

Stoppard's Life and Views

Tom Stoppard's one-act play *After Magritte* opens with a ludicrous tableau, vaguely domestic yet altogether grotesque. The characters, however, treat it as commonplace, and as it gradually unravels, each element proves to have a rational explanation. The characters are much more puzzled by a different grotesqueness which they glimpsed while out driving. Halfway through the play the room looks entirely normal – whereupon a police inspector bursts in with the line: 'What is the meaning of this bizarre spectacle?' Comic interrogations follow, during which it emerges that the absurdity seen while driving was also logically explicable – and, as it happens, featured the inspector himself. Meanwhile onstage a second weird tableau is gradually taking shape, but for reasons which this time are known.

In such controlled craziness the play resembles the Theatre of the Absurd, and also alludes to the surrealist painter René Magritte. But whereas the Absurdist and Magritte were challenging the conventional, this brilliant, jollier entertainment is basically reassuring: life is logical even when it doesn't look it. Though *After Magritte* doesn't claim to be more than theatrical fun, a similar instinct tends to underpin Stoppard's more serious material. He seems to relish the intellectual shocks of the twentieth century and yet to resist much of the resultant thinking; in a time when all knowledge and value systems have been questioned, he seeks to reassert traditional absolutes of goodness and moral justice.

Such faith is both caricatured and celebrated in the character of George in *Jumpers*. George's philosophy is intuitionist – not ultimately subject to rational argument: it is an intuition of the good. A few years later, when Stoppard's children were young,

he wrote several times of a small child's direct intuition of natural justice. In the TV play *Professional Foul*, 'there is a sense of right and wrong which precedes utterance', as opposed to the untrustworthiness of those grown-ups who are 'clever' and can therefore be persuaded 'to believe almost anything'. This in context, opposing the lies of a Communist police state, carries an Orwellian simplicity and strength.

In Stoppard's view, a person's attitudes and opinions are partly formed by temperament. As we shall see, his own life began harshly, yet the general impression he gives is of warmth, fun and generosity, of being a man who anywhere in any circumstances might find some way to be upbeat. Even where all former certainties have been demolished, the young mathematician Valentine in *Arcadia* can say: 'It makes me so happy. To be at the beginning again, knowing almost nothing . . . It's the best possible time to be alive, when almost everything you thought you knew is wrong.'

Valentine, who seems to carry Stoppard's voice, is excited by the order within apparent orderlessness, which somehow produces the elegant patterns of a leaf, a waterfall, a snowflake. Valentine believes not that life is shapeless, only that we have previously misunderstood its shape; and this is where Stoppard seems to put his own faith.

But that faith too, on his own argument, may be a matter of temperament. One element of Stoppard's good humour, as reported by friends over the years, is an apparent insouciance, a reluctance to let anything upset him too much. Several examples of this will be mentioned later, and were shocking to himself in hindsight. At nearly sixty-five he could tell an interviewer: 'What people tend to underestimate is my capacity for not bothering, not caring, not minding, not being that interested. It's pretty awful actually, when I think about it myself.'

Yet this is clearly not an insensitive man. What he might call his 'temperament' seems to me a mode of behaviour – indeed a mode of *thinking* – learned very early because it had to be: a mode, in short, of survival.

'Everything can be all right'

Sung by the child Sacha, these are the final words of *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, the play for actors and orchestra which Stoppard wrote with André Previn.

Here, 'Everything is going to be all right' is the insistent message of the Soviet state. As a political dissident, Sacha's father is locked up in a mental hospital (in the boy's shrewd perception, 'the lunatics' prison'). He cannot be released until the 'Colonel-Doctor' can save face by a cynical fudge, which Sacha himself half-suggests, pleading with both his father and the hospital doctor not to be 'rigid'. As the play ends, father and son walk free, while everyone else joins the orchestra as the state demands. The boy runs ahead and sings 'Papa, don't be crazy!' – as if fearful that his father will resume his dissident actions – and then 'Everything can be all right', which partly and poignantly echoes the state's lies, yet also, in the modulation to 'can be', challenges the audience to work for ultimate real freedom.

There are deep resonances here with Tom Stoppard's own life. In his earliest years he survived a succession of twentieth-century extremities. Twice his family fled for their lives: first from the Nazis, whose concentration camps brought death to all four of his grandparents and three of his aunts; and three years later from the Japanese, who killed his father. He put together his own account¹ when he was sixty-two, using parts of a memoir (in italics below) by his mother, Martha:

When I was born, in July 1937 in Zlin, a small town in Moravia, my name was Tomas Straussler, Tomik to my mother and father. We left Czechoslovakia – my parents, my brother Petr and I – when the German army moved in. By the time I understood that there was a connection between these two events I was an English schoolboy, Stoppard Two at prep school (Peter being Stoppard One), Tommy at home.

¹ 'Another Country', *Sunday Telegraph*, 10 October 1999.

So were we Jewish? My mother would give a little frown and go 'Tsk!' in her way and say, 'Oh, if anyone had a Jewish grandparent at that time . . .'

I believe I understand her 'Tsk!' It was less to do with denial than irritation. To ask the question was to accept the estimation put on it not by her but by the Germans. She had no sense of racial identity and no religious beliefs. Of course there were Jews in Zlin, she said, but they were proper Jews who wore black hats and went to the synagogue and the rest of it, Jews who were Jewish . . . Zlin was the world headquarters of the Bata shoe company, and my father was a doctor at the company hospital . . .

As I understand it, if I do, 'being Jewish' didn't figure in her life until it disrupted it, and then it set her on a course of displacement, chaos, bereavement and – finally – sanctuary in a foreign country, England, thankful at least that her boys were now safe. Hitler made her Jewish in 1939. By the spring, in good time before the European war started, all that was behind her, literally; we embarked at Genoa for Singapore, in good time for the Japanese onslaught.

For the Japanese were a different story. They killed my father and did their best to sink the ship which got the rest of us to India, but it wasn't personal, we weren't on a list, it was simply the war and being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

By the end of [January, 1942] all women and children were evacuated. I stayed as long as I could, specially as I did not want to go on my own to Australia. Hoping that we might all go eventually. It just did not work out and the last few days were chaotic, boats, days and times always being changed. The journey from Singapore was pretty dreadful. We were bombed just about everywhere. In the harbour, standing three days just off Singapore, then on the way to Australia, then turned back to Singapore and finally to India.

All the time we were so worried about the men left

behind in Singapore we did not really notice or mind anything. Cabins were over-crowded and mattresses on decks preferable. Children were always getting lost (not mine!) but I cried myself silly one night because I lost two silver medallions engraved with your names my best friend gave you. Hung them on a hook in the bathroom instead of putting them into my pocket – will I never learn?

I remember this. I remember the medallions, and the loss, and most of all my mother crying.

Bata, who had facilitated the Strausslers' original escape from Nazism, appointed Martha as manager of their Darjeeling shop. When 'Tommy' was five he and his brother were sent to boarding school, visited there by their mother on Sundays. In her memoir:

Personally I did not like being in India . . . The four years seem even now like a lifetime and a nightmare. I have no idea how and why I came to Darjeeling. By that time I was feeling rather ill, depressed, and it was all getting too much. Darjeeling was the change I needed. Otherwise it was just a matter of waiting and waiting. Once I was asked to go to Calcutta, only to be told that after the people were accounted for, your father was amongst those missing, presumed lost, and as they were all listed as civilians, it was all they could do.

I returned the next day to Darjeeling but did not tell you. Rightly or wrongly. Rightly, I think. You had enough to cope with.

But one day in Darjeeling, a woman friend, at my mother's request, took Peter and me for a walk and told us that our father was dead. Then she walked us back to the house where my mother was waiting for us, teary-eyed and anxious about how we had taken it. For my own part, I took it well, or not well, depending on how you look at it. I felt almost nothing. I felt the significance of the occasion but not the loss.

Not until the 1990s could he ascertain that the ship carrying his father, 'trying to make it to Australia', had been sunk by the Japanese. In 1946 Martha married an English major, Kenneth Stoppard, and her sons were uprooted yet again, then to settle finally in England.

Psychologists tend to be gloomy about people whose infancy has been so disturbed. But the adult Stoppard has little time for such determinism, and in his own personality contrives to refute it. Persistently he and his work are inclined to sing that 'everything can be all right'. I believe that this sequence, of sharp disturbance overlaid by security gratefully cherished, is a key to the man and his work.

Sometimes it can look like disturbance *denied*, or at least suppressed. Peter Wood, who directed most of his new plays over two decades, recalls that 'for all his radiant, cultivated, dazzling personality . . . there was always a glimmer of rage on the horizon'. What Stoppard seems to have done, from a very early age, is to pack suffering away in the basement – as do we all to some degree, though few have had so much to pack away. He has admitted: 'my memory is very good at erasing things I'd rather not remember' – something he learned from his mother. In his recollection of being told of his father's death, the words 'I felt almost nothing' don't quite exclude, even if they intend to, the subtext *couldn't permit myself to feel*: the image of a white-faced five-year-old, clenched in his resistance to being hurt any further. Then, aged seven, 'at prep. school – I remember walking down one of the corridors, trailing my finger along a raised edge along the wall, and I was suddenly totally happy . . . everywhere I looked, in my mind, *nothing was wrong*.'

The poignancy of this moment of white light lies in its revelation of darkness elsewhere, its glimpse of a seven-year-old only too accustomed to checking around ('everywhere I looked, in my mind') and to finding things that *were* wrong. The child Stoppard had every reason to look very warily about him, defending his own emotional security. Such wariness may partly account for his lifelong conservatism, and also for the

frivolous manner of his early writing – where a good listener can detect barrels of pain bumping around in the basement, even though they are locked away. The quotation above is from the character Gale in the early radio play *Where Are They Now?*, but Stoppard repeated it in his own voice twenty years later, after revisiting Darjeeling:

When Bengal was replaced by Derbyshire, India misted over, a lost domain of uninterrupted happiness. Of course, it couldn't have been that. What I was remembering was a particular day which became all my days at Mount Hermon, a day when I was walking along the corridor which led from the door to the playground, trailing a finger along a raised edge on the wall, and it suddenly came upon me that *everything was all right*, and would always be all right.²

A moment when *nothing was wrong* has now become an infinity where *everything is all right*. Not a hint of pain is allowed into this piece, which ends: 'My childhood was a different place . . . Life was familiar and safe and didn't change, and there were no decisions to be made, a long time ago when we lived in Darjeeling.'

The cadence seems quite deliberately sentimental: *this is how I choose to remember*. His mother's memory was altogether different: 'like a lifetime and a nightmare'.

Embracing England

My stepfather, formerly Major Kenneth Stoppard in the British Army in India, believed with Cecil Rhodes that to be born an Englishman was to have drawn first prize in the lottery of life, and I doubt that even Rhodes, the Empire builder who lent his name to Rhodesia, believed it as utterly as Ken . . . 'Don't you realise,' he once reproached me

² *Independent*, 23 March 1991.

when, aged nine, I innocently referred to my 'real father', 'don't you realise *that I made you British?*'³

Major Stoppard may have influenced his wife's decision to hide from her sons their full Jewishness. Even in her memoir of 1981, Stoppard found, 'the word Jew or Jewish does not occur'. She writes there:

The move to England had been so sudden, unplanned and drastic that I – perhaps subconsciously – decided the only thing to make it possible to live and truly settle down (I mean the three of us) was to draw a blind over my past life and start so to speak from scratch. Whether this was realistic or possible I don't know. I mean whether it was the right thing to do.

Her sons learned to collude in her reticence: 'Rightly or wrongly, we've always felt that she might want to keep the past under a protective covering,' Stoppard told Kenneth Tynan in the 1970s, saying then of his father's death, 'we've never delved into it'. He was quite happy to be turned into a young Englishman. 'As soon as we all landed up in England, I knew I had found a home. I embraced the language and the landscape.' The brothers were sent to board at a preparatory school, which Stoppard remembers warmly, and then at Pocklington, in Yorkshire, which he doesn't. There he studied classics, played cricket, and debated, with reasonable success but without being much noticed. Above all, he was bored:

We just sat around the class doing *The Merchant of Venice* and all having to read a part. All you did was look ahead to see when it was Nerissa's turn and then you said your line . . . I didn't like being there at all, I'm afraid; and the idea of, you know, carrying on with books and exams and lectures didn't appeal to me . . .⁴

³ 'Another Country'.

⁴ *Platform*, National Theatre, 1993, quoted Nadel, p. 49.

I left school totally bored by the idea of anything intellectual and gladly sold all my Greek and Latin classics to George's bookshop in Park Street.⁵

I didn't know what I wanted to do for a while, but the moment the thought of journalism came into my head I became passionate to be a journalist, and I joined a newspaper in Bristol when I was 17, and I have to say I loved every moment of it, unless I've forgotten the moments I didn't love . . .⁶

Come 1956, when the British and French went into Suez and the Russians went into Budapest, then I wanted to be Noel Barber on the *Daily Mail* or Sefton Delmer on the *Daily Express* – that kind of big-name, roving reporter. Noel Barber actually got shot in the head in Budapest, which put him slightly ahead of Delmer as far as I was concerned.

'At seventeen,' according to his older brother Peter, 'Tom was more like twenty.' Asked long afterwards whether he regretted not having gone to university, Stoppard replied: 'I came to regret it, years later. I realised when I was thirty-ish that I would probably have become part of a kind of network of interesting people . . . I felt that I'd gone along a different road and probably missed a lot of education in the best possible sense of the word. I may have got a bad Third, but I think I would have learned a great deal.'⁶

The decision to leave school after O Levels wasn't exceptional at that time, when only about 5 or 6 per cent of British young people went to university. But it did require him to work his way up from the bottom, whereas in those days to have been to a leading university meant a head start in many careers, as it were by-passing several qualifying rounds. It assisted many theatre people, whereas Stoppard had to serve a twelve-year apprenticeship, first as journalist and later as freelance

⁵ To *Theatre Quarterly* 14, May–July 1974.

⁶ To John Tusa, BBC Radio, June 2002.

jobbing writer. Yet if he had gone to university we might never have had his plays as we know them. His political perspectives might have been extended, but on the other hand he might have turned out as a more conventional artist – if indeed an artist at all, since he had no such intention at the time.

Where the Stoppard brothers were really unusual was in not being made to waste two years in the armed forces, as was then compulsory for all young males not just in Britain but in most of the developed world. For all Major Stoppard's claims to have made the boys British, they found that actually he hadn't: they were still 'aliens'. Peter Stoppard explained to me: 'I had to register with the police and was issued with an "identity card". In about 1957, I think, I obtained British nationality, and presume that Tom's situation was similar . . . I know that becoming British did not cancel Czech nationality, as a document warned me that I could not rely on protection if I entered Czechoslovakia: as far as I am aware, neither of us has formally renounced Czech nationality.'

Significantly, the *Western Daily Press* in Bristol included pieces by both 'Tom Stoppard' and 'Tomik Straussler'.

During those Bristol years theatre in England was developing excitingly (see p. 34 below). In 1955 the young actor Peter O'Toole joined the Bristol Old Vic, later attracting national attention as Hamlet; he became friendly with Stoppard, who in 1960, after six years of full-time journalism, went part-time in order to write his first play. In 1962 he moved to London, to work as theatre critic for the short-lived *Scene* magazine, while trying to write another play and also fiction. In 1964 a Faber anthology included three short stories, and plays were broadcast on both radio and TV; he did other jobbing scriptwriting for the BBC, was commissioned to write a novel, and enjoyed an extraordinary summer-long freebie for young writers in Berlin, during which he produced a first knockabout attempt at a play about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. By early 1965 this had developed more seriously, and interested the Royal Shakespeare Company. In March 1965 Stoppard married Jose

Ingle, a consumer researcher, and in August he finished his novel. Early in 1966 another radio play was broadcast and Trevor Nunn at the RSC asked Stoppard to work on the English version of Slawomir Mrozek's *Tango*, which was performed in May. Then, within a few days in August, a TV play was broadcast, the novel was published, and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* opened in a student production on the Edinburgh Festival fringe. Three paragraphs by Ronald Bryden in the *Observer*, plus a snapshot captioned 'The most brilliant debut since Arden's', were seen overnight by Kenneth Tynan, who instantly demanded the play for the National Theatre. It was a breakthrough of startling suddenness, twelve long years after the boy journalist started in Bristol.

After that slow start, Stoppard's success has been extraordinarily sustained, over getting on for forty years. Audiences and critics have found a few plays hard to chew and swallow, but even the toughest of those, *Happgood*, has its defenders. He startled me by saying of his output: 'It doesn't seem that much to me, when you think how many years have gone by. I mean there are people who write a play every eighteen months, and I don't.'

On the contrary, it's a large and rich body of work, remarkable for its consistent quality. Script after script, when revisited, still cries out for performance, and indeed one revival or another is usually running in London. What is more, in between his own new plays Stoppard has kept constantly busy with commissioned work, stage translations more or less Stoppardian in character and screenplays which are usually not.

When *Rosencrantz* opened in New York in 1967 Stoppard was asked what it was about and in an off-the-cuff pun replied: 'It's about to make me rich.' The seventeen-year-old who wanted to be famous, if only for being shot in the head, grew up into a writer who was thrilled by show business, kept wicket for Harold Pinter's showbiz cricket team, enjoyed spending money (flying by Concorde to see a son's school football match) and

giving it away (setting up two charitable trusts and also supporting human-rights movements) and threw occasional glittering parties for stars of the entertainment industry. The Queen's sister, Princess Margaret, regarded herself as a friend; Prime Ministers Thatcher, Major and Blair invited him to functions at 10 Downing Street. In 1997 he was knighted, becoming officially 'Sir Tom', and in 2000 he received the Order of Merit, which is rarely offered to an artist. Yet this is a man who describes himself as shy⁷ and for whom privacy is vital. Always generous in giving interviews, particularly to promote a new production, he has nevertheless steered well clear of chat-show circuits and the cult of celebrity – his second wife, Miriam, a TV doctor and health adviser, became more widely known to the British public.

During the childhood of his four sons Stoppard's priority was fatherhood. It needed to be, since his first marriage foundered early. An unnamed source is quoted by Stephen Schiff, writing in *Vanity Fair*:

In her cups [Jose] would tell Tom's friends how she had really written *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* . . . And all the time Tom was behaving with a kind of chivalric constancy. His friends were throwing up their hands because he was spending all his time looking after the children and doing the washing up. Then came the time when he decided it was over, at which point [December 1969] he behaved with a kind of frightening clarity, taking the two kids with him and setting up a new home with Miriam.⁸

At the divorce in 1972 Stoppard was awarded custody of his children, Oliver and Barnaby. Two further sons, William and Edmund, were born to Miriam, within what was for many years a deeply successful second marriage. In 1979 the family moved spectacularly upmarket, from a substantial Victorian house to an eighteenth-century mansion, Iver Grove, standing

⁷ p. 160.

⁸ Delaney, p. 220.

in seventeen acres of Buckinghamshire. The boys were sent to independent schools, and family holidays included traditional pursuits of the upper-class English: shooting and fishing – almost as if to placate Stoppard's stepfather. Ten years later, visiting Iver Grove in February 1989, Stephen Schiff was entranced not only by the ambience but by the marriage itself: 'It's Love on Mount Olympus . . . Watching the Stoppards now, in their living room, one realises how much the works of his new, "serious" period have been, amongst other things, valentines to Miriam.'

Ouch. God-like in their success Tom and Miriam Stoppard may have seemed, but Mount Olympus was never noted for marital concord, and what Schiff's piece also shows is two extremely busy individuals whose work is beginning to push their lives apart. Stoppard already had his own flat in London, and was soon seen keeping company with the actor for whom he has written most, Felicity Kendal. The Stoppards announced their amicable separation late in 1990 and divorce followed in 1992. Miriam later married Christopher Hogg, with whom Stoppard sat on the Board of the National Theatre. He himself has not remarried, and although he and Kendal remained very close till 1998, they never shared a home together.

For this book Kendal talks to me about her many Stoppard roles, between 1981 and 1997. It emerges that she has never thought of him as English; nor are his characters – startlingly, she suggests: 'Even in *Jumpers*, they could be Bengali'. All this she evidently approves, adding of herself, 'I don't feel remotely English.' Her parents certainly were, but her childhood and adolescence were spent in India, acting in the family troupe which performed Shakespeare around the subcontinent – all vividly recalled in her autobiography *White Cargo*. Stoppard's radio play *In the Native State* was clearly written for her with love (dedicated to her; its stage successor, *Indian Ink*, is dedicated to the memory of her mother).

⁹ Delaney, p. 218.

Another thread appears – that of Jewishness. Stoppard always knew that he was at least partly Jewish; Miriam was also Jewish, and Felicity Kendal had converted to Judaism for her marriage in 1983 to Michael Rudman. Though these are varied kinds of Jewishness, they share a quality of *difference*, within the ‘embrace’ of England, and one which – particularly in the twentieth century – stood always in some relationship to *danger*.

‘Another Country’

Remembering his mother’s determination to ‘draw a blind’ over her past, Stoppard writes in ‘Another Country’:

All my life I have been told that I ‘take after my mother’, whatever that was supposed to mean, and now it does appear to mean more than a compliment. In August 1968 when the armies of the Warsaw Pact put down the movement for reform in Czechoslovakia, my then wife was firstly incredulous and secondly infuriated that I didn’t get worked up about it as a Czech. It was true. I had no special feeling other than the general English one of impotent condemnation, tinged with that complacency felt when the ogres of one’s personal demonology behave true to form. I knew I was – used to be – Czech but I didn’t feel Czech.

‘Another Country’ was not only a family memoir but also to some extent a self-reproach, the more painful because ‘it’s all too late’. In 1968 the embracing of England seems to have gone too far: any response was now ‘the general English one’ (assumed to be ‘impotent’) from someone who merely ‘used to be’ Czech. Yet ten years after the Warsaw Pact invasion, Stoppard could insist: ‘I’m as Czech as Czech can be.’¹⁰

John Tusa asked in 2002 whether his admiration for the absurdist protest plays of his Czech contemporary, Vaclav

¹⁰ Delaney, p. 110.

Havel (later the first President of Czechoslovakia after Communism) had first led him to get involved with Czech human rights. Or was it ‘because of politics or a sense of Czech-ness? Was it words that took you into politics?’ To which he replied: ‘No. So far as I recall I was active, if that’s the word, earlier in Russian dissidents rather than Czech dissidents; and the one led to the other . . . It was certainly something to do with being Czech, but not entirely.’

The political shift appears in attacks on Lenin in 1974, both in *Travesties* and in interview (p. 122ff.). Soviet totalitarianism and abuses of human rights excited Stoppard to a cold and eloquent anger. Already he was an active supporter of Amnesty International and *Index on Censorship*, writing letters on behalf of Soviet dissidents, and in 1976 he addressed a Trafalgar Square rally organised by the Committee Against Psychological Abuse. Early in 1977 he visited the Soviet Union with the assistant director of Amnesty (which had dedicated the year to ‘Prisoners of Conscience’).

Meanwhile in Czechoslovakia Havel had been arrested on 6 January for attempting to publish Charter 77, a document of political protest: In April Stoppard, petitioning on his behalf, was refused admission to the Czech Embassy in London. Havel was, however, released in May, and in June Stoppard, who had not previously risked revisiting his country of birth, did so in order to meet him. He also met another banned playwright, Pavel Kohout, and a banned actor, Pavel Landovsky, and from that new friendship grew the later play *Cahoot’s Macbeth*. Through the following years Stoppard persisted, through newspaper articles, letters and other protest campaigns, in reminding the Western public of the treatment of Soviet and Czech dissidents. As a result he was three times refused permission to visit Czechoslovakia again.

When Communist rule there collapsed late in 1989, Havel was elected President of the new republic. The dissidents and literary intellectuals became the holders of power, with the bizarre result that when Stoppard visited in 1991, for a pro-

duction of *Travesties*, he found that several of the dignitaries he met had translated his own work.

In 1993 Martha Stoppard received a letter from a niece, Sarka, proposing to visit her in Devon. From 'Another Country':

My mother (I can see it all) had slightly panicked because Ken would not have been receptive to this sort of thing and could not be relied on to behave gracefully. So we met in London, in the restaurant of the National Theatre where I was working that day – my mother, my sister (half-sister, but I never call her that), my sister's little girl and Sarka and I, who was Sarka's father's cousin. After a while, at one end of a long table cluttered with the remains of the meal, I got into a tête-à-tête with Sarka. She wrote down the family tree of my mother's generation, on a sheet of foolscap which she turned sideways to get them all in.

Sarka revealed that Stoppard was 'completely Jewish', and that not only all four of his grandparents but three of his aunts had died in Nazi concentration camps.

Years earlier he had organised in London an event about the imprisonment in psychiatric hospitals of Russian Jews who applied for exit visas to Israel.

As a result I received letters thanking me as a Jew, and I remember once or twice – feeling obscurely that I was receiving credit under false pretences – I replied that I was not Jewish or at any rate not really Jewish. I had become habituated to the unexamined idea that although – obviously – there was some Jewish blood in me (my father's father's?), enough to make me more interesting to myself, and to have risked attention from the Nazis, it was not really enough to connect me with the Jews who died in the camps and those who didn't.

This almost wilful purblindness, a rarely disturbed absence of curiosity combined with an endless willingness

not to disturb my mother by questioning her, even after – no, especially after – our meeting with Sarka, comes back to me now in the form of self-reproach, not helped by my current state of mind now that I'm Jewish. I feel no more Jewish than I felt Czech when, 22 years ago, I went to Prague to do my bit for Charter 77 . . . and now I have the odd sense of its being too late. I don't want to be claimed as if I've turned into someone else. This is why I think I understand my mother going 'Tsk!' . . .

In 1994 he revisited Czechoslovakia, and again in 1998, with his brother Peter, travelling to Zlin, their birthplace. In 1999 he went once more.

In April this year the 96-year-old widow of Dr Albert, chief of the Bata hospital, receives me in her flat in Prague, with her two daughters, Senta and Zaria . . . All three remember Dr Straussler. The two 'girls' tell me he was considered the nicest of the young doctors, the one they asked to have when they had measles and other childhood illnesses. 'When Dr Straussler talked to us we knew everything would be all right.' . . .

When Zaria was young she put her hand through a glass pane and cut it. Dr Straussler stitched the cut. Zaria holds out her hand, which still shows the mark. I touch it. In that moment, I am surprised by grief, a small catching-up of all the grief I owe. I have nothing which came from my father, nothing he owned or touched, but here is his trace, a small scar . . .

'Another Country' ends with a sad recollection of his stepfather:

A few days after my mother died, Ken, whom from England onwards I had called 'Daddy' or 'Father' or 'Dad' (though he objected to 'Dad' which he thought was lower class) wrote to me to say that he had been concerned for some time about my 'tribalization', by which he meant

mainly my association, ten years earlier, with the cause of Russian Jews, and he asked me to stop using 'Stoppard' as my name. I wrote back that this was not practical . . .

Until I went to the bad, and the first sign of that was when I turned out to be arty, I was coming on well as an honorary Englishman. He taught me to fish, to love the countryside, to speak properly, to respect the Monarchy. In the end I disappointed him. And yet, did he but know it, it's all too late, this going back, these photographs, that small scar on Zaria's hand. They have the power to move, but not to reclaim. I was eight-and-a-half . . . when Ken gave me his name; and long before he asked for it back Englishness had won and Czechoslovakia had lost.

The pain and regret in that 'all too late' are clear. But Stoppard's mixed identity is in no way neurotic. Neither, of course, is it self-invented – it's quite unlike the masks and personae of some other artists. If anything, he has too amiably colluded with other people's expectations: at eight, embracing Englishness and learning to keep quiet about his origins; in his thirties, allowing himself to be Czech; in his fifties, 'turning out to be Jewish'. Similar acquiescence appears at times in interviews: you want the wit, I'll give you wit; you want moral seriousness, I can do that too. What he doesn't do, in public, is insecurity. He may voice craftsman's anxieties, about finding the next idea, guiding the coming production, postponing the next deadline; but any deeper, more personal doubts are excluded from discussion. The subtext in interviews is always: however you care to label me – Czech, Jewish, tomfool, conservative – it won't alter who I am, what I believe, or what I create. Of elements thought to be under-represented in his work – such as character delineation, or political or social 'commitment' – he will say, 'They don't interest me.' In moral argument he tends to reach a sticking-point, not susceptible to change: 'Well, that's what I think.' This firmness may have originated in the small boy's defensive carapace; but it grew

fast into a convincing self-confidence, already apparent to those who knew him when he was young, hard up, but always somehow on the way to eventual success.

'I think of myself as a reactionary'

In these words the self-confidence is pre-emptive. They are Stoppard's when he was only thirty – and looking scarcely eighteen, in the accompanying *Sunday Times* photographs. The piece, 'Something to Declare' – alas without the pictures – is reproduced later, on p. 109ff. What the young playwright 'declares' is non-commitment. 'I burn with no causes. I cannot say that I write with any social objective.' In context, that was courageous; it isn't a genuinely reactionary position but he knew that in 1968, a time when artists were particularly required to be 'committed', it might be so caricatured.

Yet the point of the title metaphor is that the writer who walks through the green exit thinking he has nothing to declare, no baggage of commitment, may be carrying contraband in his subconscious. A decade or so later this became a routine idea of deconstructionist theory; it's typical of Stoppard's independent acuteness that he's already there, and his image of going through Customs is far easier to grasp than most critical theory: 'One is the beneficiary and victim of one's subconscious: that is, of one's personal history, experience and environment . . . A concrete example. My mother married again and my name was changed to my stepfather's when I was about eight years old.'

He promptly starts to walk through the green exit: 'This I didn't care one way or another about.'

Nothing to declare: we may recall 'I felt almost nothing' (his father presumed dead) and 'no special feeling' (the invasion of Czechoslovakia). But this time he calls himself to open his baggage: 'Then it occurred to me that in practically everything I had written there was something about people getting each others' names wrong.'

The article is partly about the new possibilities of theatre, paying homage to Beckett. Yet within its baggage lie distinctly unprogressive elements: 'language as an end in itself', 'I'd like to cold-bloodedly kill them' (admittedly referring to racist murderers), 'that lovely group' of refugee Russian aristocrats, and a tart resistance to the fashion for 'theatrical experiences' which are not 'written plays'. Readers at the time would recognise *US*, the 'theatrical experience' praised for just one of its effects, as a polemic against American action in Vietnam.

'I'm a conservative in politics, literature, education and theatre,' he told Mel Gussow in 1979.¹¹ After early years as bruising as Stoppard's, many have understandably embraced and clung not only to England's stable democracy but also to the stock images which define it for a foreigner: cricket and country houses and, yes, even royalty. Long before he could dream of acquiring a country house of his own he refused to join a strike, causing himself at the age of twenty-two to be suspended for three months by the National Union of Journalists.¹² Much later he was one of very few artists to praise Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, claiming that she spoke her mind and avoided politicians' fudge. In both cases he was prepared to isolate himself from the prevailing opinions in his workplace.

Stoppard's political views are reactionary in the best sense of the word – not pressing a right-wing message of his own, but vigorously resistant to false new orthodoxies; as he added to Gussow, 'My main objection is to ideology and dogma.' He has involved himself not with party politics but with the wider concerns of Amnesty International, which he has consistently supported.

In his 2002 trilogy *The Coast of Utopia*, which deals sympathetically with early Russian radicals, the writer Turgenyev resembles Stoppard as he knows he is often seen.

¹¹ Delaney, p. 133.

¹² According to Nadel, p. 25. Stoppard to me: 'It rings a faint bell. But I'm certain I would have been one of a group of journalists, not a lone stand-out.'

HERZEN: What you mean by civilisation is your way of life . . . as if life as evolved in the European upper classes is the only life in tune with human development.

TURGENEV: Well, it is if you're one of them. It's not my fault. If I were a Sandwich Islander I expect I'd speak up for navigating by the stars and eighteen things you can do with a coconut, but I'm not a Sandwich Islander. To value what is relative to your circumstances, and let others value what's relative to theirs – you agree with me. That's why despite everything we're on the same side.

HERZEN: But I fought my way here with loss of blood, because it matters to me and you're in my ditch, reposing with your hat over your face, because nothing matters to you very much – which is why despite everything we'll never be on the same side.

Where Stoppard's views and tone always harden is on the influence of Karl Marx. 'Marx got it wrong,' was his 1974 line, and in *The Coast of Utopia* Marx, though rarely seen, is an alarming caricature. In 1977 Stoppard wrote a book review¹³ applauding 'the defence of objective truth from Marxist relativism'. The book, *Enemies of Promise*, was by Paul Johnson, a maverick intellectual who has ploughed his own provocative course for many years after veering sharply away from the left (when young, he edited the *New Statesman*, a socialist weekly). Stoppard and Johnson lived near each other and had been friends for some time (a year later, Johnson was the dedicatee of *Night and Day*). The review mentions differences between them, but Stoppard associates himself explicitly with the book's overall position.

The society which Paul Johnson wishes to defend from its enemies is the Western liberal democracy favouring an intellectual elite and a progressive middle class and based on a moral order derived from Christian absolutes . . .

¹³ 'But for the Middle Classes', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 June 1977.

[His] fundamental assertions are these. Truth is objective. Civilisation is the pursuit of truth in freedom. Freedom is the necessary condition of that pursuit. Political freedom and economic freedom are dependent on each other. Material and cultural progress (growth) is dependent on both together. The loss of freedom leads to civilisation's decline . . . One does not have to be an expert on anything to know that in one of his themes – the defence of objective truth from the attacks of Marxist relativism – Johnson has got hold of the right end of the right stick at the right time.

Stoppard gives examples of the 'unreason' he and Johnson detect in 1970s academia:

'The assumption that there exists a realm of facts independent of theories which establish their meaning is fundamentally unscientific' . . . 'all facts are theory-laden'. These are now the quite familiar teachings of well-educated men and women holding responsible positions in respectable universities, and the thing to say about such teaching is not that it is 'radical', but that it is not true. What it is, is false. To claim the contrary is not 'interesting', it is silly. Daft. Not very bright. Moreover, it is wicked.

Such anger may have been timely in 1977, but the slippage of tone is uncharacteristic: Stoppard here seems to abandon debate, preferring to storm out and slam the door. His attack on intellectual relativism is far more effective in *Jumpers*:

GEORGE: It occurred to you that belief in God and the conviction that God doesn't exist amount to much the same thing?

ARCHIE: It gains from careful phrasing.

or in *Professional Foul*: 'You can persuade a man to believe almost anything provided he is clever enough . . .'

On art, Stoppard finds Johnson excessively blinkered. A few years earlier, however, he had described his own views on art as

'square, conservative and traditional'. The topic is his play *Artist Descending a Staircase*; and because he is known for his own clever cut-ups the interviewer wrongly associates him with the cut-up artist Beauchamp. The playwright has to put him right: his sympathies lie with the conservative artist Donner. 'I absolutely think that Beauchamp's tapes *are* rubbish, and I think that what Donner says about them is *absolutely* true. I think that when Donner says that much of modern art is the mechanical expression of a very simple idea which might have occurred to an intelligent man in his bath and be forgotten in the business of drying between his toes, that is me.'¹⁴

Nearly thirty years later, in 2001, Stoppard caused a stir at the Royal Academy with after-dinner remarks about conceptual art, which he sees as hardly even 'mechanical' – all concept, no craft. 'An object can be a work of art just because the artist says it is.' In his subsequent article about the affair he asks: 'When did it stop being true that an artist is somebody who can do something more or less well which the rest of us can only do badly or not at all? . . . Conceptual art is exactly what it says it is. It is thought exhibited, thought bodied forth. ("Eureka! The plinth repeated upside down and transparent!") But so is a Turner, he of the prize. So is art itself. The thought varies in profundity. The rest, the making, is, or was, the hard part.'¹⁵

¹⁴ Delaney, p. 37.

¹⁵ 'Making It', *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 June 2001.