The New Criterion

Theater March 2021

The most grateful Englishman

by Kyle Smith

On a new biography of the playwright Tom Stoppard.

Tom Stoppard frequently and approvingly quotes Cecil Rhodes's remark, much ridiculed by those in a position to take their own culture for granted, that "to be born an Englishman is to have drawn first prize in the lottery of life." It's a view Stoppard's stepfather, Kenneth, instilled in the boy from a young age. Born Tomáš Sträussler in Zlín, Czechoslovakia, Stoppard did not arrive in England until he was eight, having had his life upended first by Nazi Germany and, on the other side of the globe, Imperial Japan. Other men might have taken on a hunted or insecure personality from such early traumas, but Stoppard, on the evidence of Hermione Lee's definitive authorized biography, Tom Stoppard: A Life, is a case study in the joy and gratitude that comes, or ought to, with being English.1

Stoppard, now eighty-three and still a major force in theater—just last January, his play *Leopoldstadt* , about generations of Austrian Jews before and after the Holocaust, debuted to acclaim in London before the hammer of coronavirus struck—has never stopped marveling at the lucky accident of his being raised in England. It's the most spoiled segment of English society that overlooks the country's value. Consider the bristling disgust of, say, Emma Thompson, the London-born, Cambridge-educated, Academy Award–winning writer and actor who sees her native land as a sort of fetid prison camp of the soul, its culture an infection best dealt with by opening all doors and windows as widely as possible to the world. Arguing for the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union in 2016, Thompson famously described Britain as a "tiny little cloud-bolted, rainy corner of sort-of Europe, a cake-filled misery-laden grey old island," adding, "I feel European even though I live in Great Britain." Thompson was born swathed in the prejudices of the self-hating cultural aristocracy (both her parents were actors) and has worked as an entertainer her entire adult life.

Stoppard's background differs slightly. All four grandparents and many other relatives were slaughtered in the Holocaust, while his father, Dr. Eugen Sträussler, is thought to have died along with many others trying to flee Singapore in 1942 when his ship was sunk by Hirohito's invading forces. Stoppard was by age nine the world citizen his cosmopolitan colleagues pretend to be. Far from dismissing his good fortune as his due, he is keenly aware of how differently everything

could have turned out. “For every thousand people,” he said in 1973, “there’s 900 doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good and one lucky bastard who’s the artist.” Staggeringly appreciative, that. It’s a wonder he didn’t get his artist’s license revoked on the spot. Is any group more afflicted with dyspepsia than the successful portion of our creative class? Certainly no other group seems to maintain a higher ratio of status—or income—to upbeat thoughts. Professing woe, especially about one’s country and culture, is the default position for Western cultural elites, and has been for at least half a century.

Sir Tom (he was knighted in 1997), however, is a joyous contrarian, as the emeritus Oxford professor Lee shows in her exhaustive (if sometimes exhausting) nine-hundred-page literary biography. Writing with the full cooperation of her subject and his circle, Lee is sometimes thorough to a fault. I could have done without the five-page description of one of Stoppard’s houses, nor did I see the point of an almost equally long digression detailing his work on a screen adaptation, never used, of Philip Pullman’s atheistic fantasy allegory *Northern Lights*, known in the United States as *The Golden Compass*. (Another writer started from scratch, and the film was released to a collective shrug in 2007.) Still, Lee’s slab of a book now stands as the definitive life of the leading playwright of his time. (Ira Nadel in 2002 published an honorable but unauthorized shorter biography, titled *Double Act*. Stoppard, who objects in principle to biography on the reasoning that literal facts obscure deeper truths, claims he never read it. As one of his characters put it in *Indian Ink*: “Biography is the worst possible excuse for getting people wrong.”) Lee delves with equal vigor into both life events and literary analysis, devoting considerable space to each major work and the details of their earliest productions, in addition to sensibly explicating the various texts. A small-type listing of Stoppard’s credits covers nearly two pages, yet Lee makes room for at least a brief discussion of seemingly every project, even some of no consequence.

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It’s refreshing that Lee avoids the biographer’s trap of subject-loathing (a tendency Stoppard was apparently leery of, hence his refusal to assist any biographer until he had reached the age of seventy-five). She is at pains to illuminate the generosity of his soul, the esteem in which even his surviving ex-wife and several ex-girlfriends hold him, and his extensive portfolio of loving friendships, many with ideological foes such as the hard-Left playwrights Harold Pinter and David Hare. “In the land of showbiz, which is not free of spite, he has an exceptionally good reputation,” Lee writes. Yet she concedes, at the very end of the book, that some essence of him remains walled off. Another playwright (name not supplied) contends that he has known Stoppard for forty-five years and yet doesn’t know him at all. Stoppard has confessed that he puts on a flashy show while remaining hidden—he calls himself “a repressed exhibitionist.”

Lee’s project is supported by Stoppard’s strong memories, which extend all the way back to early childhood, though he doesn’t remember his father except from photographs. The four

Sträusslers (including Stoppard's younger brother, Petr, later Peter) earned their ticket out of Zlín through the intercession of Bata, a leading shoe manufacturer that effectively ran the town, even to the extent of operating medical clinics. As the jackboot was about to stomp on Czechoslovakia in 1939, Bata helped arrange for many Jewish families, including that of its company doctor Eugen Sträussler, to escape to its overseas factories. Its Singapore branch was where the Sträusslers headed, by sea, having no inkling that the British colony would be overrun by Japan. The family sought to flee to Australia, but Eugen stayed behind to help the British volunteer defense corps and was killed. Martha Sträussler (known as "Bobby") boarded an American ship with the boys and was surprised to discover only after boarding that it was heading not for Australia but India, where she was to work at a Bata store.

In Darjeeling, Petr and Tomáš attended an American Methodist school, and their mother met a British major, Ken Stoppard. Martha accepted his wedding proposal, and the family moved to Derbyshire, England, after the war in early 1946. Young Tom reveled in English country life, attending first the Dolphin School near his Derbyshire home, then Pocklington, in Yorkshire. At seventeen he left school, decided he was a journalist, and talked his way into a job at a paper in Bristol, where his mother and stepfather then lived. Among the friends he made while hanging around the theater scene in Bristol was an up-and-coming young actor named Peter O'Toole, with whom Stoppard was in a love triangle (the girl they both dated was Isabel Dunjohn), and who awed Stoppard with his performances in Shaw's *Man and Superman* in 1957 and in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* the following year. Stoppard was with O'Toole in Stratford-upon-Avon the morning the latter became famous, as congratulatory phone calls and newspaper reviews praising O'Toole's Shylock poured in. Observing the hubbub, Stoppard told his mother, "I'd like to be famous!"

Though he was as an artist inspired by the Fifties movement toward existential unease as captured in *Godot* and Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Stoppard's work is distinguished by its varsity-wit enthusiasm—delight in language, in learning, in games. In his best plays—*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974), *The Real Thing* (1982), *Arcadia* (1993), *The Coast of Utopia* (2002), and *The Hard Problem* (2015)—Stoppard delivers everything a theatergoer could ask for: the champagne of Wilde and the beef of Ibsen and Shaw, prepared with the Continental flourishes of Beckett and Pinter. Unlike those titans, however, Stoppard dismantled dangerous social myths in the process. One comes away from a Stoppard performance admiring not just the genius of his technique but the substance of his ongoing argument—against utopianism, artistic faddism, and atheistic materialism.

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Travesties, for instance, is a zany concoction that is on the surface a pastiche of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* but also makes an aesthetic and political argument by commingling the Great War experiences in

Zürich of the exiles V. I. Lenin, James Joyce, and Tristan Tzara. All three are revolutionaries, but Stoppard properly separates Joyce as an inspired builder of a new edifice, whereas Lenin and Tzara merely sought to destroy old ones. Stoppard often points out that writing a play requires both skill and imagination; someone who has the former but not the latter might make a delightful wicker basket, whereas someone having the latter but not the former gives us only "modern art." Tzara and the other Dadaists personify the kind of vapid (if critically praised) art he deplores.

His work has already proved able to extend its appeal across generations. *Travesties* was smashingly revived in its 2016–18 incarnation in London and New York, while the fiftieth anniversary production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the play that made his name when Kenneth Tynan (and Laurence Olivier) bought it for the nascent National Theatre within days of its debut at the Edinburgh Fringe, was equally well received in London in 2017. Meanwhile, Stoppard's fourteen radio plays, which he started writing in his twenties as a tyro playwright but has continued to compose sporadically across the decades, have just been collected and published as an audiobook by the bbc. *Leopoldstadt*, in which he considered his own heritage like never before, is due to return to the Wyndham Theatre in London on June 12. (No New York production has yet been scheduled.)

Stoppard has hinted that the latter might be his last play; he often takes ages to come up with a suitable idea, though between plays he keeps up a ferocious pace of other activity. I met him unexpectedly once, at the Four Seasons Hotel in New York in the fall of 2006, where the English director Paul Greengrass was the honoree at a small party promoting his riveting film United 93. I was talking to Greengrass when he said, "I'd like you to meet Tom, he's writing my next movie." I turned, and there was Stoppard, matey and charming and blithely unconcerned with whether I or anyone else was aware of his stature. I think I mumbled something fraught with awe, but my mind has gone blank on the matter. I can't rule out the possibility that I bowed, or requested to touch the hem of his garment. The film, by the way, was The Bourne Ultimatum—one of dozens of popcorn pictures Stoppard worked on over the years—but you won't find his name in its credits. Universal Pictures reacted frostily to Stoppard's ending, which killed off the hero of the billion-dollar franchise, and little or nothing of his script made it into the finished film. Yes, even Tom Stoppard gets rejected; the screenplays he wrote adapting A Christmas Carol (for the director Bennett Miller) and his own Arcadia (for the producer Scott Rudin) generated only silence from those who commissioned them.

Those misadventures call others to mind. For years in the 1990s, Stoppard was contracted by Universal to punch up various scripts it had in development, and he spent several weeks working with—ye gods—Steven Spielberg on an attempt to fashion an animated film from Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*. Stoppard also contributed without credit to such films as *Medicine Man*; a Charlie Chaplin biopic (developed as *Charlie*, released as *Chaplin*); *Restoration*; *Sleepy Hollow*; *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*; *102 Dalmatians*; a 2010 Ridley Scott *Robin Hood* that Stoppard later derided as "Robin Hood invented socialism"; and one about a hausfrau werewolf called *Mom*. Among his many credited works—almost all of them built on someone else's idea—are the screenplays for *The*

Human Factor (1979), *Brazil* (1985), *Empire of the Sun* (1987), *The Russia House* (1990), *Billy Bathgate* (1991), *Vatel* (2000), *Enigma* (2001), *Anna Karenina* (2012), *Tulip Fever* (2017), and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), the only unqualified success in the bunch and the one for which he won an Oscar. One might consider most of these efforts *infra dig* for a writer of Stoppard's ability (including the meretricious Harvey Weinstein picture *Shakespeare in Love*), and few of them were even Stoppardian. An exception was his exquisite bbc/hbo adaptation of the Ford Madox Ford tetralogy, *Parade's End* (2012). The rest were, for the most part, paycheck jobs, and on these duds Stoppard frittered away much of his career, which might have been more wisely spent on his calling, itself hardly unremunerative. In a typical year Stoppard has productions running all over the world (*The Coast of Utopia*, for instance, ran for ten years in Russia), and, unusually for a playwright of our times, he even sells lots of published plays. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* has sold around one million copies and *The Real Thing* almost as many. Theater has been faithful to him. Why did he expend so much energy running around with those Hollywood slatterns?

Lee is not a probing interviewer any more than she is a humorist (the closest she comes to a witty line is "It remains to be seen if Stoppard's Ghost of Christmas Past has a future," on page 721), so the question is never posed, but there are times in this book when the reader is nearly compelled to throw the thing on the floor and shout, "Damnit, Stoppard, stop faffing about and get back to the real thing." Stoppard has allowed as many as nine years to slip away between plays; while the list of major works is impressive—there are more than a dozen major original plays, counting *The Coast of Utopia* as one, plus several important translations of Continental playwrights and Chekhov—it could have been considerably longer. Stoppard would protest that ideas for plays simply don't come to him very often, but perhaps he was crowding them out of his mindspace with all of these projects of secondary, tertiary, and quaternary import.

I do not mean to downplay his achievement in the theater, unmatched and unapproached by anyone living. "Polymathic, brainy, inspirational, passionate, rigorous, sympathetic, conservative with a small 'c,' irresistible, supportive, witty" are some of the words Lee has heard when soliciting adjectives to describe the great man, as well as "curious, open, gentle, thoughtful, amatory, daunting, clear-thinking, focused, stimulating, brave, warm-hearted." Quite a satisfying haul of compliments, yet Lee reveals in the same paragraph that she has been holding back a bit, because the most common descriptors are these: "loyal, kind, considerate, glamorous, generous and intelligent." (Though he is also apparently "not as nice as people think," she says.) The playwright is as expansive as his work; he has given to his associates as assiduously as he has given to his art. One finishes the book in a state of immense gratitude that Stoppard exists. Few who do so will disagree with a remark, attributed to "a famous writer, who loves [Stoppard] dearly": he is "one of the most important people in the world."

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1 *Tom Stoppard: A Life*, by Hermione Lee; Knopf, 896 pages, $37.50.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 39 Number 7 , on page 40

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