

## The Theatre of the Absurd *Vis-à-Vis the Plays of Tom Stoppard*

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**Abstract:** *This paper is a critique of existential terror, estrangement, and meaningless social and ethical contradictions seen everywhere in the plays of Tom Stoppard. The playwright intellectually mingles history and philosophy. The sense of humour with refined wit is the essence of Stoppard. He superbly demonstrates the confusion between fact and fiction in human life. His helpless characters are always caught in the existential dilemma and misunderstanding of things. Stoppard's recurrent subject is immanent death and preordained fate of his personas. Due to this all, the absurdity, ambiguity, and chaos of human life are experienced by readers persistently. The present study tries to explore and evaluate the same.*

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**Introduction:** Change is the law of Nature. Time is always on wings, and so is socio-cultural milieu along with its institutions, practices, and values. This change is discerned first in the field of literature as being a representation of life. Literature has to associate itself with the shifting scenario and fleeting circumstances, otherwise it may become fake and lifeless. So far as literary drama is concerned, it is one of the oldest genres. Since Greek practitioners, it has always shown flexibility, and instructed and entertained the public with novel techniques and subjects. In the second half of the twentieth century, a new type of drama came into existence known as absurd drama. It is an amalgamation of money influences and literary approaches. These include surrealism, Dadaism, symbolism, Brechtian Epic Theatre, and above all, it has hand and glove relation with existentialism. It may be said that existential philosophy is a theory, and absurd drama is its practical.

**Origin and Meaning of the Theatre of the Absurd:** The first vivid and elaborate description of the absurd drama is found in Martin Esslin's Book *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Esslin basically derived the concept from Albert Camus's well-known essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The term absurd is applied to all the literary works which focus on common idea that human existence is necessary absurd and meaningless. It is Camus who for the first time perceived this absurdity and senselessness of life during the World War II, and expressed the same in his plays as well as in fiction. He emphasizes that this absurdity is a result of man's endeavour to discover meaning and order in life which denies to possess either. The predicament

and purposelessness of mankind arise due to incompatibility between the existence and the environment. The realization and consciousness of this universe devoid of control creates a scenario of metaphysical anguish which is the nucleus of all absurdist writers. The significant figures in this absurd cycle are Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, Edward Albee, Fernando Arrabal, and others. The French playwright Ionesco defines the Theatre of the Absurd in a short but striking manner: "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senselessness, absurd and uselessness (Abrams 11).

Such writers view life as absurd and meaningless because man is born unmasked and dies unsought. There is always a tug-of-war between body and reason, and time is always incomprehensible for mankind. Man strives to attain destination and completeness, but always ends in a notion that his undertakings and endeavours are not effective and efficient. There is never a correspondence between the intentions and result of his performances. Although it is hard to work with efficacy, and to understand the things with accuracy, yet it is also unthinkable to hinder ourselves from action as long as we survive. It is this lack of knowledge, ignorance, and paradoxical conditions of life which permeate the maximum fabric of absurdist writers irrespective of their styles and genres they choose for the expression.

**Historical Background and Roots:** So far as absurd drama in contemporary literature is concerned, it is by no means an outright original in its roots. It is an assimilation of numerous age old conventions already found in literature particularly in drama. The traditional pre-figurations which made the Theatre of the Absurd feasible are: miming and clowning found in Greek and Roman dramas; the *Commedia dell'arte* of Renaissance Italy; the pantomime of the English theatre; the elements of nightmare and dreams in literature; allegorical and symbolic drama; the conventional fools and lunatic scenes in drama of which Our Shakespeare presents myriad instances; and the ancient ritualistic drama which is a fusion of religion and dramatic art.

The new drama which reached its zenith in Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet is the fruition of all these aforementioned sown seeds. Its modern precursors are Swedish dramatist August Strindberg who created dreamy and nightmarish plays like *The Ghost Sonata* and *Dream Play*, Franz Kafka's novels *The Trails* and *Metamorphosis*. Moreover, Charles Chaplin's little man and Buster Keaton's stone-faced stoic are also direct influences on Beckett and Ionesco. Dadaism equally triggered the absurdity. Alfred Jarry's French drama *Ubu roi* performed in 1896 is termed as prototype of the modern absurd theatre. The names of surrealist like Antonio Astaud, and Roger Vitrac are also of paramount significance in this context. Vitrac's drama *Victor on Les Enfants all Pauvior* (1925), predicts Ionesco and Arrabal. Astaud is the namer of the "Theatre of the Cruelty" because such plays jolt the audience into a complete consciousness of horror of human existence. Thus, it is evident that the Post-war phenomenon--the Theatre of Absurd, when

Genet's *The Maid* (1947), Ionesco's *Bald Saprano* (1949), and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) were performed, is the offshoot of the deep historical roots.

**Characteristics and Themes:** In a nutshell, the Theatre of the Absurd can be characterised by the peculiarities like these: life is necessarily insignificant, and hence miserable; reality is unbearable; hope is missing and efforts are useless; alienation and estrangement; there are no traditional plots, action, and characters; nothing meaningful happens: the conclusion is ludicrous and comic; no problem is resolved; characters are allured by death; fantasies, illusions, and dreams are all pervasive; the message is conveyed through fragmented and fleeting images; irrationality of life; language is no more a means of communication, but a barrier between characters; nihilism and negativity are omnipresent.

**Author:** Tom Stoppard was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 1937 in Czechoslovakia. His family left for Singapore when German Nazi invaded their country, but his father was killed there when Japan attacked it (Singapore). Then the family moved to India. Stoppard later on reminded this situation in like manner: "It was women and children first, and [my father] remained behind while my mother, brother, and I were evacuated in India... My father died in Enemy hands and that's it" (Hunter 1). His mother wedded again Ken Stoppard and shifted to England all. Tom Stoppard adopted his name from his step father, otherwise he was born as Thomas Straussler. Stoppard never attended collage, and started his career as a journalist in *Daily Press*. He showed his tendency towards theatre in 1960 at the age of thirty three, and quitted journalism to be a dramatist. His debut play *A Walk on the Water*, was later on renamed as *Enter a Free Man. If You are Glad I'll be Frank, Albert's Bridge, The Real Inspector Hound, Jumpers, Travesties*, and *Arcadia* are other achievements of Stoppard, but it is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967) which won laurels for him.

**Stoppard's view of drama and his Domains:** He looks upon drama as a mode of discourse about life, or what Mathew Arnold says about poetry as 'criticism of life'. Instead of dramatising issues of class conflicts, racial and cultural clashes, and penury of the people, he displays a philosophical bend of mind. He has not tied himself to a singular sect or pure genre, but writes freely motivated by his own intuition. His work is a mixture of or what Salman Rushdie calls 'chutnification' of comedy, humour, parody, pastiche, irony, wit, paradox, deflation, politics, philosophy, history, and above all critique of art. He acknowledges this unity in diversity like thing of his plays in one of the interviews: "If the mixing of the ideas in farce is a source of confusion, well, God knows why I try to do it like – presumably because I am like that" (Brassell 269).

**Philosophy of Life and Style of Writing:** Stoppard as playwright has emerged an innovator in his treatment of subjects and style. He revives the historical events, dissolves them into bits, and ultimately reconstructs them with a fresh form and spirit. In this way, he reshapes the sensibility of his audience, and prepares them to evaluate the things from deviated angles.

The conventional plots and protagonists have been radically transformed. Hamlet, who has become a legend, an image of adulation, is not even spared by Stoppard. While evaluating *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, a reader shows an acrid temper for the egotist Hamlet and his creator Shakespeare. Stoppard deconstructs the established beliefs of his readers, and urges them to think that mostly the extraordinary becomes ordinary and vice-versa. Due to this shift, any dramatic persona whether big or small may assume a pivotal position. In *Travesties*, Tzara steals away words from certain poems, and reorders them into a new structure which ends in absurdity. He sifts many philosophical concepts with an impartial approach, and shows quite distinctly right and wrong. He approaches life in an idiosyncratic way, though it may bewilder others. Regarding his subjects and style, Stoppard comments:

My plays are actually constructed out of people deflating each other. I am very hedgy sort of writer. What I think of being my distinguishing mark is absolute lack of certainty about almost anything. So I tend to write about oppositions, rather than heroes, don't I? I don't feel certain enough about anything to put up a hero to say it for me. (Hunter 40)

Stoppard insists that there is no individual identity and autonomy in human life. Ros and Guil are two persons dwell single life with one identity and the same traits. He reiterates the same stock in the dramas like *Travesties* and *The Real Inspector Hound* to demonstrate that life abounds with uniform actions and consequences. Though the characters are witty and thoughtful, yet they vacillate between rational and emotional imbalances. Stoppard enacts this psychological complexity more effectively in his masterpiece *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. He has experienced tragic-comic life, and so his plays are blend of serious and slanderous. He teaches his lesson in a comic rather than didactic way. Through juxtaposition, the bygone and the contemporary are encountered. Anyway his style is original and personal as it is well-said by Enoch Brater: "What he has found in his theatre is not only a special way of saying something, but something, at least that needed very much to be said"(129).

**Absurd and Existential Elements:** Though Dietrich Schwanitz comments that Stoppard delineation of characters and concoction of episodes distinct him from the towering absurd writers like Beckett, Genet, and Pirandello, yet there is matching semblance among them all. Almost all Stoppard's plays revolve round the absurdity and existential dilemmas. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is the direct offspring of absurd masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*. *Jumpers* tends to elaborate the issue of good-bad in the human existence. Stoppard's spectacular mark is his assimilation and modification of the Theatre of the Absurd. The dramas like *Travesties* and *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* render the same perception.

The characters are contradictory to traditional ones, and no persona has a secure and established status. Their position is fleeting, and their identity may diminish any time and in no time. The lives of Ros and Guil present an existential chaos, and man's psychological trauma.

The play recurrently suggests death. The painful exertions of these characters to find out objective and self-reliant truth end in vain. It is felt that truth is dynamic and relative as player in the play speaks:

Truth has to be taken on trust; Truth 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 as long as it is honoured. (67)

The drama reflects that life is constrained and preordained. Rose and Guil play coin tossing game, and every time Ross chooses 'head'. He wins over his companion sixty times, constantly without exception. Thus, the law of probability flouts absolutely. The heads and tails on a coin represent the hierarchical strata which split people into diverse classes. The authoritative and power users like ministers, rulers, emperors, and material proprietors are on the top, and ever more prosperous. While as slaves, manual labourers, subordinates, oppressed ones are at the bottom in adversity and in abject condition. Hamlet as the head of the society is furnished with the exaggerated tragic seen at the conclusion of the play, and the execution of Ros and Guil, a pair of tails is not even least felt for by audience or readers. They are just puppets as Ros tells his friend regarding the letter handed to them by Claudius:

Or to look at it another way—we are little men, we don't know the inns and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels, etcetera—it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with design of fate or even of kings.(110)

The title of the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is aptly suggestive of these characters' ultimate doom. Though they are conscious, yet at times they are perplexed:

ROZ: They had it for us, didn't they? Right from the beginning. Who'd had thought that we are so important?

GUIL: But why? Was it all for us? Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths? (122)

Their end is chalked out by their literary creators. They are existential beings whose choices are pre-planned. There is no way round, but to tread the shown path. This is obvious in Guil's dialogue: "We've caught up. Your smallest action set off by it. Keep an eye open, ear cocked. Tread wearily, follow instructions. We'll be all right (39-40).

Stoppard creates diversions in-between the action of the play by taking the characters outside the text. He makes them chat from deviated perspective. The readers get a notion that the actors enjoy intervals. Such things happen frequently. This repetition or what Frederick Nietzsche, one of the masterminds of existentialism, calls 'eternal recurrence' is the pervasive element in the Theatre of the Absurd. Ros expresses this situation as: "...We are brought round

full circle to face again the single immutable fact—that we, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing a letter from the king to another, are taking Hamlet to England” (101).

The helplessness imposed upon the characters make them existentially vulnerable. They have no liberty and self-will to escape. They die their mental death earlier than bodily one. At the end, the floating boat, a symbol of restricted setting, leads them to their inevitable trap weaved by their master heads. The boat is a sort of jail for them, and England a grave waiting for them there. This metaphorical presentation of human life like a prison, and contracted existence is dealt with differently by different writers. Beckett's *Endgame* (1958) depicts it through the image of dustbins where characters succumb. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos* (1944) shows it by creating a scene of narrow upper floor with no windows at all.

For the absurd dramatists, the world is a goal. Sam Shepard dramatises it in *A Lie of Mind*. He shows a couple all alone having nothing to do except to humiliate and fight each other. Stoppard also suggests that his characters are the representation of the people residing in a narrow spaced world, and command no determination of their own. Therefore, life is an illusion signifying nothing. This delusion is spoken of by Shakespeare much earlier in *As You Like It* through the voice of Jacques:

All the world is a stage.  
And all the men and women, merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts.  
..... (58)

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* typically demonstrates that human life is a stage with no control over it. His 'play within play' device, and on stage and off stage position of Ros and Guil bring forth the exact correspondence between the real life and reel life. It also reminds Kierkegaardian philosophy of God's position and power. The real people like characters in the play, have no power to streamline their ways. Their means and ends are already decided by some supreme agency. All their struggle and demonstrations end in nothingness. Regarding the role of characters in dramas, player tells Ros and Guil: "...We are tragedians, you see. We follow direction--there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, and the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means..." (80). Player's statement contradicts to what he has said before: "...Events must play themselves to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion" (79). Through these words, the playwright suggests that there is no moral purpose and rational end either in real life or in art. Right and wrong in people and characters are the endowments of fate and author. They have to accept it. Therefore, according to Stoppard, there is scarcely any difference between the virtual presentation of artistic world and actual reality of concrete universe. He shows individuals in the hostile environment as marionettes in the reign of destiny. Ros and Guil carrying their own

order of doom in the form of letter, is a double edged symbol of absurdity and comedy. This weird irrationality can be seen in their misunderstanding and the repetition of words:

PLAYER: Why?  
GUIL: Ah (to Ros) why?  
ROS: Exactly.  
GUIL: exactly what?  
ROS: Exactly why?  
GUIL: Exactly why what?  
ROS: What?  
GUIL: Why?  
ROS: What what exactly! (68)

Absurdist and existential writers are always preoccupied with the apprehension of death. Death is inevitable, and cannot be halted. Stoppard's pair Ros and Guil, is conscious that they die at the completion of each performance and resurrect at the outset of a new one, as Guil says "And it has happened hasn't it?" (56). Again both know that the vessel is a means of their death: "We might as well be dead. Do you think death could possibly be a boat?" (108). They represent general human plight living oxymoronic 'life in death'. Stoppard seems to suggest that death is a redeemer that rids a man of all worldly angst. The absurdity of these characters is accentuated by the role of players as SPIES. Though they wear the same robes like those of Ros and Guil, but the pair does not comprehend it. The end of SPIES is a portent of pre-arranged fate of Stoppard's two anti-heroes:

What brings Ros forward is the fact under their cloaks the two SPIES are wearing coats identical to those worn by Ros and Guil whose coats are now covered by their cloaks. Ros approaches 'his' spy undoubtedly. He doesn't quite understand why the coats are familiar. Ros stands close, touches the coat, thoughtfully. (82)

*The Real Inspector Hound* also adheres the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd. The dramatic personas are not logical, but eerie type of beings. Their world is ambiguous and mysterious. Lady Muldoon is in solitude without any connectivity with others. Her husband is missing, and does not return. They are 'cut off from the world', as Mrs Drudge expresses it in her telephonic chat: "... I hope nothing is amiss for we, that's Lady Muldoon and her house guests, are here cut off from the world, including Magnus, the chair-ridden half brother of her ladyship's husband Lord Albert Muldoon who ten years ago went out for a walk on the cliffs and was never seen again—and all alone, for they had no children " (15). Magnus is totally overburdened by the existential dilemma. He is bodily wreck and crippled. The situation is such that nobody takes care of anybody in the house.

In *Jumpers*, Stoppard creates absurdly estranged couple George More and Dotty. The husband-wife indifference is reminiscent of Edward Albee's George-Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Being a professor, George More is expected to preach and practise moral virtues. He is absorbed in preparing a seminar paper: "Man, good, bad or indifferent"? The title bears a profound ethical essence, but is ironical and bewildering so far George's personal life is concerned. He is alien in his own home. He is estranged fellow within as well as without. There is a lack of communication between wife-husband. He is absurd figure, and is not certain either about the present or the future. Apparently a strong academician, but factually he is an emaciated person. Like Albee's George-Martha who simmer in marital distance and infidelity, the philosophy professor is cuckolded in his own house by a guest. This is a result of non-communication and misunderstanding. In *Enter a Free Man*, Stoppard creates the same situation. The man also named George is badly busy in his work, and has no concern of his family. His wife Persephone feels senselessness of her life due to this chasm. Like a general trend of the Theatre of the Absurd, the scene shifts between the wife's sitting room and the husband's pub. Stoppard seems to suggest that sharing and caring one another is an identity of mankind, and without it, life becomes absurd, and man's angelic quality turns into beastly one.

Stoppard's concern of the absurdity of human existence is eloquently conveyed in *Jumpers*. George Moore tries his utmost to persuade his wife that life is unflinching irrational, and Logical Positivism has no strong ground:

The National Gallery is a monument to irrationality! Every concert hall is a monument to irrationality!—so is a nicely kept Garden, or a lover's flower, or a home for stray dogs! You stupid woman; if irrationality were the criterion for things being allowed to exist, the world would be one gigantic field of Soya beans! ...the irrational, the emotional, the whimsical...these are the stamps of humanity which makes reason a civilizing force. In a wholly rationalistic society, the moralist will be a variety of crank, haranguing the bus queue with the demented certitude of one blessed with privileged information 'good and evil are metaphysical absolutes!'... (30-31)

The history play *Travesties* is a big achievement in Stoppard's dramatic career. The drama creates a dichotomy between the literary art and a totalitarian state or history. It revives the past with such luminaries as Vladimir Lenin, Tristan Tzara, and James Joyce. These figures are made to meet in Zurich during the World War I, though there is no solid evidence behind it in real history. Stoppard does not attempt at the authenticity of history, and presents the plot through an old man whose memory is faulty and wavering. Although these influential personages converge in Zurich, yet their destination and realities are individual. They conform Kierkegaard and Nietzschean philosophy that truth is subjective and personal. The personal truth for Lenin is to realize his dream of revolution in Russia; for Tzara to propagate the Dada; for Joyce to accomplish his mega literary masterpiece *Ulysses*; and for Stoppard's Carr to carry out his

assignment. There is a question of appearance and reality. What is thought real is fictitious, and factual is substituted by illusionary. This is the phenomenon in which almost all absurd writers are caught. Stoppard's play becomes doubly absurd because of its senile narrator. This lack of reliability and incompatibility between history and art give rise to the meaninglessness and misunderstanding.

The absurd atmosphere is also felt in *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*. The tyrannical and senseless laws are parodied in a bizarre manner. The state officials impose absurdities as realities on the people without any consideration. The characters Alexander and Ivanovo are measured with one rod on the basis of sharing the same cell. In this way, the playwright laughs at the principle of equality prevalent there in a comic, but absurd manner.

**Conclusion:** Thus, the absurdity and meaninglessness of life has been given different dimensions by Tom Stoppard. As the causes of the Theatre of the Absurd are several, so the effect cannot be a single. It has behind it numerous philosophies and influences, and the writers have tried to deal with its various aspects in their own distinctive modes and styles. Stoppard mostly focuses on misunderstanding, estrangement, weakness, helplessness, non-communication, fear, overshadowing feeling of death, dichotomies, cruelty and so on. These are the different facets of the umbrella coinage the Theatre of the Absurd. Though Stoppard shows a resemblance to other absurd writers in his subject matter, yet his style and techniques are his own. In short, whatever he touches with his miraculous pen and imagination has become eternal, and it is sufficient to maintain his individual space unchallenged in the Theatre of the Absurd in particular and in the world of drama in general.

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