University of Chicago, Graham School
The Open Program - Literature

The Plays of Tom Stoppard
HUAS80102-21W1
Winter 2021

Thursday at 1:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. from January 7 to February 25
Online

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An intellectual acrobat and an amazing spinner of words, Tom Stoppard is a playwright who focuses on everything from metaphysics and moral philosophy to the abuse of freedom and the nature of love. He is also terribly funny, wildly inventive and wonderfully dramatic. In this class we will explore eight of his masterworks including *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *The Real Inspector Hound*, *Travesties*, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor*, *Night and Day*, *The Real Thing*, *Hapgood* and *Arcadia*.

Required books:


Week-by-week assignments:

**January 7** – Read and discuss *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Two minor figures from Shakespeare’s tragedy, uncertain of their own identities and caught flipping coins, come up against the seemingly inexplicable events that make up *Hamlet*. Owing a debt to Beckett and Pirandello, as well as Shakespeare, this comic play with serious underpinnings marked Stoppard as a highly original dramatist. The Broadway debut was met by the press and public alike as an extraordinary theatrical moment, and Stoppard suddenly found himself cast into the ranks of such esteemed English playwrights as John Osborne and Harold Pinter.
January 14 – Read and discuss *The Real Inspector Hound*. Moon is a second-string theatre critic with a fierce desire to become first-string. Birdbot is already well regarded for his theatrical reviews. This send-up of the work of Agatha Christie follows these two critics as they attend the opening of a new thriller in London. Simultaneously, we trace the story of the reviewers and the story of the murder mystery they are assigned to review. By the end of this brilliant farce, the two narratives become so entangled that they are almost impossible to separate.  

January 21 – Read and discuss *Travesties*. Zurich, 1917. As Europe is torn asunder by war, three of the twentieth century’s great revolutionaries - James Joyce, Tristan Tzara and Vladimir Lenin encounter a British official named Henry Carr whose turn in the theatre goes awry, leading to a lawsuit concerning a pair of trousers. *The Guardian* called this play “a dazzling pyrotechnical feat that combines Wildean pastiche, political history, artistic debate, spoof reminiscence, and song-and-dance in marvelously judicious proportions.”

January 28 – Read and discuss *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor*. Dealing with a Russian madhouse that contains dissenter of the Soviet Union, this play, written to be performed with a full orchestra, is a witty assault on institutional evil. It contrasts the circumstances of a political prisoner and a mental patient to question what difference there is between free will and the freedom to conform. The original score was composed by Andre Previn and his musicians were an integral part of the production.

February 4 – Read and discuss *Night and Day*. This stimulating and funny play is set in a fictional African country, which is ruled by a cruel despot. The nation is faced with a Soviet-backed revolution that rapidly brings newsman from around the world to cover the story. Using the characters of Ruth Carson; her husband, Geoffrey, who owns a mine; a veteran reporter named Dick Wagner; and an idealistic young journalist named Jacob Milne, Stoppard pits the ideal of a free press against that of working-class solidarity as a revolution takes place in the background.

February 11 – Read and discuss *The Real Thing*. “I don’t think writers are sacred, but words are. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones in the right order, you might nudge the world a little or make a poem that children will speak for you when you are dead.” So says Henry, the playwright’s alter ego, who stands at the center of his most autobiographical work. *The New York Times* called it “not only Mr. Stoppard’s most moving play, but also the most bracing play that anyone has written about love and marriage in years.” It asks us to determine what “the real thing” is regarding matrimony, relationships, politics and art.

February 18 – Read and discuss *Hapgood*. Does light come in waves? Or does it come in particles? Experiments will show either result and so the experimenter can choose the outcome. “A double agent is like a trick of the light,” Kerner the physicist tells Blair the spy catcher, “You get what you interrogate for.” The dual natures of light and of people are the themes of Stoppard’s espionage thriller that borrows heavily from the world of John le Carré.

February 25 – Read and discuss *Arcadia*. Considered by many to be his finest play, *Arcadia* weaves together two periods of time and two worlds. In 1809, Lady Thomasina Coverly, age
thirteen, is being tutored by Septimus Hodge inside a large country home in Derbyshire. In 1989, Hannah Jarvis, a garden historian, works with Bernard Nightingale to uncover a scandal that may have taken place when Lord Byron visited this same house a hundred and eighty years ago. Stoppard presents a series of antitheses on classism and romanticism, art and nature, order and chaos, determinism and freewill.

All readings are subject to change.