Chapter III: Aiming Beyond the Absurd

Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is regarded as criticism, not literature, in Normand Berlin’s adverse comment, as “a derivative play” that “feeds on Hamlet, on Six Characters in Search of an Author, and on Waiting for Godot.”1 Hinden counters this aptly observing, “Stoppard does not ‘feed on’ Shakespeare, Beckett, and Pirandello; he dines with them.”2

Absurdism, one of the most exciting and creative movements in the modern theater, is a term applied to a particular type of realistic drama which has absorbed theater audiences and critics for the past three decades.3

The absurd in literature is that which defies what is conventionally comforting, religiously re-assuring, and metaphysically logical. The artist of the absurd evinces a tendency to violate conventions, to put into doubt postulates of self-identity and stable meanings in life, society, and the world. The aesthetic movement of absurdism started as a radical response to effects of the Second World War; its issues are found to receive impetus from Dadaism and Surrealism. Adopting Ionesco’s idea of absurdity based on man's divorce from the meaningful background he once possessed and man’s existence in an incomprehensible world, Martin Esslin (1961) cites, “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose....Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; his action becomes senseless, absurd, useless.”4 Esslin defined the absurd as seriously doubting well-designed
statements about the human condition, but as presenting the situation “divorced from
discursive speech to the point where language became mere musical sound”,
dramatizing despair, fear, loneliness, and meaninglessness; in other words,
recreating the condition in all its un-presentable aspects. Thus, the absurdist theater
that derives energies once from the ‘existentialism’ of Jean Paul Sartre (‘existence’
being privileged over ‘essence’) from Camus’s narratives, and other arts became a
staple of stage performance in the fifties and sixties. The reason for this is the
staging of absurd human conditions rather than narrating mental conflicts in
narrative modes became dramatically more effective in capturing uncannily the
interest of audience.

Tom Stoppard too appears as a dramatist concerned with the absurd.
Beyond the preoccupations of famous absurdist, his major interests relate to
irrational human conditions but with some knowledge of the past and individual
actions borne without one’s control; his plays demonstrate intertextuality of
relationships and meanings held together with playful comic vivacity, and make the
audience aware of the complicity of political and social forces in meaning making
processes in life. Many such things indicate that Stoppard moves beyond the limits
of the absurdist theater.

With the theatre of the absurd, names like Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and
Pirandello come foremost to our mind as the forerunners dramatically portraying the
nihilistic and the ridiculous in life. The concept of nihilism, which follows ancient
Greek skeptics and Nietzsche in the twentieth century, rejects the idea of any
philosophical certainty and enforces existential meaninglessness of social systems.
Albert Camus came round to the absurd as defined in his Myth of Sisyphus:
A world that can be explained by reasoning, however, faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. The divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity!  

The Theater of the Absurd has historically followed domestic plays and comedies of various categories (comedy of menace, dark comedy, etc) which had a comparatively brief period of success. Irving Wardle outlines some of the characteristic features of ‘the Theater of the Absurd’ thus: “the substitution of an inner landscape for the outer world; the lack of any clear division between fantasy and fact; a free attitude toward time, which can expand or contract according to subjective requirements; a fluid environment which projects mental conditions in the form of visual metaphors.” Some identical perceptions and absurd in outlook, besides toss of the coin coming to the head every time, inform Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (*Rosencrantz*, briefly hence). Certain other premises in the play in contradistinction with Shakespeare’s Hamlet cannot be overlooked:

**Guil:** Operating on two levels, are we?! How clever! I expect it comes naturally to you, being in business so to speak…. The truth is, we value your company, for want of any other. We have been left so
much to our own devices—after a while one welcomes the uncertainty of being left to other people’s.

Player: Uncertainty is the normal state. You’re nobody special.

Gul: But for God’s sake what are supposed to do?!

Player: Relax. Respond. That’s what people do. You can’t go through life questioning your situation at every turn.

Gul: But we don’t know what’s going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don’t know how to act.

Player: Act natural. You know why you’re here at least.

Gul: We only know what we’re told, and that’s little enough. And for all we know it isn’t even true.

Player: For anyone knows, nothing is. Everything has to be taken on trust; trust is only that which is taken to be true. It’s the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn’t make any difference so long as it is honored. One acts on assumptions. What do you assume?⁹

The Player thrusts as true the conviction that his players create their own reality and that the play offers them the unreality of the world of drama. However, here Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, raised above Shakespeare’s pawns meant for sacrifice, wander bewilderingly for some clues to explain why they are put in a world or a situation as it is. This reflects that the theater of Rosencrantz and

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*Guildenstern are Dead* denies the comforting humanist perspectives of the Elizabethan stage and the Enlightenment rationalism of truth as against uncertainty. It puts into doubt, the way Beckett and Pinter did, “the sanctity of the individual which naturalism so resolutely upholds”.

Stoppard himself has consistently emphasized the pleasure he takes in language. ‘I’m hooked on style,’ he informed Giles Gordon in 1968, and elaborated on his preoccupation with ‘things I find difficult to express’ in an article in the *Sunday Times*:

One element of this preoccupation is simply an enormous love of language itself. For a lot of writers the language they use is merely a fairly efficient tool. For me the particular use of a particular work in the right place, or a group of words in the right order, to create a particular effect is important; it gives me more pleasure than to make a point which I might consider to be profound.

The construct of language and communication seems to be what Stoppard has acknowledged through the works of his past predecessors. He further states that the specific works of T.S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett ‘are the twin syringes of my diet, my arterial system,’ and that he has been influenced more by ‘the way in which Beckett expresses himself’ than by ‘the image of two lost souls waiting for something to happen’ Stoppard stresses on the idiosyncratic communication between the two tramps, rather than the act of waiting postulated by Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*.

These remarks encourage us to locate his work making the
Further, for the glib complacencies of language to demonstrate, Stoppard has taken up Ludwig Wittgeinstein’s concept of language (Philosophical Investigations and Tactatus) as background work for his Dogg’s Hamlet, and Cahoot’s Macbeth. By decisively separating the structure of language from the perceivable world, Wittgeinstein postulated that any investigation into human language would not give access to reality; on the contrary, language is “a projection of the mind rather than a picture of the world, in a sense creates reality.”\textsuperscript{13} Moon the black Irish Catholic in the novel Malquist and Mr Moon, comes round to acknowledge the unsolvable aspects of the same one world:

If I had time to prepare my words I would have given the other side too. I can see both sides ... because they claim to have appropriated the whole truth and pose as absolutes. And I distrust the opposite attitude for the same reason.\textsuperscript{14}

Moon is having racist prejudices. And in order to enforce irony Stoppard once admits, “I’m a Moon myself.” He endows his portrait with the same irony that colors his other characters.\textsuperscript{15} This would remind us of how Derrida critiques Austin’s performative language in Margins of Philosophy observing, “One will no longer be able to exclude … the ‘non-serious,’ the oratio obliqua from ‘ordinary’ language”. Further, the effects of ordinary language “do not exclude what is ordinarily opposed to them term by term (i.e. relative specificity of the effects of consciousness), on the contrary presuppose it… as the general space of their possibility.”\textsuperscript{16} To him as to the
postmodernists, “the pure singularity of (any) event” is a misnomer, split within, and hence, language is haunted by its ironic, parasitic, perverse, menacing intent intrinsic to itself. This squarely critiques the ‘felicitous’ performative of Austin, which, to Austin, must be uttered by a fully conscious ego in complete possession of its wits and its intentions. That language even creates confusion and deadly ethical blunders may be gauged from:

Player: The old man thinks he’s in love with his daughter.

Ros (appalled): Good God! We’re out of our depth here.¹⁷

The Player next explains it is Hamlet, not Polonius the old man, who is thought to have fallen in love with Ophelia. A deliberation on ‘death’ and ‘not-being’ would give the reader insights into Stoppard’s skepticism on metaphysical postulates and also on language’s felicitous meanings.

Guil: Yes . . . yes … (Rallying.) But you don’t believe anything till it happens. And it has all happened. Hasn’t it?

Ros: We drift down time, clutching at straws. But what good’s a brick to a drowning man?

Guil: Don’t give up, we can’t be long now.

Ros: We might as well be dead. Do you think death could possibly be a boat?
Guil: No, no, no . . . Death is . . .not. Death isn’t. You take my meaning. Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being. You can’t not-be on a boat.

Ros I’ve frequently not been on boats.

Guil: No, no, no – what you’ve been is not on boats.

Ros: I wish I was dead. (Considers the drop) I could jump over the side. That would put a spoke in their wheel.  

Put in the same situation the two characters read the reality differently and Rosencrantz is not obliged to “take my meaning.” Derrida and postmodernists are of the view that the performative as a coded statement (possibility of communication) is haunted by a possibility of its own menace, its intrinsic irony. This is all the more apparent in Stoppard’s plays as in Travesties and Jumpers. The subjugated side, or the non-serious of language, of discourses, systems, metaphysics and history speaks of the fact that the performative ‘cannot guarantee fulfilling its intention,’ despite our best intentions, to ‘remain felicitous, sincere, true to itself.’

For example, Dogg language as in Dogg’s Hamlet is an attempt at communication with no grammatically spoken registers; it undoubtedly indicates invention and play, while a thing is actually being built.

Dogg : Brick.

(Abel enter, holding his ear and … )

Sun, dock, trog, slack, pan, sock, slight, bright, none, tun, what, dunce . . .
Easy: What?

Dogg: Dunce.

Easy: what?

Dogg: Dunce!

Easy: What??

Dogg: Sun, dock, trog, slack, pan, sock, slight, bright, none, tun, what,

\textit{dunce} !

Easy: Oh!\textsuperscript{20}

Stoppard notes in the “Preface” to this play:

Moreover, it would be also be possible that the two builders do not share a language either; and if life for them consisted only of building platforms in this manner, there would be no reason for them to discover that each was using a language unknown to the other. This happy state of affairs would continue only as long as, though sheer co-incidence, each man’s utterance made sense (even if not the same sense) to the other.\textsuperscript{21}

Stoppard would not, of course, move toward a possible conclusion that given this “happy” co-incidence, all utterances are unnecessary. Moreover, his invention of a new language as here or in \textit{Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead} is closely reminiscent of Beckett’s purpose to free the play and so free life from the tyranny of meaning, the conventional meaning that is associated with symbolic
forms by adopting a “sparse and bare vocabulary” which can be interpreted for “many meanings,” with “none the inevitable” whatsoever. Raymond Federman has noted in Beckett’s fictions a narrative method working up disintegration of language as “to delyricise, to destylize the language of fiction, to designify the words.” Beckett “adequately” sought, as critics demonstrate, the “solace of form” recognizing poetics of ‘insuperable indigence’ (Beckett’s own phrase) or syntactic subversions dismantling “grammatical conventions and hence grammatical logic.”

What is true of Beckett’s novels in terms of language and meaning are equally true of his plays. Stoppard however intends that the absurdity of life is to be partly enquired in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, though least comprehended, by the characters themselves doomed to a situation; and this enquiry is made possible and accessible in a language much loosened from the Beckettian inexorable impermeability, but more shifted to the postmodern palimpsest and polysemic difference and trace. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are “much more sophisticated and rational” than Estragon and Vladimir. In Stoppard, the inexorable oddity of life, the aporia of meaning has not been collapsed into the conditions of entropy. Rather, unlike in modernist structures and traditions, Stoppard’s plays enact a postmodern situation where an acknowledgement of the undecidable, however incoherently comprehended, is met with realistic, identifiable men but with witty measures of parody, inscribed with an enlivening sense of playfulness. In this, Stoppard aims self-discursively to move beyond the limits of the absurd. Cahn has justly suggested: “Stoppard confronted absurdity head-on and at the same time takes the initial steps towards moving beyond absurdity.”
Further, despite language being humane and amusing, Stoppard warns us, its importance cannot be over-estimated. He knows that language is easily manipulated and distorted by commercial or totalitarian forces, and under its treacherous nature “what chances of survival exist for truth and value!” One of the ways to redeem this unresolved condition (metaphysical aporia) is comic delight in deficiency of the language.

Shakespeare, Wilde, Joyce, Beckett, and all those philosophers that walk shoulder to shoulder in Stoppard’s plays “emphasize that there is nothing exclusively literary or academic about Stoppard’s allusiveness. His comic rebounds are not only from cathedral walls but from advertisements, pop fiction, pop songs. Perhaps the commonest all rebounds is from a stale pattern of language.” Thus, Stoppard’s plays are a counter-discourse radically intermingling multiple levels of reality. In Jumpers, Stoppard reveals limits of the Logical Positivists and their absolutist rationalism. The character George comments: “If rationality were the criterion for things being allowed to exist, the world would be one gigantic field of soya beans!” With this humorous undercut, he would radically dispute any “privileged information” proclaiming ‘Good and evil are metaphysical absolutes!’ Similarly, in Travesties, Lenin’s post-revolution attitude to “the lower orders” becomes a self-defeat of communism, whereas Tzara the Surrealist artist disrobes the capitalist and colonialist West naked: “Wars are fought for oil wells and coaling stations; for control of the Dardanelles or the Suez Canal; for colonial pickings to buy cheap in and conquered markets to sell dear in. War is capitalism…” All this polemic reveals one basic strain in the plays that the playwright is a determined humanist rather than a committed ideologue or an atheist.
One crucial element to radicalize language and logic is parody, which ridicules models and concepts with its ironic intent and produces *difference* of the postmodern. On the modernist stage, Beckett has dramaturgically parodied conventions, beliefs, and metaphysics with least alternative possibility suggested for reassurances of human existence or values. Some of Stoppard’s plays (*Jumpers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Dogg’s Hamlet*, etc.) move unrelaxed on the borderline between fact and fantasy, inexplicable causes and meaningless human acts, between endless waiting and endless irony. In the postmodern age, it is found that too much of aesthetic structuring of reality and rigorous constructedness of certain dimensions of life has been critically interrogated, and postmodern dramatists have struggled out of this doomed condition to look for fresh openings in our existence, for replenishments of life. In economics and knowledge late capitalist instabilities and postcolonial interrogations have prepared the contemporary stage for postmodern parody. John Barth, a significant postmodern novelist and conscious of the ‘exhaustion’ of narrative conventions, has found parody and travesty as two of the manifestations which anticipate the new postmodernist approach, suggesting possibilities of art in the post-war literary movement. He wrote:

Artistic conventions are likely to be re-tried, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate anew and lively works.

Stoppard has demonstrated in his plays the ‘postmodern’ celebration of pluralities and ‘incredulity’ toward the grand narratives as famously defined by Lyotard. In other words, the dramatist has employed the parodic modes in order not merely to trivialize the great traditions and high metaphysics, but also to break down and break
free of the constructedness and protected conditional ties of human existence. And here lies Stoppard’s serious moral import that is delivered in non-serious parodic performances. His play works on certain conditions and prompts certain assumptions in life situations; but in crucial moments, the performance subverts them as absurd and life-inhibiting processes. For instance, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* Stoppard portrays a hilarious work of absurdist existentialism, for the two Elizabethans may as well be any two of us. We go through life not knowing what our role is, our purpose in existing, and the harder we look the more we are forced to give up and let things happen around us; as such the characters have no free will and will never be able to escape their already prewritten destiny. Simrad comments, each of the hired clowns “fears the unknown, the incomprehensibility of life that is represented by death and attempts to assess his position.” Stoppard’s metaphor “wheels set in motion” does not merely signify the predestined finalism which the two condemned do not understand (“wheels within wheels”); more than this, it does also project the historical and cultural difference of the old world that fixed “the meaning of order,” fixed the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the Elizabethan world stage. The playwright critiques this fixed order, encourages re-reading of the modeled reality, and espouses life’s freedom, which he as an artist wants to see as much freed from life-constraining absolutes as energized by responsibilities to living.

   Beckett’s plays are not devoid of comedy or parody. Huizinga’s idea of medieval *ludic* forms and Beckett’s plays as *ludic* or theater of ‘*ludus* or game’ present the grotesque spirit of carnival in *Waiting for Godot*. But Stoppard’s bristling parody is more delightful and privileged over his modernist forbear’s dark
comedy. The postmodernist Stoppard appears to espouse the sense of play in order to make reality livable and less excruciating despite human predicaments. His plays remind of Derrida who proclaims:

[...] reading literature thoroughly is attending to it as language through a complex play of signifying traces; it also enables us to interrogate the covert philosophical and political presuppositions of institutionalized critical methods which generally govern our reading of a text. There is in deconstruction something which challenges every teaching institution.”

The absurdity may also be marked in *Jumpers, The Real Inspector Hound* and life’s normative foundations recovered by Stoppard’s sustained satire on the absurdities of academic philosophy and relativism.

Furthermore, the plays of Stoppard attest to a carnival of clashing ideas and intertextualities. For example in *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor*, Stoppard plays contradictory ideas in the dialogue between Alexander and Ivanov:

Alexander: I do not play an instrument. If I played an instrument I’d tell you what it was. But I do not play one. I have never played one. I am not a musician.

Ivanov: What the hell are you doing here?

Alexander: I was put here.

Ivanov: What for?
Alexander: For slander.

Ivanov: Slander? What a fool! Never speak ill of a musician!—those bastards won’t rest. They’re animals to a man.

Alexander: This was political.

Ivanov: Let me give you some advice. Number one—never mix music with politics. Number two—never confide in your psychiatrist. Number three—practice!38

The two cellmates, Alexander a political prisoner and Ivanov a genuine mental patient in a mental hospital have been portrayed by Stoppard as two individuals with split interests. They are prisoners held for their differing ideas and each of them finds it difficult to bear the other. This clashing of interests can also be found in Travesties, Jumpers and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead dramatizing to radical perspectives. In their dialogically polyphonic perspectives the plays stand out as superior illustrations of life-energizing and travestying motions.39 Intertextuality may seem superficially parasitic of classic texts and concepts, but in Stoppard’s intelligent craftsmanship the intertextual mode always inspires the morale of life as against fixed ideals that oppress and sap life.

In the theater of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, what starts out as an amusing evening at the expense of two friends ends with a sense of personal loss. To Jenkins, “that final empathy is essential if, after all the game playing has ended, we are to experience their deaths for ourselves.”40 Stoppard works subtly upon his audience’s emotions by making the play’s ideas transcend the commonplace in the
humor of Rosencrantz bristled with a genuine compassion for man. Thomas R. Whitaker’s description of drama as “an art of man-with-man” may be more revealing in this context. He observes, “A play always exists among us. It contains not ‘character’ but roles-played-by-actors-for-us. The *dramatis personae* are not people but the partial masks of the actors’ lives and *ours* while participating in the performance.” He grounds a play’s “meaning” not in the author’s “impotent mastery but in spontaneous reciprocity, inherent mutuality” between actors and audience. Thus, in this light, Stoppard’s clowns walk in and out of us, every now and then. Their deaths are unhelpful and unheroic, but they are not absurd, for the play offers us learning experience, if no explanation to them.

One would justly agree with Brassell observing Stoppard’s development:

> There is a distinct move toward realism in the majority of the plays after *Travesties*, inevitably accompanied by a reduction in structural originality, though even within these more conventional forms. Stoppard’s unfailing inventiveness frequently rebels against the prevailing disciplines.

In later plays *Night and Day, Professional Foul, Every Good Boy Deserves Favor*, and *The Real Thing*, etc, there is sufficient indication that Stoppard’s instinctive development evolves away from “more naturalistic presentations and more didactic treatment of specific themes.” *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor* presents Stoppard’s attacks on the suppression of individual liberties in Communist countries, whereas *Professional Foul* in fact powerfully demonstrates his central concern as a socialist ideologue would, that man can change his world. Thus his
position denies any neat classification under either/or category. *The Real Thing* is about the supreme value of love and what it means in practice, particularly within marriage. Brassell characterizes Stoppard as a dramatist who presents “utterly serious discussion of human values” within “the most felicitously imaginative and comic structures.”

Stoppard’s radical positions conforming to none of our conventionally structured realities or meanings appear to move towards a realist theater, a realism which does not deny the essentially comic-farcical and which has to negotiate inevitably the shifting subjectivities and the undecidable difference of our contemporary times. The absurdist theater aimed at and structured a mode of expression to recreate that which is absurd subverting cerebrations of stable meanings and symbolic forms of meaningfulness. The postmodernist theater, such as Stoppard’s, nevertheless, apart from its complicated relationship with modernism, goes many steps ahead to be a theatrical spectacle by celebrating the playfulness and jouissance of life rather than intellectually cloistered meanings.
Works Cited:


Ibid 76-8.


Ibid 8.


24 Ibid 102.


28 Ibid 151.


31 Ibid 39.


41 Ibid 43.


46 Ibid 268.