that will never be erased, and in years to come, people will see this once uncharted untrod path and say...George Riley walked this way - (p.32).

EFM is certainly not Stoppard's most brilliant play and one critic has remarked that it is built very much like a goldfish bowl in which the main character swims round and round, unable to escape, even if he wishes, although he chooses, at times, to nurture his dream of freedom. This ties in closely with the world as depicted in modern comedy, viz. as a mysterious entity which is, at times, half-menacing, nebulous and consistently impenetrable.

George essentially reflects the isolation of modern man within an impenetrable void. In addition, as has already been mentioned, his dreams, illusions and fantasies are basically a defence against the intrusion of reality and an attempt at finding solace from an unsympathetic and dreadful world within his own private universe. This attempt unremittingly leads to pain and suffering as the contemporary hero repeatedly bangs his head against the wall of a menacing and cruel world. George attempts a solution to this situation when he says:

A man must resist. A man must stand apart, make a clean break on his own two feet! Faith is the key - faith in oneself...

(p.16).

Within this process, however, man tends to lose his identity, which is in its turn, a familiar theme in contemporary comedy. George reflects this theme as he relates:

I'm just an ordinary man like yourself... The world goes on. I expect you're sick of it all - life on the run - always looking over your shoulder, waiting for the knock on the door, the unguarded word, the endless lies, loss of identity - it's no life at all....

(p.25).

Persephone also intensely experiences the meaninglessness of existence so characteristic of contemporary characters. Instead of creating a dream world around her she chooses to escape from reality by means of a preoccupation with cleaning and neatness:

... I've kept our life tidy - I've looked after you, and him, and got you this far - perhaps it is a waste of time. You never went to sleep on a damp sheet and you never went to school without a cooked breakfast - and what was the point of that?

(p.68).

These remarks reveal Persephone's intense awareness of the essential loneliness of life. Nevertheless, in spite of her own suffering she has succeeded in keeping her family respectable, although she doubts the point of it all. In addition, she evidently craves activity to fill her life, which she finds in cleaning and keeping house. Thus she is the only one of the three who fully realizes and appreciates the value of the family union. This is revealed when she reprimands Linda for treating her father unsympathetically:

You treat him like a crank lodger we've got living upstairs who reads fairy tales and probably wishes he lived in one, but he's ours and we're his, and don't you ever talk about him like that again... You can call him the family joke, but it's our family... We're still a family

(pp.67- 68).

As many other characters in contemporary comedy, Persephone prefers awkward relationships to the terror and dislocation associated with loneliness and isolation.

Another theme frequently found in modern comedy, and which is developed in EFM, is modern man's nostalgia for a lost past. George recalls:

My life is piled up between me and the sun, as real and hopeless as a pile of broken furniture. Thirty years ago I was a young man ready to leave the ground and fly. Thirty years... More, perhaps much more than the time I have left, and when a man's past outweighs his future, then he's a man standing in his own shadow...

(p.33).

Like various other modern characters, George attempts to escape from the reality of his dreary existence through dreaming of the past and what could have been. In addition, although George reminds those around him that they should have faith, he himself is irretrievably caught within the workings of an essentially faithless world. The bleak and, at times, utterly destructive view of human existence in modern comedy, derives largely from the lack of faith experienced by the characters. The lack of faith, and in particular, religion, is revealed in a conversation between Persephone and Linda:

- Persephone : ...I can't see what he sees in you in those trousers. Specially on Sunday.
 Linda : What's Sunday got to do with it?
 Persephone : Well, it's not very nice. Sunday. Church and everything.
 Linda : I always wondered where those people were going. Don't get much of an example in this house.
 Persephone : I've got dinner to see to. You'd be the first to complain if there was no hot dinner on a Sunday

(p.56).

EFM serves as the thematic and theatrical basis of Stoppard's later writing. In addition, it is clearly a modern comedy, exhibiting an essential union between farce, comedy, the absurd and tragedy. We recognize something of ourselves in George Riley's hopeless struggle against a hostile world and realize that it is this very struggle which ultimately provides his life with some meaning. We can agree with Cahn when he says that in this play "... Stoppard creates his archetypal theatrical situation: a realistic, identifiable man confronting an absurd world and seeking refuge from it" (1979:34-35).

3.3.2 Jumpers

When Jumpers was first performed in 1972 at the Old Vic Theatre, John Barber commented: "It is another comedy as erudite as it is dotty, with some dark philosophic meaning buried under the fantastifications. You could say it was stark raving sane" (in Evans, 1985:186) while Young remarked that this play was "... as gay and original a farce as we have seen for years, but a farce for people who relish truly civilized wit" (1985:186).

These comments effectively illustrate the central concerns of Jumpers, viz. an exploration of man's seeking and failing to establish his exact place in the overall scheme of things, "... the growingly materialist base of modern society and the desperate attempt by its protagonist to establish the existence and reality of transcendent values" (Bigsby, 1976:19). In addition, in contrast to some of his other plays such as EFM and Travesties, Stoppard clearly moves into a metaphysical realm with Jumpers. Many critics regard it as Stoppard's most brilliant play, seeing that it consists of "... scintillating verbal wit, intellectual allusion and masterly manipulation of structural elements all culminating and exploding at times in the most exuberant farce which is used to convey the most agonising emotions and ideas and literally to bash the audience into awareness" (Combrink, 1979:192).

Although Stoppard explores very serious issues in Jumpers he chooses to do so within a comic framework. The play is ultimately a union of philosophical issues, farcical misunderstandings, detective story, verbal games, allusion, puns and witty dialogue. Structurally speaking it concerns two levels, viz. the metaphysical or philosophical on which the protagonist, George Moore, frantically searches for some kind of proof of the existence of a metaphysical reality which one can call God and the more realistic level on which Inspector Bones of the CID conducts an investigation into the murder of Professor McFee, the Professor of Logic at the University. These two levels are ultimately superimposed, giving way to an effect of dislocation and bewilderment which is so characteristic of both Stoppard's plays and those of contemporary dramatists in general.

Other subsidiary plots are woven into this structure. These include those concerning the two astronauts Oates and Scott, the first Englishmen to reach the moon, and Archie's supposed "affair" with Dotty.

Jumpers contains various themes concerning morality, which constitute much of the supposed philosophical meaning or interest of the play. One deals with the forementioned astronauts. After landing on the moon they have to return to earth with a faulty rocket. Seeing that only one of them can return, they fight, whereupon Scott knocks Oates down and lifts off. These events are revealed during the course of the play through television reports and ultimately destroy Dotty's romantic illusions about the moon. She relates this loss of a dream in symbolic terms:

When they first landed, it was as though I'd seen a unicorn on the television news ... It was very interesting, of course. But it certainly spoiled unicorns... it was just those little grey men in goldfish bowls, clumping about in their lead boots on the television news; it was very interesting, but it certainly spoiled that Juney old moon; and much else besides...

(Faber and Faber, 1972:38-39).

The exploration of the moon is inevitably associated with the loss of mysteriousness and wonder, a prevalent theme in Stoppard's plays. The moon is now becoming familiar mundane territory where once it inspired imaginative

poetry and has thus been degraded into something cold and lifeless. Dotty laments this in Act Two:

...Well, it's all over now. Not only are we no longer the still centre of God's universe, we're not even uniquely graced by his footprint in man's image... and all our absolutes, the thou-shalts and the thou-shalt-nots that seemed to be the very condition of our existence, how did they look to two moonmen with a single neck to save between them?... Because the truths that have been taken on trust, they've never had edges before, there was no vantage point to stand on and see where they stopped...
(p.75).

This is evidently a crucial speech in Jumpers, as it reflects an issue explored in most of Stoppard's other plays, viz. that of man trapped in a hostile world beyond his control. It is presented from a new angle here, however, in that it is suggested that man should accept his situation and take responsibility for his action, thereby attempting to provide his life with some measure of meaning and purpose.

Dotty finds it increasingly difficult, however, to maintain admiration and respect for man after he has landed on the moon. For the first time man has viewed himself as an infinite speck against a vast universe and has, tragically, been stripped of all delusions of grandeur. Shiner points out that "we are being shown here not an Absurdist gap which denies morality, but the reality of the moral despite the fact that morality has no source but the human form of life" (Shiner, 1982:641).

Another recurrent moral theme is explored through McFee's murder. This is set against the pathetic fate of Pat and Thumper who are used as comic props in order to attain farcical effects. George confuses two of Zeno's paradoxes with a fable of Aesop. He subsequently proposes to prove his point at a philosophical lecture by means of demonstrating that the hare would win the race and the arrow would reach its target. The events assume a touch of the absurd seeing that, early in the play, George looses off an arrow unintentionally with unknown results. At the end he discovers that it has killed Thumper the hare and, climbing down from the desk, he steps on Pat, killing it as well. The impact of these events create emotions which are true to the spirit of modern comedy: the audience experiences the paradoxical feelings of horror, sadness and humour all in one, once again illustrating the remarkable ability of contemporary comedy to be more moving than tragedy itself.

Jumpers thus clearly falls within the context of contemporary comedy. The prevalent tone is that of tragicomedy and the absurd, while ultimately revealing a measure of nostalgia for the metaphysical absolutes that the modern world has abandoned. According to Bigsby the real advance in his play is "that Stoppard succeeds in fusing a comic approach with metaphysics" and that "he begins to control the resources of theatre with greater confidence and skill than before" (1976:23). In other words Stoppard has successfully united dramatic absurdity, farce and serious philosophical argument. This,

in turn, serves to strengthen a crucial theme in the play, viz. the notion that man need not be merely a passive victim of his environment but can, through his own doing, become an active participant in the often hostile events which mark his existence.

George Moore, the comic hero in Jumpers is a successful and endearing character who, at times, reminds one of George Riley in EFM. He is evidently bewildered and centres his attention upon an attempt to prove, by logical means, the existence of moral absolutes and the credibility of God. Moore strikes one as a brave, though forlorn figure, as he continuously ends up confused by the world though endlessly searching for a means of counteracting its essential absurdity. In other words his preoccupation with philosophy is in reality an attempt to derive some measure of order from the prevailing chaos. Many of his long philosophical speeches are extensive parodies, once again illustrating Stoppard's inherent fondness for drawing upon the riches of other authors through allusion. They thus form a crucial part of the play in that they can be seen as reflective of society in general and of man's part in creating the absurdity within which he is forced to exist.

It has been suggested that through George's extended disquisitions Stoppard moves beyond the absurdist void and "...the disjointed world of playwrights such as Beckett and Ionesco. The specific philosophical problem at the basis of George's inquiry is whether moral judgments are absolute or relative, whether their truth lies in correspondence with the facts of emotion" (Cahn, 1979:118).

As has already been suggested, George is, at times, a truly comic character. This is illustrated effectively in the farcical scene where he, after much serious thought and consideration, first learns that he has accidentally killed Thumper and then "fatally" steps on Pat (p.81), at which point he breaks down.

Throughout the play George is contrasted with Sir Archie Jumpers, a materialist, philosopher, gymnast, doctor, psychiatrist, lawyer, coroner, and guardian of the Radical-Liberal orthodoxy. Where George continuously doubts himself, Archie is extremely confident and where George is almost passive and hopeless, Archie is active and effective. In addition, Archie frequently visits Dotty in her bedroom justifying his visits as professional while George's marriage to Dotty is sexually unsatisfactory. Moreover, Archie succeeds in covering up the murder and bribing Inspector Bones, thereby revealing efficiency in coming to terms with the world around him.

The essential crisis in George's life is effectively summarized by Archie in the final speech of the play:

Do not despair - many are happy much of the time; more eat than starve, more are healthy than sick, more curable than dying; not so many dying as dead; and one of the thieves was saved. Hell's bells and all's well - half the world is at peace with itself, and so is the other half; vast areas are unpolluted; millions of children grow up without suffering, deprivation, and millions, while deprived, grow up without suffering cruelties, and millions, while deprived and cruelly treated, none the less grow up. No laughter is sad and many tears are joyful. At the graveside

the undertaker doffs his top hat and impregnates the prettiest mourner. Wham, bam, thank you Sam

(p.97).

Here Stoppard alludes to a familiar statement by Beckett:

There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than English. 'Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned'

(in Cahn, 1979:122).

Stoppard here links his play to the spirit of the absurd although Archie's speech is essentially marked by optimism, albeit somewhat cynical.

As in most of Stoppard's comedies language ostensibly fails as a means of effective communication. George relates that "...though my convictions are intact and my ideas coherent, I can't seem to find the words...(p.46).

Moreover, this play contains some dialogues which are typically Stoppardian, for example where George is confessing to an anonymous phone call to the police about noise while the Inspector assumes that he is confessing to the murder of McFee. Having characters talk at cross-purpose is evidently an effective device employed by Stoppard to attain various effects including those of humour, dislocation and incoherence:

George	: Inspector! - I think I can help you in your inquiries. I'm your man. I am the mystery telephone caller.
Bones	: ... You laid information against your wife, sir?
George	: Yes. Well, it was really against myself more than my wife.
Bones	: Anonymously. Against yourself?
George	: Yes.
Bones	: You have a funny way of going about things. Are you trying to prepare the ground for a plea of insanity?

(p.47).

According to Combrink "the failure of language in its communicative function is at one level a powerful symbol of man's functioning within a world in which all absolutes have disappeared, to leave only a void, a nothingness" (1979:198).

We have to consider, however, that in Jumpers Stoppard moves, on some levels, away from the notion that language always fails as a means of communication. Cahn remarks that "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...is how to live under those conditions" (1979:124).

We have thus determined that Jumpers is a true contemporary comedy containing many elements which are typical of Stoppard, including brilliant and scintillating wit, ingenious use of dialogue and language, and extremely

effective use of allusion through which he appears to pay tribute to the rest of contemporary theatre. At the end of the play we are left with Dotty's: "Goodbye spoony Juney Moon" (p.87) and experience an overwhelming sense of irony and deep frustration although this is, to a certain extent, alleviated by Stoppard's essentially compassionate view of mankind. In addition, in the end, we cannot ignore the pathos of the human situation as explored in Jumpers:

Traditional ethics cannot survive in a universe where quarrelsome jumpers can land on the moon, churches are converted to gymnasiums, an agnostic agriculturist is appointed by the government as Archbishop of Canterbury and the police can be persuaded to connive murder (Hayman, 1977:108-109).

3.4 A reassessment of comedy in the twentieth century

In order to determine the nature and value of comedy in the twentieth century, it is important to consider the evolution of theories of comedy throughout the ages seeing that these theories are ultimately reflections of the central notions of comedy at specific times. Many theories deal exclusively with the phenomenon of laughter while others practically ignore it altogether. Comedy has for centuries been regarded as essentially instructive and medieval view held that the comic process ultimately proceeds from adversity to prosperity. During Neo-classicism many felt that comedy was an imitation of the errors of life and an integral issue was the delicate balance between pleasure and pain. The theories which evolved during the Restoration greatly influenced those of the twentieth century seeing that comedy was then viewed as inherently corrective and civilizing, thus man must preferably be laughed out of his vices.

Bergson can be said to have initiated modern comic theory by stressing its social significance and commenting upon the release of feeling which accompanies laughter, thus comedy by implication. Both Olson and Freud tie in with these ideas in that they stipulate the function of catharsis in purging the human body and mind of both humorous and sad feelings through laughter and weeping. Catharsis is thus essentially a release of pent-up feeling, either comic or tragic.

In view of such a variety of theories concerning the comic one realizes that it is important to keep in mind that they are not inevitably inaccurate, merely incomplete. There is thus a fundamental need for a new, all-embracing theory of comedy meeting the requirements of the twentieth century. Because of this need, reception theory has rapidly attained a strong foothold in recent time. It has endeavoured to provide new methods of analysis, explanation and concretization and has frequently stressed the importance of communication in modern literature. Contemporary comedy is thus viewed as embracing a new form in order to communicate more effectively. In this process of communication the reader's response is seen as of increasing importance and since no two concretizations of particular texts can be identical, it is

tremendously difficult to determine and define a complex notion such as that of contemporary comedy. Both the production and the reception of a text is of paramount importance. Moreover, since literature and society influence each other extensively, it is easy to see how contemporary concerns have influenced the interpretation and evaluation of modern comedy.

The concepts of comedy and laughter are indivisibly linked and important considerations concerning this relationship surface when one considers theories of laughter. These include the fact that a literary work need not evoke laughter in order to be a comedy and that it is incorrect to approach comedy merely through laughter. Comic laughter is viewed as existing in close relation to the acceptance of limitation in modern comedy and thus catharsis is portrayed as an escape from these limitations through laughter. Therefore laughter in contemporary comedy is a basic though inessential element and its prevalent functions include acceptance of limitation, criticising, recognising and accepting the integral sense of absurdity and escaping from truth and despair. Moreover, it is essentially edged with hysteria, fear, anxiety and conversely, an illimitable compassion.

It appears that the possibility of tragedy no longer exists in modern times mainly because of the disappearance of nobility and grandeur and loss of belief in a rational order. Thus it is felt that contemporary comedy has to assume the "burden" of both traditional comedy and tragedy, in effect replacing these genres. Modern comedy lends itself to the needs and notions of modern man and has essentially become the expression of a sick society in which man is portrayed as a machine. He can thus assume that modern comedy is a genre in its own right and should be regarded as such.

Contemporary dramatists such as Pinter, Gray, Nichols and Stoppard share certain essential qualities integral to modern comedy as a whole. Within the context of contemporary comedy, language has assumed a new significance. To some, it is a form of non-communication and to others like Pinter, it is clear that people fail to avoid the communication from which they actually want to run. In modern comedy, communication also takes place, paradoxically, through silence. Language is seen as an offensive weapon, an alienating and dislocating device. Moreover, it is employed both to link and to divide and as a means of unsettling and disorientating characters inhabiting a hostile universe. Certain fundamental themes pervade modern comedy in general. These include those of the struggle for survival, communication, and meaningful existence in a strange and fragmented environment. Man is portrayed as living on the verge of disaster, plagued by fear and uncertainty. The idea and opportunity of redemption has ultimately disappeared, thus there is the integral pain which is associated with existence. The quest for identity and meaning has assumed an ever-increasing importance. The modern comic hero is frequently abandoned and left to exist in a strange and shattered world, pathetically isolated with no hope of redemption or meaning. Moreover, he is seen as desperately trying to escape the dooming conditions of his miserable life, only to be met by the increasing fragmentation and dislocation of his futile existence.

Modern man is portrayed as existing in a society marked by a loss of faith. Faith is viewed as a "luxury" which no-one can afford, hence man's continual

hopeless search for meaning in a purposeless world. Misfortune is ultimately seen as God's way of punishing man for the misuse of freedom given to him by God.

Another central issue in modern comedy is man's intense nostalgia for a lost past. Illusions and dreams are subsequently seen as pathetic but necessary survival techniques, and the intense struggle against a hostile world ultimately, though somewhat paradoxically, provides some measure of the meaning he so desperately craves. The question of choice frequently surfaces in modern comedy. Although man is portrayed as desperately attempting to escape his dreary existence, the comic hero is often perceived as being over-accepting¹⁾. He accepts the terrifying conditions of his existence meekly and forlornly since there is a limit to what he can do. Thus he is left, isolated and pathetic with the remnants of hope and faith, which fail to provide adequate answer to a fragmented and desperate existence.

Tom Stoppard's work certainly fits into the genre of modern comedy as described thus far. His comic heroes are portrayed as exhibiting an essential "tattered dignity" together with a prevailing sense of disappointment and uncertainty. They are sometimes seen, however, to survive in the face of disaster. Moreover, the pain and rejection they suffer are turned into something positive in that they lead to a better understanding of and increased tolerance toward those around them. There is an essential lack of contact between Stoppard's characters, which adds to the terror and dislocation of their existence. Man fails to establish his exact place in the scheme of things which ties in with the loss of mysteriousness and wonder in a hostile world. Moreover, he is trapped in a fragmented existence but should, ultimately, accept the stark reality of his situation and assume responsibility for his action. In the end he is stripped of all delusion of grandeur and is left on the edge of an abyss, although he need not be a passive victim of circumstances.

Stoppard employs language in order to attain various effects, including those of humour, dislocation, incoherence, and, paradoxically, that of order.

- 1) In Ways of the World (1978) Heilman maintains that genre is essentially "a way into a play", thus implying that, within the context of the work of a playwright such as Tom Stoppard, the mere fact that his plays exist within the genre of comedy, clearly facilitates the process of communication between playwright and audience. In modern critical thinking we find a strong contention that generic distinctions have become invalid and irrelevant although various contemporary critics have expressed an awareness of the usefulness of generic distinction. Heilman's contention that the idea of genre is "a way into a play" is an exceptionally felicitous idea. Moreover, he indicates that, within the framework of contemporary comedy, the "over-acceptance" of the comic hero essentially implies a sprawling excess of the comic spirit in that it moves from the centrally comic into the blackly comic. Subsequently, the tendency to attribute some sense of "redemptive action" to comedy ultimately leads to the upgrading of comedy as the most useful voice of human possibility, thus effecting proper communication between playwright and audience. It thus emerges that the mere fact that a play is labelled as a comedy causes the reader to apply certain interpretive conventions when reading the play. To refer to a work as either tragic or comic is to acknowledge that the author has imbued it with a specific vision of life.

Moreover, he has created truly comic characters who employ exuberant farce as a means of coming to terms with their existence.

It is thus evident that contemporary comedy is, despite the infinite variety within its context, a genre in its own right and that Tom Stoppard's work can be placed squarely within its framework.