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Loneliness Underneath Laughter : Aspects of Alienation in the Early Plays of Tom Stoppard

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**Loneliness Underneath Laughter: Aspects of
Alienation in the Early Plays of Tom Stoppard.**

**EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY**

Submitted by: Steven Hounsome

in part completion for the degree of,

Bachelor of Arts (Drama Studies) Hons.

Submitted at:

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis investigates the various states of alienation that exist in the early plays of the British dramatist Tom Stoppard. By first defining alienation (and discussing the areas of contention which surround the concept), it proceeds to argue that whilst Stoppard has been greatly revered as a comic writer his works are equally consequential for their sensitivity and insight. They depict a prolificacy of characters who fail to assimilate with their society, can no longer relate to those around them and, as is often the case, reach for, but never manage to grasp a sense of their own identity. The diversity of emotional states that arise from such a condition will be discussed at length.

In considering the plight of these characters, it will be necessary to also consider the nature of the societies in which they are embedded, and to ask where the true source of alienation arises. The societies portrayed by Stoppard are far-ranging: East and West, repressive and liberal, indeed, even meta-theatrical, yet they are unified by a common failure; the inability to engender a sense of real connection amongst their members. The impression we get with many of these early plays is that Stoppard's alienated protagonists are not facing an unusual predicament, rather they are indicative of man in a modern, atomised society—that they are, ironically, “in good company”.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signature: .......

Date: November 5th, 1999

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Introduction

The term alienation now has widespread currency in everyday speech; those who refer to it have a general understanding of what they mean when they say an individual is alienated or that we live in a society and an age where alienation is prevalent. It is, however, a far more multi-faceted concept than contemporary usage would have us believe; philosophers, sociologists and psychologists have adopted, and discussed, the term in ways that are often at odds with one another. For this reason, I feel it is necessary to elucidate the general definition of alienation, as it is used in this thesis, before the term can be discussed in relation to the work of Tom Stoppard.

Alienation is, according to Ben Halm, “generally viewed as the definitive malaise of modern Western existence” (23). Essentially, it refers to the situation whereby an individual is estranged, or cut off, from a thing of considerable importance to their wellbeing. Felix Geyer elaborates on this discord (*italics in original*):

Alienation...points to a relationship, defined by a *subjectively undesirable separation*, between a subject or group of subjects and some aspect of their environment... This environmental aspect may be real or imaginary, concrete or abstract: such as nature, God, work, the products of work or the means of production, fellow humans, or different social structures and institutions (*x*).

Hegel identifies a further factor when he speaks of self-alienation. In losing touch with his “social substance” (that is, society), man loses touch with his inner nature because, he believes, man is “essentially universal”.

Whilst alienation is characterised by the occurrence of one, or more, of these numerous separations it can also be identified in a multitude of psychological ailments, including “anxiety, anomie, despair, depersonalization, rootlessness, apathy, disorganization, loneliness, atomization, powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation,

pessimism, and the loss of beliefs or values” (Feuerlicht, 10). An individual need not demonstrate all these characteristics to be considered alienated.

This is a general definition of alienation; however, several areas of contention in alienation theory need also to be acknowledged. In doing so, I hope to explain where this thesis stands in regard to those areas and, thus, explain with greater specificity the way in which I shall utilise the term.

There is considerable disagreement over whether alienation is to be perceived of as a subjective or objective state. Marx asserts the source of alienation lies firmly in one’s social conditions. People become estranged from themselves, their work and their fellow man through existing in a system that makes them slaves to capitalist production. Psychologists and sociologists, however, place more emphasis on the subject’s internal state. Melvin Seeman’s six-category model is a prime example of this (267-293). Felix Geyer notes that the philosophical and psychological approaches to alienation can accommodate one another (x). This thesis will work from such a basis. It will accept that alienation is a subjective state, but one which is brought about by certain conditions in one’s environment.

The question of alienation’s subjectivity raises another area of contention—whether the individual requires insight into their predicament to be classified as alienated. Amitai Etzioni feels they do not: “the concept of alienation does not assume that the alienated are aware of their condition”, because, in refutation of the common psychological approach, “the roots of alienation are not in...intrapsychic processes” (618). Other theorists (Schacht, 251-2) have argued against this conception, but they are a minority and seem to do so only on the basis of simplifying the term. Therefore, this thesis will not restrict itself in this way; it will accept that an individual need not be aware of their situation to be deemed alienated.

Traditionally, it has felt that the term alienation applies only where the two things divided were once in union—man cannot *be* alienated, he can only *become* so. Kenneth Keniston observes this when he writes “most usages...share the assumption that some relationship or connection...once existed” (452). However, as Feuerlicht contends, it “now also applie[s] to situations where such a union never existed but where the individual concerned or an observer feels that it should exist” (8). This thesis will work from the latter precept as it is my aim to use the term not in any esoteric form but in the way in which it is most commonly understood.

Possibly the most obvious area of departure between alienation theorists is over the prospect of alienation having positive aspects. For Marx alienation was, unquestionably, a social evil that must be overcome through the establishment of a communist system, a system that is “the complete return of man to himself as a social being” (Ollman, 153). However, Hegel was one of many who stressed the positive aspects of alienation. He felt it marked “the emergence of the individual out of an unreflective unity with his society and culture, as a distinct and independent personality” (Schacht, 31). This notion is supported by both William Bier (x) and Lacan, who, in discussing “the mirror stage”, wrote, “the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity...will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development” (129). These interpretations do not however, contribute to the general meaning of the term. Now, when we speak of alienation, we tend to imply that it is an undesirable state; as Feuerlicht notes, “if it were not for [the] negative evaluation the term acquired...very few people, perhaps only historians of philosophy, would use alienation today” (16). This thesis also regards alienation as undesirable, to do otherwise would sever the word from its currently accepted meaning.

This basic definition of alienation, and clarification of some of its particulars, provides a foundation from which Stoppard's plays can be discussed. From here, the plight of his characters and the nature of the society in which they are embedded can be detailed; furthermore, implications of man's strained relationship, to both himself and his society, can be drawn.

Chapter One

Enter A Free Man

Stoppard's stage debut, *Enter A Free Man*, shows a playwright still coming to terms with a suitable mode of expression. Stylistically, it is an uncomfortable blend of 1950's social realism and freewheeling farce. Thematically, however, it demonstrates an interest that would predominate in his writing for the next decade- individuals unable to assimilate with those around them.

George Riley is an aging inventor who routinely walks out on his wife and daughter without ever getting further than the local pub. Riley feels he is distinct from others and will risk stifling that special quality by remaining at home. In this sense he chooses to be alienated and even delights in the fact. To submit to any sort of community is, in his mind, to compromise oneself:

A man must resist. A man must stand apart, make a clean break on his own two feet! Faith is the key - faith in oneself. (16)

His escapes, however, are not only an affirmation of his staunch individuality; they are also the result of his feeling misunderstood and unappreciated at home:

That's what's gone wrong here - no respect. That's why I'm being driven out - you ask me why - well, that's why - because here I don't exist. (65)

His wife, Persephone, is caring in a matronly way, but is too busy dusting and vacuuming to show much interest in Riley's inventions and, even when interested, does not have the mental faculty to comprehend them (37). Linda, his sharp-tongued daughter, has an open disregard for what her father does.

Riley's inventions, however impractical, serve an important personal function. Full of quirk and charm, they are an extension of his personality; their existence confirms his existence. Whereas Albert and Gladys--of the radio plays--are slaves to

labour, the products of Riley's labour are an affirmation of self. They give him hope of transcending domesticity and of attaining a significance that will, some day, be recognised by others: "Below me a vast plain stretches like an ocean, waiting to receive my footprints... and in years to come, people will say... George Riley walked this way" (32). The disbelief and disinterest his family directs toward his inventions is, therefore, a negation of his worth. To protect his tattered dignity he must seek out a more appreciative audience.

And whilst Persephone and Linda intensify Riley's alienation; they too seem alienated in this domestic setting. Persephone busies herself with household chores that allow her to avoid facing the vast emptiness of her life: "[She] perceives the world as a frightening place and... sees no greater glory, no afterlife, not much to this life..." (Cahn, 31-2). She also recognises that family is all they have, and therefore, that remaining cohesive is paramount:

He's ours and we're his, and don't you ever talk about him like that again. You can call him the family joke, but it's our family. We're still a family. (67-8)

Persephone is devoted to keeping the house peaceable, but only on a superficial level; her attitude being that if the carpet is clean, everyone is well fed and nobody is shouting things will sort themselves out. This naïve belief has cost her the ability to relate to George and Linda on truly human terms. In her quest to keep the family united she has, paradoxically, alienated herself from them.

Linda's dissatisfactions are more overtly expressed than her mother's: "I'm stuck here in this tidy little house waiting for it to change so I can get out" (64), however, as she is a teenage stereotype we tend to dismiss them more readily. Whilst feelings of imprisonment and alienation are to be expected from someone her age, the resulting fantasy she builds, and the fanaticism with which she clings to it, is

somewhat more disturbing. She has placed her faith in a string of casual boyfriends to rescue her, like “knights in shining armour”, from her home. This fantasy invariably ends in disappointment. All her interactions with others then, both inside and outside the family, are unsatisfactory and, as a result, she comes to feel that she cannot really know people:

All that talking and loving—I thought I *knew* him—I thought I knew everything about him. I didn’t even know his name. [81]

Riley’s hopes, meanwhile, are firmly pinned on the regulars at Carmen’s pub. He enters putting on an air of conviviality—imagining strangers to be friends—as a means of feeling at home in this environment. In truth, though, he is just as alienated here as he is with Persephone and Linda. To most drinkers he is just another anonymous face, and the response of those that do know him is, as Ronald Hayman observes, hardly satisfying: “Carmen, the barman, sympathises without listening and Able...admires without understanding, while Harry...mocks at Riley with an irony he fails to notice” (15).

These regulars are, in various ways, also victims of alienation. Able, as Riley likes to call him, is a boyish sailor who spends his time trying to win the affection of women. He struggles to write a postcard to an overseas fancy of his, and later in the play, when trying to buy a drink for Florence, is humiliated by her response: “O, what a lovely boy! Are you a sea scout?” [29]. His pathetic attempts to relate to women, indeed to others in general, evoke our pity. Socially, he is as inept as Riley but lacks the arrogance and imagination to keep himself afloat. His response to confusion and failure in the outer world is, like so many Stoppard protagonists, to retreat into a private world of order—for him, a regimented life in the Navy; as he admits to Riley, he “feel[s] lost on leave” (73).

Brown is the archetypal ordinary man—lonely, anonymous and directionless. Rather than interacting with society, he quietly watches it drift past and, appropriately, his presence in the play almost remains unnoticed. His alienation is only tolerable because it is probably, we suspect, all he has ever known.

Riley's formidable imagination temporarily protects him from the feelings of alienation that an environment such as Carmen's pub could invoke. He chooses to see in Harry a willing business partner and in Florence a kindred spirit who will drop everything to accompany him. They are, in reality, merely passers-by whose politeness and curiosity allow Riley's fantasy to build. This delusion is indicative of Riley's approach to life—preferring the comfort of life-lies to the challenge of an insincere and indifferent world. Ronald Bryden sees value in such life-lies when he contends that because, for George, “the alternatives to reality are equally real: he is a genuinely free man” (31).

I would argue that Riley is anything but free and that Stoppard's title ironically highlights this. He is far more dependent on the support of others than we may initially believe; even he admits that he wants a business partner because he is no good by himself (20). Similarly, he relies on his daughter for pocket money and his wife for hot meals and compassion: it is the latter dependencies that reliably send him home. As John Russel Taylor explains, “[Riley] has no real ability...to escape...even if he chooses to nurture from time to time the illusion of his own freedom” (17).

There are, however, deeper implications to Riley's homeward journey. Despite his having dismissed home as “*nothing*, absolutely nothing. I give nothing, I gain nothing, it is nothing...” (34), he does not seem to have given up hope of rekindling the warmth that we are led to believe once existed there. He is particularly disturbed by the rift developing between himself and his daughter, unable to come to terms with

her adolescence (and the disrespect that accompanies it), he prefers, much to her chagrin, to relate to her as a child:

The trouble is you haven't got faith in me, have you?... Well, you did once, didn't you?... I used to tell you – yes I did – and you had *faith* – can't you *remember* – can't you remember it was happy?... In the park. We used to walk in the park, and don't deny it – *you had* FAITH! (62)

According to Susan Rusinko, winning the admiration and love of his daughter is Riley's prime motivation; his dream of success as an inventor is a means to this end (14-15). His failure to collect unemployment benefits is not a demonstration of laziness, as Rusinko also claims (13), rather it is evidence of his unwillingness to admit defeat and, therefore, be diminished in his daughter's eyes. Riley is far more the family orientated man than he would like us to believe, if he could only embrace this idea he might recognise the lunacy of retreating from home.

By the play's conclusion we are given hope of reconciliation eventuating. Riley has returned in the knowledge that he has no inventions left; there is a tone of dread in his recognition of having lived like a sailor “anchored in the middle of a big calm sea, never going anywhere, just sitting, far from land, life, everything” (75). We get the impression that he is, after existing for so long within his own head, finally starting to recognise and enjoy the society that surrounds him:

It's very nice in the park. I haven't been there for a long time. Quite pretty, all the children, trees, in the middle of all the houses (83).

As John Simon observes, “our hero finally appears to accept reality” (81).

There is, nevertheless, reason to suspect Riley's acceptance will be short-lived. In the final moments his “indoor rain” is momentarily successful, although his jubilation is cut short by the realisation that there is no way to turn the mechanism off. It is just enough however, to cast a seed of doubt in his mind that domestic life really is for him. He reiterates his old catch-cry “This boat isn't the whole...” (84), meaning

“there is a world for me outside this family”. By the final few lines the old pattern is re-established, Linda succumbs to offering another week’s worth of pocket money and he marks the debt down in his notebook as he has always done and always will. Thomas Whitaker feels the play ends with a “linear movement” that suggests “the future need not repeat the past” (18), however I feel the actions mentioned above suggest a circular, and thus inescapable, pattern.

To win back a secure, albeit dysfunctional, family a compromise has been made. The family’s allocated roles will protect them from an insufferable alienation in the outside world, yet, by returning to live their lives in the established fashion they confirm that they will never be truly unalienated. Tim Brassell alludes to this when he says “the new tone of melancholy self-appraisal” at the play’s conclusion, will restore the family to a state of only “temporary harmony” (75). Because no family member has been prepared to relinquish their illusion, and face the reality of their situation, the barriers that existed between George, Persephone and Linda throughout the course of the play will endure.

In tending towards the comic Stoppard risks cheapening the human concerns of his drama. The pathos is diminished because “we deride George” at the same time as “we are asked to sympathise with him” (Corballis, 31).

To view the play as a sort of second-rate tragedy, however, is to mistake its true nature; Stoppard has produced a comedy that adeptly “[spins] gaiety from despair and absurdity” (Lambert, 25). Whilst inviting sympathy for the alienated George and his long-suffering family, the playwright’s wit and alacrity prevent the material from deteriorating into bathos.

Chapter Two

If You're Glad I'll Be Frank

Stoppard's radio play, *If You're Glad I'll Be Frank*, focuses on the regimented lives of Gladys, a speaking clock who announces the time every tenth second over the telephone, and her desperate husband Frank, who searches for his wife whilst trying to uphold a bus schedule.

At the core of this conceit lies the idea that both characters are alienated through being trapped in jobs that demand the repression of identity. So much so for Gladys, that she is required to imitate a machine, reminding us of Marx's theories of the alienated worker: "machinery is adapted to the weakness of the human being, in order to turn the weak human being into a machine" (Marx, 143). Gladys seeks ways in which to defy this and assert her identity, flirting with the idea that she will break out of her allocated role, "I'm going to cough, sneeze, whisper an obscenity that will leave ten thousand coronaries sprawled across their telephone tables" (47). But she has been repressed for too long; she knows, as do we, that this will never develop beyond a naive fantasy.

Gladys' loss of identity, however, is not the only way in which she becomes alienated. She realises that her unusual occupation has caused her profound domination by the unending passage of time. As the following speech shows, she is always in the service of time yet, contradictorily, is reduced to insignificance by it:

When you look down from
a great height
you become dizzy. Such
depth, such distance,
Such disappearing tininess so
far away,
rushing away,
reducing the life-size to nothing- (30-1).

By comparing a few seconds of laughter to the million flutters of a bumblebee's wings (38) or a lifetime to "the moment a glacier forms and melts" (35) she causes herself the distress of seeing her existence as brief and inconsequential. "Most Stoppard characters possess just such a capacity for wonder- finding mystery in the clockwork- which distinguishes them from their fellows, even if it is hazardous to their sanity" (Robinson, 37).

Robinson suggests that Gladys' nature, as opposed to her environment, is the cause of her alienation. Other critics have also contended that her actions and idiosyncrasies are of prime importance, underplaying the significance of her work or society. "The point is not simply that technology has further imprisoned... Gladys, but that she has consciously chosen the anonymity and estrangement of the mechanically disembodied voice" (Dean, 28). She is, in this regard, like the bird in the poem by Robert Pack:

Said the bird in search of a cage,
This world is even large for wings;
The mindless seasons drive me down
Tormenting me with changing things. (23)

To extend, and support, Dean's argument, it can be said that Gladys was alienated long before she became a speaking clock. Her desire, as a young girl, to join a convent betrays her inability to cope with the pace of society:

I was going to be a nun, but they wouldn't have me because I didn't believe... I asked her to let me stay inside without being a proper nun, it made no difference to me, it was the serenity I was after, that and the clean linen... (42).

This dream was an attempt to overcome alienation by retreating to an environment that caused less confusion but, ultimately, could only have perpetuated her condition; moving from a community where she felt a misfit to another where she would have *been* a misfit.

John Brown, in Stoppard's *A Separate Peace* enacts a similar dream when he admits himself to a private hospital. Just as Gladys has no faith Brown has no illness, "it's the privacy [he's] after" (168). Both are denied retreat; Gladys' resolve is to look elsewhere and this is why the role of speaking clock seems, to her, appealing.

However, in stressing that Gladys' condition arose before she worked at the postal service, Dean tends to overlook the importance Gladys' occupation has in compounding her alienation. It offers her minimal human contact, her voice failing to invoke a reply from the other end of the phone, only breathing, pausing, listening, "the frogsong of clockwindings and the muttered repetition to the nearest minute" (42). I would contend that this play is less concerned with the deficiencies of an individual than with the deficiencies of a "mechanistic world, warped and destroyed by a logical system" (Bigsby, 6). Stoppard satirises society's processes for failing to recognise human aspirations.

Neil Sammels argues that:

...The anxieties and ambitions of everyday life become as insect movements in the grass. She turns from them, as from the sufferings of her husband, in quiet contempt (91).

He suggests that Gladys' alienation is self-imposed rather than an effect of social normalisation, and that, even if freed from the constraints of society, her marriage could not be a success. Certainly she does come to see human life as trivial, but Sammels assumes that this inevitably breeds contempt. While this is the case for Albert, of *Albert's Bridge*, Gladys has more objectivity. The realisation that her own ambitions are also "insect movements in the grass" encourages pity, as opposed to scorn, both for herself and for others. Neither can Sammels' claim that she turns from Frank in contempt be substantiated. Frank is invaluable to Gladys, by recognising her

voice he grants her an identity. She fails to respond to his pleas only because the system has trained her to regard it as impossible.

In support of my notion that society, rather than Gladys, is fundamentally responsible for her alienation is her ability, despite believing that she was “emptied long ago” (31), to muster emotions such as love, frustration, loss and desire; suggesting that she is, inherently, psychologically sound:

Yes, we met dancing, I liked him
from the first... (38).
Oh, Frank, you knew my voice,
but how can I reply?... (42).
come on, please Frank, I love you... (47).

The intrusion of the system is not a recent phenomenon in Frank and Gladys' relationship. Even Gladys' fondest memories are of occasions organised around schedules, giving the impression that society has never allowed their marriage to reach its potential. “His bus passed my window twice a day, on the route he had then, every day, with a toot and a wave and was gone” (38). This is a contrast to an earlier Stoppard radio play about an alienated husband and wife, *'M' Is For Moon Among Other Things*, where the couple- Constance and Alfred- are so consumed by their own fantasies and fears they fail to register when the other is speaking. They will never transcend quietly unsatisfying domesticity due to their inability to acknowledge the situation:

CONSTANCE: If I had a choice, perhaps I'd choose what I'm doing now... But I want the choice. I don't want the moon, Alfred, all I want is the possibility of an alternative, so that I know I'm doing this because I want to instead of because there's nothing else.
ALFRED: Sshssh- hang on, Constance, let me hear the News (17)

At least Gladys and Frank, by recognising their predicament, keep alive the possibility of reconciliation.

The external dynamic that Gladys and Frank struggle against—work, and by implication, society—is represented through the characters of Gladys’ superior, the First Lord, and Frank’s conductress, Ivy. Both are well lessoned in, and strictly adhere to, the schedules and procedures of their worlds. Whilst they provide a tangible enemy for the two heroes of the play, Stoppard does provide them with a degree of sensitivity. Ivy, who has maniacally hounded Frank throughout the play, “Frank- I ask you to think of your schedule!” (46), shows empathy for his frustration at not having found his wife, “You’ll have to go on looking, Frank...”(49). This small moment of unexpected compassion imbues the play with pathos and suggests that the search for a human connection is universal.

Even the First Lord, whom Ronald Hayman dismisses as a “staunch and starchy upholder of the system” (57), can be seen to demonstrate regret. After having lied to Frank, leading him to believe Gladys did not work at the post office, he solemnly utters “dear me, dear me” (49), suggesting that he recognises this situation, where husband cannot reach wife, is woeful. He cannot, however, allow them to meet, to humanise the fragile system would bring it crashing to the ground. Ultimately it is this system, not any of the characters tied to it, which is deplorable.

Whilst the predicament of Gladys and Frank is a comic extreme, it should not be merely be regarded as a “nice farcical notion” of “idiotic inconsequence” (Taylor, 17). Their trials are analogous to the obstacles faced by all who seek genuine human contact.

Chapter Three

Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead

In discussing the alienation theme as it relates to Stoppard's most commercially successful play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, it should first be observed that there are two schools of thought regarding this work.

The first of these comprises numerous critics who contend that Stoppard has written a play with serious overtones, one that provides a metaphor for the human condition: "Guildenstern speaks archetypal words for all those caught in the modern universal dilemma" (Gianakaris, 55), and elsewhere: "[they] represent the universal experience of feeling caught up by an incomprehensible force in a bizarre tragedy" (Duncan, 69). Comparisons with absurdism, particularly *Waiting For Godot*, are also often drawn.

However, others have passionately discredited such approaches as being overly academic, seeking profundity in what is an essentially comic work:

The vision of the Theatre of the Absurd is predicated upon the hopelessness, meaninglessness, and futility of the human condition...There is no such bleak perception...no angst, no despair lurking beneath the surface of *Rosencrantz*" (Dean, 38).

Speaking of the connection with Beckett's work, Ruby Cohn has said "*Godot* was stylistically rather than philosophically seminal for Stoppard" (114). And although believing the play deals with "important issues", Normand Berlin does not feel the playwright "points his finger directly at the existential dilemma" (276). Perhaps the strongest exponent of this attitude is Stoppard himself. In an interview with Jon Bradshaw he explains that "the play had no substance beyond its own terms...it had nothing to do with the condition of modern man" (50). And, in a direct refutation of the approach I will soon take, he told Tom Prideaux his play was not "a response to

anything about alienation in our times...it would be fatal to set out to write primarily on an intellectual level” (76). From an interview printed in *Theatre Quarterly* we know existentialism is a philosophy he finds “neither attractive nor plausible” (6).

I have outlined the above as it provides a background from which I can propose my own approach: that this play, whilst not a ‘serious’ political work like *Professional Foul*, need not be classified a piece of comic inconsequence like *The Real Inspector Hound*. Stoppard’s canon is complex, as this play, by existing at the nexus of both serious and comic, stands testimony. The theme of alienation and the comedy can be coterminous, there can be loneliness underneath laughter.

The premise of the drama is to take the two famous courtiers from *Hamlet* and present them at moments when they are not required by Shakespeare’s script. Without the guiding hand of an author, these characters are left destitute, filling in time endlessly flipping coins and playing word games. The story of *Hamlet* is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s world in the sense that it is the only thing that can provide them with an identity and a purpose. Once inside the drama they gain a confidence which they otherwise lack, speaking the appropriate Elizabethan tongue, seeming to know Hamlet and recognising their primary goal. The cruel irony is that while this world is everything to them its presence is only fleeting, leaving them with seemingly endless periods to cogitate over who they are and why they are there. Shakespeare’s play, by remaining always at the edge of their existence, never fully engaging them, only provides them with something tangible to be alienated from, a reminder that “life, like laughter, is something going on in the next room” (Billington, 37):

We have not been...picked out...simply to be abandoned...set loose to find our own way... We are entitled to some direction...I would have thought (14).

Despite their seemingly hopeless situation, Guildenstern, and to a lesser extent Rosencrantz, remain ever 'intrigued'. They are not content to accept the way things have panned out for them. Subsequently, the courtiers' moments of play are, even more so than their Beckettian counterparts, not just exercises in time wasting. They are genuine attempts to find evidence of a coherent world.

The first of these attempts appears in the opening sequence of the play when they repeatedly toss a coin. Guildenstern's motive here is that the coin, by landing randomly, will establish that their world still conforms to rules of logic and that events can be spontaneous. The game, in fact, confirms the opposite. When the coin lands (at first count) seventy six times on heads, it gives rise to his suspicion that events are preordained or absurd and leads to his feeling further estranged from a world in which he had hoped to find reason. He also supposes the disparity will threaten his friendship with Rosencrantz. "The equanimity of your average tosser of coins depends upon the law...which ensures that he will not upset...his opponent by winning too often (12-13). Thus, we learn he fears alienation not only on a societal, but also an inter-personal level.

Guildenstern proceeds to seek rationalisations for the amazing result. Sounding like George Moore in *Jumpers* he says, "The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear" (12). Both Moore and Guildenstern believe that their alienation can be overcome through a process of intellectualising. However, as Helene Keyssar-Franke notes, "intellectual games are lonely sport, often seeming to lead nowhere tangible or sufficient" (93), his approach will only lead to a heightened awareness of his alienation. Guildenstern's efforts to find answers prove fruitless because, rather than confronting the outside world, he chooses the more comfortable option—quizzing both himself and Rosencrantz (36-7).

This is manifest in their game of questions and answers. The purposes of playing here are manifold—it is a game where they know all the rules, and it therefore provides relief from a world where they know none. On a practical level, it is their attempt to “glean what afflicts” Hamlet. However, it is also an opportunity to vent their covert anxieties- many of the questions take on existential overtones:

What in gods name is going on?... What does it all add up to?...
Is there anyone else?... Am I dead?... Is there a choice?... Is there a
God? (32-3).

Paul Delaney feels Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s attempts to decipher their situation indicates their “sense that what evades their grasp is unknown to them but not unknowable”(14)... “[they] are never led to feel that theirs is an isolation amid a cosmic void” (21).

Their faith in the essential comprehensibility of their surroundings is verified in the mind of the audience, which recognises those surroundings as the storyline of *Hamlet*. We have witnessed this world and realise that it does work on a type of logic. Our familiarity with what we see before us, a mad Ophelia, a tormented prince and so forth, heightens our sympathy for the pair who lack, but desperately desire, such familiarity.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s alienation is assuaged somewhat by their attachment to one another. It is such that they are never apart and, correspondingly, are never alone. They are drawn together out of their mutual terror of solitude. This is emphasised when Rosencrantz pleads to Guildenstern, “Don’t leave me!” (56) and later, when on the verge of separating to seek out Hamlet, he concludes that “We ought to stick together” (67). For Rosencrantz, keeping his partner on good terms is of fundamental importance. This is emphasised when he asks Guildenstern to guess in

which fist he is holding a coin, we discover he has a coin in both, hoping that by allowing him to win every time he will make him happy (77).

However, on closer inspection, the intimacy between the two is of a superficial kind, born out of necessity rather than desire. They are, in many ways, very unlike and the unquestioning naivete of Rosencrantz often raises the ire of the more philosophical Guildenstern:

Are you stupid?...If I had any doubts, or rather hopes, they are dispelled. What could we possibly have in common except our situation? (*They separate and sit.*)

Language only proves to be a further barrier between them, both have a tendency to drop off into absurd exchanges where words lose all meaning and, thus, they fail to understand themselves or one another (28). The idea here is that an individual cannot successfully adopt the vernacular of a given society until he has comprehended that society's cultural fabric. This inability to effectively communicate adheres to the theories of Freud, as interpreted by Bigsby, which see "speech not as...a means of destroying barriers between individuals, but as a means of...evading the vulnerability which is a necessary corollary of communication" (13). Ultimately, whilst their companionship does provide some relief, it is really only further evidence of how comprehensively alienated they both are.

The issue of absent memory figures prominently in this play, it is a trait common both to the alienated individual and to the theatre of the absurd: "[Man] 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" (Esslin, 5). Because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to remember, they are deprived a sense of progression, of action leading to cause. Guildenstern expresses his frustration at this when he proclaims, "We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us,

with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered” (44). The most either manage to recollect is—

a man standing in his saddle in the half-lit half alive dawn banged on the shutters and called two names...when he called we came. That much is certain – we came (29).

The line is often repeated (12, 13, 14, 83, 95), suggesting that this moment marked their birth. They do not remember a past because they are without one—*Hamlet* literally called them into being. Rosencrantz boyishly complains “I want to go home...I’m out of my step here-“ (28), although we sympathise we also recognise the sad truth, this place where they feel so unbearably alienated *is* home.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s inability to conjure the past inevitably results in a loss of identity, without knowledge of their origins or prior actions they cannot know their selves. This is demonstrated when they fail to recognise themselves as the subjects of one of the players’ performances (62). They are alienated not only from their world but also from within themselves, they do not have “any firm behaviour-patterns, any ‘instincts’ which mark [them] off from the other” (Bennet, 16) and are, therefore, unable to discern the qualities marking them as individuals. The result is they are unable to distinguish themselves from one another.

My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz. (Guil *confers briefly with him.*) (*Without embarrassment.*) I’m sorry- *his* name’s Guildenstern, and *I’m* Rosencrantz (16-7).

Anthony Jenkins remains unconvinced over this identity crisis: “When ordinary people feel so threatened and lost they tend to cling to their individuality; one’s name is the essence of that self...that they should forget their own names fails to ring true” (41). Jenkins’ assertion is generally applicable to the alienated, however, I would argue that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s alienation is so severe they have completely

lost the sense of having any individuality to 'cling to'. The doubtful element in Stoppard's representation of these characters is not that they have forgotten their names then, but that they demonstrate an almost casual response to having done so.

The courtiers' relationship to their world can be defined as a continual battle between wanting to be controlled and wanting to exert control. Guildenstern is desperate to be informed of the events transpiring, not so that he can disturb them but so that he can conform to them- filling his allocated role. His first line to the Queen is, "We both obey, and here give up ourselves in full bent to lay our service freely at your, to be commanded" (27). This attitude is reiterated throughout the play; he tries to appease Rosencrantz by telling him:

There's logic at work- it's all done for you, don't worry. Enjoy it. Relax. To be taken in hand and led, like being a child again...It's like being given a prize" (30).

As June Schlueter observes, "they are attracted to the Hamlet play...because it offers this insecure couple security and certainty, which...is comforting" (74).

Their situation is symbolised by the boat they travel on in the third act. They are allowed a degree of movement on the vessel, giving the impression they are free to act, at the same time though, they are inexorably carried along by the currents. In one sense this is pleasing to Guildenstern (75), yet it is also the source of his greatest concern—that he is incapable of altering his environment and that he exists in "a world where initial events seem random but where the end is irrevocably fixed or determined" (Mullinex, 4).

This is the feeling he is left with at the end of the play and the end of his life. He remonstrates with himself for having missed the "moment, at the beginning, where [he] could have said- no" (95). Ultimately Guildenstern's desire to submit engenders a feeling of powerlessness, which, as noted by Peter C. Ludz, is one of the six key

factors in the development of alienation (21). It is not that he cannot act or that he could not have changed events, rather his feelings of inconsequence have led him to believe he should not act. “We are little men, we don’t know the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels, etcetera- it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate or even of kings” (83). Brian Richardson acknowledges this situation when he writes, “Guildenstern is so seduced by the discourse of determinism that he can hardly imagine any kind of action outside its control, even as he is surrounded by apparent instances of indeterminate events” (169). The events Richardson refers to are epitomised in Hamlet’s death warrant. Had they disclosed this letter to the Prince the storyline would have been irrevocably changed.

Rosencrantz does, unlike his partner, look for ways to upset the greater scheme and, by doing so, grant himself significance. He decides that throwing himself off the boat is the best way to put “a spoke in their wheels”. Guildenstern advises him that this action could very well be a *part* of their scheme and Rosencrantz demonstrates the hopelessness of their situation when he responds, “I shall remain on board. That’ll put a spoke in their wheels” (81). Neither character can disturb the scheme if he does not know the script. Rosencrantz, realising this, comes to the same conclusion as his partner- acquiescence is their only option:

All right! We don’t question, we don’t doubt. We perform (81).

The notion of giving up identity to perform an allocated part is central to another character—the Player. He has actively chosen to relinquish his “self” and assume, in its place, an endless recurrence of roles. However, whereas the courtiers are tormented by their insubstantial identities, the Player’s lost (or never attained) self-awareness causes him little angst. On the contrary, his roles are comforting in that they prescribe him a purpose. By relinquishing all individuality he is presenting

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with an alternative to their eternal grasping for identity and understanding:

Relax. Respond... You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn (49).

This is what Neil Samuels is speaking of when he says, "Guildenstern yearns for *meaning*, while the Player will settle for *order*" (75, italics in original). Behind this self-assured exterior, however, the Player is no less alienated than the courtiers; he is just as dependent on a "script" as they and has no greater insight into the author or purpose of that work. He also proves to be dependent on an audience, shown when he deplores Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for having left him mid-performance. His greatest fear is that he will be rendered lonely and inconsequential:

You don't understand the humiliation of it – to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable... We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade; that somebody would be watching. And then, gradually, no one was (46-7).

The presence of the Player in this work substantiates the idea that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not entirely idiosyncratic in suffering feelings of alienation. It is, in fact, the burden of many, as the Player himself informs them:

Uncertainty is the normal state. You're nobody special. (49)

Alienation can, however, be handled in different ways; the Player demonstrates a more off-the-cuff approach to life than our two protagonists can muster. Ultimately though, one senses he is not free of dissatisfactions, he has merely subsumed them within a cheap facade.

Although Prince Hamlet makes only the occasional appearance in this drama, his presence calls our mind back to the text of *Hamlet*, reminding us of its essential concern; the "dilemma of a sensitive individual confronted by a corrupt society" (Gordon, 9). In this respect, there is a synonymy between Hamlet, Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern. They are all, to varying degrees, innocents alienated by their unendurable awareness of moral degradation. For Hamlet this is the act committed by Claudius, for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern it is the smutty repertoire of the players: “No enigma, no dignity... only this – a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes” (20). All three suffer the feeling that their actions will not alter events in such a way as to enable them to feel an affinity with society. John Weightman addresses these similarities when he writes, “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern... become little Hamlets, whose uneasiness is a wry, apologetic modern echo of the Prince’s splendid renaissance melancholia” (38).

However, there are still significant differences between Shakespeare’s prince and Stoppard’s courtiers. For Hamlet, alienation is a result of specific occurrences, for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern it is intrinsic to their being and, whilst all three finish dead, Hamlet at least “struggles through social disorder, psychological crisis and metaphysical confusion to an affirmation of an order operating through all things” (Egan, 60). *His* alienation is overcome, for his boyhood “friends” there can be no such comfort.

The notions of mortality and alienation are intimately connected in this play. Guildenstern seeks meaning and value in life, yet he also recognises what must be the ultimate negation of meaning and value, that death is inevitable. If, as Rosencrantz says in one of his few lucid moments, “we are born with an intuition of mortality... out we come, bloodied and squalling with the knowledge that... there’s only one direction” (53), we are likely to feel a profound degree of purposelessness.

Joseph Duncan argues this awareness imbues Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with a humanity, “they gain identity as humans and as individuals in accepting the inevitability of their own approaching deaths” (66), Keyssar-Franke even claims this to

be “the underlying assertion of the entire play” (96). Other critics have also written of the positive aspects to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s fate. John Russel Taylor believes that death will “define and give shape to their pointless and shapeless lives” (319). Robert Gordon contends that life’s “underlying pattern becomes manifest only at the moment of death”(20) and John Weightman even suggests that they are aware of this when he contends that “[they] go wittingly to their deaths to give their lives a meaning” (40). These readings suggest that death offers an end to the courtiers’ alienation by finally allowing them to see the “script” of their lives.

I would argue, however, that at the play’s conclusion their only newfound awareness is of death’s imminence. They have no greater understanding of why they are to die or even, in fact, of why they were called for in the first place. Allowing the script to play itself out is not, therefore, a positive choice on their behalf. It is more that “tired of it all, they knowingly walk into the lethal trap Hamlet has set for them” (Simon, 664). Rosencrantz’s final utterance is an indication of relief, not for death having finally brought answers to their existence, but for it having removed them from a world that is both cruel and perplexing:

All right, then. I don’t care. I’ve had enough. To tell you the truth, I’m relieved (95).

In the final moments of his life he, like Albert of *Albert’s Bridge*, decries society as the enemy, “they had it in for us didn’t they? Right from the beginning. Who’d have thought we were so important” (93), the point of Stoppard’s play, however, is that they are not. To the characters in *Hamlet* their death is incidental, not worthy of tears or celebration. When viewed in comparison to the bloodshed that has occurred elsewhere (as summarised by Horatio in his final speech (96)) it could almost be described as trivial. According to William Babula the audience leaves with a similar feeling:

The overwhelming sense that the audience has is that their groping does not matter. (280)

A contrasting argument is made by Paul Delaney who asserts that the play “celebrates the value and worth of the individual” (35).

It is acceptable to say there is truth in both these arguments; whilst Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are inconsequential we sympathise with their alienation and admire their humanity. And, to return to the point made at the start of this section, we sense the severity of these existential concerns whilst enjoying the play’s undying comic spirit.

Chapter Four

Albert's Bridge

Albert's Bridge opens with the title character and his three colleagues, Bob, Charlie and Dad, engaged in the interminable task of painting a single-span bridge. Whilst the others shout greetings and inquiries Albert sings softly to himself, suggesting a degree of introversion. The moon is the theme of the song, foreshadowing his later state of cold, detached omniscience. He also engages in interior monologues that invite us into his world; his is a voice of reason. By contrast, the other three characters are engaged in an absurd exchange as they indelicately descend the bridge:

CHARLIE: Mind my head, Dad.

DAD: Watch my feet, Charlie- comin' down-

CHARLIE: I'll watch your feet- you mind my head. Watch your head, Bob- (54).

A dichotomy is established- the quiet satisfaction and sensitivity of the loner against the selfish urgency of the mob.

The ascent of the bridge is, however, a result, not a cause, of Albert's alienated state. Certainly, his inability to assimilate becomes more overt at this time but it is important to stress that Albert has never really belonged. His insight, seemingly not shared by others, into society's chaotic nature precludes an intimate attachment to that society. Therefore the bridge is a symptom insofar as it demonstrates his need for an escape.

Even so, the bridge does, later, come to be a cause of his alienation. The longer Albert spends there the more chaotic society seems and the less possibility there is of his finding cause to descend:

...Being up there...I saw the context. It reduced philosophy and everything else. I got a perspective. Because the bridge was- separate- complete- removed... (62).

Victor Cahn identifies another way in which the bridge exacerbates Albert's alienation: "Slowly his admiration turns into an affection and finally into an obsession that transcends all personal relationships...Albert has transferred all his love to the bridge" (90). There is no longer the motivation for Albert to seek out human contact, the bridge seems, to him, a more than adequate replacement.

So far the assumption has been made that Albert is a maladjusted member of society and that, as Tim Brassell notes, "the bridge sets the seal on [his] alienation" (85). Irving Wardle, however, suggests a way in which the bridge is actually beneficial:

[Stoppard's characters] always set life at a distance; and it is only then that they get into a stride of confident eloquence... they come to life by withdrawing from it (19).

The notion that the bridge allows Albert to "come to life" is challengeable. His life, as it were, on the bridge is merely dreading that which lies below him. We must wonder what the value of any life is when lived in complete detachment from its own species.

Joan Dean mounts a similar argument when she says, "the lofty perspective from the bridge affords Albert a vision of an ordered and coherent world" (30). To elaborate on that point, when Albert is amid the bustle of the city he finds existence demanding and confusing, therefore his self-imposed exile atop the bridge could be viewed as a coping method. It unifies the chaos and renders it insignificant. Ironically, he may be less alienated when physically detached from society than when at its hub.

However, to have overcome alienation denotes having not only an improved understanding of society but also a sense of belonging. Albert's perspective might

afford him some recognisable patterns but it certainly does not bring him any closer to assimilation. Nor does it *really* bring him closer to an understanding; the patterns he sees are a fallacy (distance allows the truth to be concealed), thereby rendering the bridge a device for an illusion rather than a path towards enlightenment. The bridge offers Albert not only a location; it also provides him with a job. We should briefly consider the relationship between this job and Albert's alienation.

Marx has written extensively on the alienating effects of labour in capitalist society (*italics in Bottomore's translation*):

The *alienation* of the worker in his product means...that it exists independently, *outside himself*, and alien to him...The life which he has given to the object sets itself against him as an alien and hostile force (96).

However, Albert's work, painting the bridge has, for him, "the qualities of a major artistic endeavour" (Whitaker, 25). It is rewarding because the product of his work is tangible, it remains fixed for him (and the rest of the city) to observe. The silver paint establishes where he has been and the brown paint where he is going, in this sense it places him in a clearly defined matrix of past, present and future. The progress of time is far less delineated in 'real' society. Being deprived of a sense of his history, a contributing factor of alienation, is at least one malaise that Albert, through his work on the bridge, has avoided.

Furthermore, because Albert is undertaking the task alone he is able to make a direct connection between the product of the work and his self. He recognises this would not have been possible had he followed his parents' dream:

[A factory man's] bits and pieces scatter, grow wheels, disintegrate, change colour, join up in new forms, which he doesn't know anything about. (55)

The bridge has saved Albert from a life of work that would have been, by Marx's definition, alienating. Albert recognises this, even echoing Marx in the above quote.

In working to establish the presence or absence of alienation in Albert it has been presupposed that alienation is always undesirable and to be avoided. A great deal of alienation theory has propagated this attitude. I refer to a definition given in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* as a case in point, “A psychological or social evil, characterized by one or another type of harmful separation, disruption or fragmentation, which sunders things that belong together” (21). The discussion thus far has not contradicted this presupposition. The question is whether alienation is for Albert, in some aspects, beneficial.

Probably the most important consideration is Albert’s state of mind when he is in exile. Victor Cahn relates him to Albert Camus’ description of Sisyphus, who is condemned to eternally push a rock up a mountain:

Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy (91).

Likewise, for Albert, each drop of paint and each girder of the bridge forms a world and it is the struggle with these two materials that fills his heart. We must ask, then, how alienation can be conceived of as an evil when its subject willingly submits to it and when it brings such happiness. We come by an answer to this if we consider the nature of his happiness more intensively.

The task of painting is not intrinsically pleasurable for Albert; rather, it provides him with an obsession that allows him to temporarily forget the intolerable state of the world, by the end of the play he is even spending whole nights on the bridge. Citing the *Mosby’s Medical Dictionary* definition, Albert’s tendencies could be seen as those of an obsessive-compulsive, “performing repetitive acts or rituals, usually as a means of releasing tension or relieving anxiety” (1094). Painting,

therefore, provides only the relief of having momentarily fulfilled a compulsion, not the genuine happiness of having found one's vocation.

Alienation does, at least, seem to afford Albert a greater sense of individuality. This is demonstrated when Albert solemnly contemplates life as a perfectly adjusted member of society:

The honest working man, father of three-...
content in his obscurity,
digging the garden of a council house... (69).

Albert revels in the knowledge that he has, through the bridge, avoided this fate. It seems he would sooner suffer alienation than anonymity. Kenneth Tynan observes this in Stoppard's characters generally, "Stoppard heroes... have nothing to pit against the hostility of society and the indifference of the cosmos except their obstinate conviction that individuality is sacrosanct" (23).

However, the bridge can also be seen to cost Albert a sense of identity. He is engaged in idolatry, worshipping an object, of which he, in enabling its renewal, is part creator. Erich Fromm explains the way in which idolatry is a cause of alienation:

He transfers to the thing of his creation the attributes of his own life and instead of experiencing himself as the creating person, he is in touch with himself only... in the indirect way of submission to life frozen in the idols (44).

This is demonstrated late in the play when he no longer conceives himself as an individual on the bridge but, rather, *as* the bridge, "Paint on my arm, silver paint on my brown arm; it could be part of the bridge" (72).

Another, more overtly, negative result of Albert's alienation is the chilling disregard for humanity that grows in him the longer he spends in solitude. This is conspicuous in his scene with Fraser, who has climbed the bridge to throw himself off it. Rather than try to prevent the suicide, as Fraser expects him to do, Alberts wants to hurry it along:

Come, come, don't procrastinate... You said you were going to jump... Well jump... You know your own mind. And you're holding me up (78).

We may ask how Albert has gone from lost and lonely soul to casually encouraging the death of a fellow man; it seems a relatively large transition. I have two suggestions for this. First, he bears a deep resentment toward the society that has left him on the 'outside' and, therefore, resentment toward the individual members of that society. This notion is supported by Albert's contemptuous observation "I could drown them in my spit" (71). The second possibility is that Albert, as a result of viewing humans from afar over an extended period, has lost his ability to think of them as anything other than 'dots'. He no longer associates those dots with thoughts and feelings; he even seems vaguely amazed that "all the dots have names" [72]. Naturally, he is unaffected by whatever might occur to them. This is solipsism, which Frank A. Johnson identifies as commonly occurring in the alienated:

In the severely alienated person, there is very little belief in the validity of experience outside the self. All experience, therefore, is conceptualized simply as occurring internally, and hence can only be what the individual experiences or feels (93).

Albert's alienation has cost him potential happiness, self-knowledge and humanity. Ultimately, it also costs him his life. The bridge has become dilapidated so an army of painters is sent up to finish the job over the course of a day, the girders cannot withstand the stress and eventually the whole structure comes crashing down into the bay. It was a chaotic society that drove him fearfully up the bridge and an ordered one, marching in step, which brought him back down.

Is it society, or Albert himself who is responsible for his alienation? The society depicted in this play is not the Soviet Russia of *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, the existential wasteland of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* or the crumbling system of *Squaring the Circle*. On the contrary, it is, by all appearances, a

liberal democracy very much like our own. Why then, in a free and successful society such as this, has Albert been left spiritually destitute?

The obvious answer is that his alienation is a result of his own inadequacies. His attempts to carve an existence for himself among society are feeble; passively accepting marriage to a woman with whom he has little in common yet ignoring those with a similar disposition, namely Fraser and Fitch, going so far, in fact, as to regard them as enemies.

Albert's society, however, compounds the problem. Its manic pace is captured by Albert in one of his numerous monologues: "motors, coughing fits, applause, screams, laughter, feet on stairs, secretaries typing to dictation, radios delivering the cricket scores, tapes running wheels turning, mills grinding, chips frying lavatories flushing..." (72). And the notion of society's chaos and senselessness is not entirely a product of Albert's mind; Fraser is significant in that he lends support to these attitudes.

Like Albert, he is decimated by his awareness of society's lack of order:

I do not believe that there is anyone in control. There is the semblance of pattern- supply meeting demand, one-way streets, give and take, etcetera- but there's nothing really holding it together. One is forced to recognize the arbitrariness of what we claim to be order (77).

Fraser believes the only answer to his predicament will come through an act of self-destruction—throwing himself off the bridge. The plan is never enacted because he, like Albert, finds solace in the perspective offered by this structure, each time he climbs its height in desperation he regains the strength to go back down. Fraser is no less alienated than Albert; it is plausible to suggest his repeated sojourns to the bridge come to be more for the human contact with Albert than to enable his suicide. Yet, unlike Albert, he possesses the courage to return and face his society, he is aware of

the necessity for reconciliation with it. He is also free of Albert's egotism, having no pretensions that his existence is any more meaningful than those of the scurrying bodies below. Therefore, his presence is an important step in supporting the idea that we cannot merely blame individuals, we must begin to consider the fundamental flaws of the society.

Several other characters demonstrate the pervasiveness of alienation in the world of this play. Albert's mother and Kate are both pragmatic and materialist women who are alienated from Albert in failing to understand his abstract concerns. To both women a sense of family is paramount. The mother repeatedly seeks confirmation of her relationship to Albert by asking him to call her mother, his failure to do so or to even take notice when she pitifully asks- "do you love me, Albert?" (62), causes her silent grief. Kate is the figure of the lonely wife, a less spectacular form of alienation than Albert's but one which is, perhaps, more readily identifiable to the audience:

I talk to myself because nobody else listens, and you won't talk to me, so I talk to the sink and the stove and the baby, and maybe one day one of them will answer me (75).

Dad is the figure of Marx's alienated worker, profoundly disturbed by the purposelessness of his labours and the potential life they have cost him. "I've spread my life over those girders, and in five minutes I could scrape down to the iron, I could scratch down to my prime" (55).

The committee member, Fitch, is like Albert and Fraser in the sense that he dreams of a more ordered society. His life goal is to "transform the running of a living community to a thing of precision and efficiency, a cybernetic poem- a programmed machine as perfect as a rose"(80). This desire has caused him to think of mankind as no more than a mathematical equation, thus he has lost any real emotional connection

with, and is alienated from, his species. He secretly desires an escape but is so entrenched in the system that all he can do is contribute to the madness.

The same can be said for the committee as a whole; they are a detached organisation wielding an absurd degree of control over the lives of citizens and, thus, engendering a feeling of powerlessness in them. It was their policy that placed Albert in exile and the failure of that policy which cost him his life. The incompetence of the committee demonstrates that governing bodies must always work in accordance with the needs of 'real' individuals or risk dire consequences.

This play presents a society suffering atomisation—structured in such a way that it inevitably draws its citizens apart. Yet the resounding feeling is that, like Kate, Fraser or Fitch, “we must conduct ourselves through the maze of meetings, transactions, decisions and piddling dilemmas that weigh us down” (V.Cahn, 92). As Cahn goes on to say, “we know that there is no meaning, and yet we must believe that there is” (93). We cannot rely on “illusion[s] and false refuge[s] from life” (Robinson, 44); to seek an answer to one’s alienation by retreating into exile is to be beyond salvation.

Chapter Five

Jumpers

Jumpers is a pastiche of acrobatic performance, philosophical debate, murder mystery and surreal farce. This unconventional, and seemingly disparate, array of styles does, however, possess a central concern that unifies the disorderly design-society and its decline into chaos.

George Moore is a moral philosopher whose chief concern is proving the existence of God (17). This is not merely an academic concern; it is a personal quest to restore sense to a society that seems increasingly absurd. George believes proof of a deity will verify his faith in moral absolutes and confer meaning onto his life: “nothing can be created out of nothing...my moral conscience is different from the rules of my tribe...there is more in me than meets the microscope” (58).

George’s wholly rational society, of which the radical-liberal Jumpers are emblematic, has stripped man of both mystery and humanity. Their belief that morality is subjective, that nothing is essentially “good” or “bad” is an affront to George, it engenders in him a comically extreme pessimism about the future: “Man has gone ape and God is in the ascendant, and it will end as it began, with him gazing speculatively down on the unpeopled earth as the moon rises over the smoking landscape” (30).

George’s irrational yearnings are his counter to the prevailing attitude. He falters, however, in trying to validate his irrationality with rational measures, his “rigorous philosophical honesty makes it virtually impossible to construct a valid argument” (Gordon, 23). By postulating his theories with logic he inadvertently supports the counter-argument—dispelling the certainty of both God and an absolute

moral code (45-6); the sad truth, which George fails to truly recognise, is that there is nothing logical about faith. The play is not, as Harold Clurman infers, an assertion of God's existence (638), rather it is an assertion of the validity, the necessity even, of faith in spite of all the evidence.

There is a strange nobility about George's resilient attachment to a flawed theory, just as there was about Riley and his flawed inventions, but unlike the inventor, George cannot unquestioningly believe in his proposal. As a result he is left metaphysically alienated, trapped in a coldly rational world and bereft of a God in which to seek solace. Furthermore, he is alienated by his society. Because his philosophy does not concur with theirs he is an irredeemable outcast; as James Morwood explains, "his philosophy cannot be tolerated... in a society where a ruthless and materialistic government insists on obedience and conformity" (141).

Moore recognises that he is equally estranged from a smaller community; his philosophy colleagues. His branch of inquiry is decidedly unpopular at a time when language and logic are the fashionable topics:

In the circumstances I was lucky to get the Chair of Moral Philosophy.
Only the Chair of Divinity lies further below the salt. (41).

His esteem is further compromised by the fact that he is not the first philosopher named George Moore, as he observes, "it tends to dissipate the impact of one's name" (48). Subsequently, he does not have a professional identity that could, at least, offer solace for his being an outcast.

As a means of tempering this aspect of his alienation George has deluded himself into believing he had a professional friendship with the late Bertrand Russell. Russell, however, was a friend of his wife who, we suspect, was little more than mildly amused by the crank philosopher. Although George's wife, Dotty, is keen to alert him

to this, George can never quite let the idea go that he shared an understanding with this important figure: “Did Bertrand Russell ever... mention me, after that?” (32).

George’s devotion to an esoteric field has extracted him from his day-to-day existence- he is the last character to learn of McFee’s death, barely notices his secretary and struggles to remember the name of his servant, he is, as Dotty says, “living in dreamland” (22) . Subsequently, he is alienated not only on a metaphysical and professional but also domestic level. Furthermore, because he lives holed-up in the private world of his study, he compromises his relationship to Dotty. Her cries for help are genuine, yet he responds to them only as an interruption to his work (18). He has not been deserted by her, as Victor Cahn contends (121), rather, he is the deserter. However, unlike Albert of *Albert’s Bridge*, there seems to be a part of George that yearns to reconnect with his wife. He reminisces fondly of earlier, happier times before they became estranged:

Oh, Dotty... The first day you walked into my class...I thought, ‘That’s better!’... It was a wet day... your hair was wet. (25)

Yet, despite his desire, he is unable to recapture those days. In concentrating solely on the development of his mind he has paid a heavy price—the ability to muster emotions. On occasions during the play he comes close to breaching the emotional gap between them but is then either unwilling or unable to completely fulfil the role of supportive husband, using work as an excuse to retreat from the bedroom:

DOTTY: Georgie...

(*But George won’t or can’t*)

GEORGE: (*Facing away, out front, emotionless*) Meeting a friend in a corridor, Wittgenstein said... (66)

In this way, philosophy is, for him, not just a means to find God but also a way to escape facing the issue of his wife’s deteriorating sanity; any theory to cogitate, no matter how absurd or banal, will suffice:

Consider my left sock. My left sock exists but it need not have done so... Why does my sock exist? (20).

John Simon criticises Stoppard for failing to develop Dotty and George's relationship, "seldom even letting them inhabit the same side of the stage" (84). However, I feel this to be a wise decision on Stoppard's part as their physical distance on stage creates a visual that tells us a great deal about the relationship, namely that "they are afraid of their need for each other"(Cave, 70).

Because Dotty has been denied the support she requires from George, she must seek it out from male visitors, Archie, Bones and, at one stage, an entire troupe of jumpers (46), in a fashion that could be mistaken for nymphomania. Whether or not these encounters become sexual (like George we are never to know for sure), it is important to note that this is not Dotty's prime motivation, "her dependence... arises from emotional and practical needs that George refuses to fill" (Thompson,197). It is for similar reasons that she reminisces over her halcyon days as a performer and, furthermore, reminds herself that she is still very much remembered and admired by fans: "my retirement is now almost as long as my career, but they're waiting for me to come back out, and finish my song" (30). The attention and affection for which Dotty craves are borne out of a need to feel significant; the last vestiges of her sanity depend upon her ability to sustain this belief.

Although her visitors remain, they appreciate her on an aesthetic level only and, whilst her admirers applause emphatically, there are cries of disappointment when she fails to hold a tune. She faces the threat of losing their attention to the next new thing (in this case a secretary on a trapeze). Dotty's alienation from George is not, therefore, adequately substituted with close relations to others.

George's aloofness is not, however, the primary cause of Dotty's alienation. Her state emanates from a broader concern--man's conquest of the moon; what is

typically seen as an advancement of man's status is, for her, only proof of our insignificance and, as Weightman asserts, confirmation of "our isolation in the universe" (44). It suggests that our values, morals and beliefs are arbitrary:

Man is on the Moon, his feet on solid ground, and he has seen us whole, all in one go, little—local...and all our absolutes, the thou-shalts and the thou-shalt-nots that seemed to be the very condition of our existence, how did they look to two moonmen with a single neck to save between them? (65-6)

Dotty is here referring to the very public battle for survival that occurs between Captain Scott and his colleague Oates. It has destroyed any belief that man is inherently altruistic, pushed to the furthest limits his true, primal nature of callousness and selfishness is revealed. Irving Wardle contends that Stoppard's play is "trying to define the minimum conditions in which human beings will treat each other well" (49): the moon incident does not establish that minimum condition, it merely certifies that those minimum conditions (whatever they may be) have their definite limits. The ironic use of the names Scott and Oates (who were, as Mary Davidson notes, heroic and selfless Antarctic explorers (309)), reminds us, bitterly, of the qualities that are so sadly lacking in the explorers of Stoppard's world.

Dotty's fears are very much like George's, they both concern recent changes in society that bring with them the threat of anomie. In this sense, the victory of the Radical Liberals and the moon landing are analogous, they form part of an overall picture of society's increasing disorder. This disorder has sparked, in Dotty, a complete mental breakdown; her only recourse is the isolation of her bedroom. And yet her claim that she's "all right in here" (24), is clearly untrue; there is no peace in seclusion for Dotty. A huge television screen replays the moon incident over and over, cruelly reminding her of that which she needs to forget. Furthermore, Dotty cannot hope to ease her alienation by hiding because, unlike John Brown, she is not suited to solitude;

she is continually torn between the need to escape her chaotic society and the need to be a “society girl”—the centre of the party and the object of attention.

The theme of alienation is developed well beyond its depiction in George and Dotty. McFee is a prime example; his situation recapitulates Stoppard’s central concerns in a way that intensifies the play’s resonances of loss and despair. Like Dotty, McFee’s angst derives from the sight of the two astronauts and the implications their struggle has for mankind. He has, we are told, seen the future, “and it’s yellow” (71), a reference not only to cowardice but also to the cold mentality of the Radical Liberal jumpers (whose leotards are that colour). He responds to this perceived chaos by seeking admission to a monastery (71), although his spectacular death prevents this plan from reaching fruition.

Another aspect of McFee’s alienation, we discover late in the play, is very much like George’s. As one of Archie’s jumpers he seems to enjoy the benefits of fellowship—safety and support (demonstrated literally through their assemblage of a human pyramid). It is suggested, though, that his philosophies were secretly tending more towards George’s than Archie’s and, therefore, that he did not belong amongst the society of gymnasts. This estrangement probably cost him his life, Archie may well offer security but he has little tolerance for those that threaten the unity of his club (54). The death of McFee (he is blasted from out of the human pyramid), is a prime example of Stoppard’s effective use of imagery to display alienation in a more surreal and potent way than could be achieved with dialogue alone.

In a sense all the Jumpers are alienated. They must suppress their individuality—becoming ciphers wearing identical costumes and espousing identical theories, all of Archie’s devising. Lucina Gabbard goes as far as to draw an analogy between Archie’s club and “the Marxian masses controlled by society” (88).

Crouch and the secretary are also figures of servility; their respective positions have left them anonymous and powerless. McFee seemed to be Crouch's only acquaintance; his death marks the beginning of what could be a very lonely future for the servant. Crouch, never one to draw attention, despondently accepts this when he says, "I shall miss our little talks" (71). The secretary, who was in an adulterous relationship with McFee, is even more stoical about her loss. Mute (and nameless) throughout the play, we only learn of her silent suffering through comments by other characters.

Even the cocksure Inspector Bones reveals a degree of vulnerability toward the end of the play. It becomes evident that he has spent a considerable deal of time fantasising about Dotty, describing her as, "a delicate creature, like a lustrous-eyed little bird you could hold in your hand" (49). In pinning his hopes on a star he is attempting to transcend the dissatisfaction of under-achievement elsewhere in his life:

ARCHIE: I think you're a man who feels that his worth has not been recognised. Other men have got on—younger, flashier men... Superintendents... Commissioners...
BONES: There may be something in that. (55)

In this respect he can be likened to Alfred, of *M Is For Moon Among Other Things*, who escapes a mundane existence by indulging in reverie (believing he has an intimate connection with Marilyn Monroe (21)).

Harold Clurman accuses Stoppard's play of stating its point, or "thesis", rather than revealing it through action (637). Whilst this claim can be partially supported by George's long monologues, which threaten the play with didacticism, I contend that Stoppard's "thesis" goes beyond mere statement. George's notions about a callous, chaotic society and the lack of divine order are supported through a series of interwoven instances, and images, of men fractured by their world. Astronaut Oates, the

“receding figure waving forlornly from the wastes” (14), who seems an allegory for man’s desolation, exemplifies this. As does Tarzan, who is hurt by a recognition that brings to mind Lacan’s “Mirror Stage”, on gazing into a jungle pool he realises he is not like the animals he lives with (44). And a further example is Bones’ brother, the victim of a nervous breakdown after years of merciless taunting by those around him (52). Whilst all these examples are ephemeral, they nonetheless confirm, to us, George’s gravest fears; they also intimate the universality of alienation.

Stoppard’s conclusion adopts a melancholic tone—there is more resignation than angst. It is only at this late stage, when the comic hi-jinks and philosophical grandstanding have subsided, that we comprehend how little McFee’s death has meant to the other characters (Crouch and the secretary excepted). Our sympathy for George also peaks at this stage, in the words of Alfred Ayer, “what finally happens to the hare and the tortoise is the most moving moment of the play” (16). Not due to the death of the two pets but because it is the occurrence which causes George to, belatedly, realise “his moral failure in putting theories of Good and Evil before the needs of the individual: in particular Dotty” (Innes, 341). He finally recognises he needs more than a deity, he needs real people around him, but he also recognises that his actions have led to him being utterly alone.

George’s dream Coda ends, according to Lucina Gabbard, on an “optimistic note”. She contends that Archie’s final speech is Stoppard’s way of saying “look on the better side!” (95):

Many are happy much of the time; more eat than starve, more are healthy than sick, more curable than dying; not so many dying as dead...half the world is at peace with itself, and so is the other half (78).

I disagree with Gabbard; to contrive an ending such as this Stoppard would be contradicting the moral tone of his entire play. What this speech does indicate is the

victory of an unconscionable rationalistic mentality, one that is all too ready to dismiss human suffering, even if to do so requires serious self-deception. Dotty's final refrain farewelling the moon warns us against buying into their philosophy, we are reminded that all is *not* well.

In speaking of the comic nature of the play, James Morwood claims that, whilst "the society the playwright envisages is dehumanised and grim...no world that makes our risible muscles operate so freely can be altogether bad" (141). This seems to confuse the comic nature of the play with the grim nature of the world depicted in it. Although we appreciate Stoppard's wit, we can recognise that our mirth is not shared with his characters. The most that they can do, in such a world, is "cling to a kind of blind, stubborn faith" (Zeifman, 185). George's faith in the existence of God, Dotty's faith in her admirers, McFee's faith in the monastery and Bones' faith that he can understand and assist Dotty are all admirable, if not entirely successful, methods of coping with the insufficiencies of life.

Chapter Six

Every Good Boy Deserves Favour

Every Good Boy Deserves Favour, written in 1977, is distinct from many of the earlier works discussed here in that its concerns are political. Despite this shift in emphasis, the play still shares the same essential themes as were present from *Enter A Free Man* onwards; it “presents an absurd world, confusing and terrifying”, only on this occasion it is “concretized in the form of a Soviet regime” (Cahn, 145). And, as always, our protagonist is an alien being in this regime.

The play depends heavily on its central metaphor—Soviet society as an orchestra. The connection is established when the Doctor, an arch upholder of the state’s values, leaves his position in the string section, to enter his office, violin in hand (20-1). Likewise, the Teacher runs the school orchestra. Implicit in this metaphor is the idea that each citizen is a musician whose actions are dictated by sheet music and conductors. Furthermore, they must work together to produce a harmony.

For a play satirising the Soviet system this metaphor initially seems reasonably flattering, suggesting a society united toward common goals. Tim Brassell observes this when he writes, “the beauty of large-scale musical works can *only* be achieved by highly disciplined ensemble work; as a metaphor for the collectivist state it is decidedly flawed” (188). However, the unity of the citizens-musicians is enforced and the ‘beautiful large-scale music’ can, for this reason, only ever be superficial. Citizens, it seems, are uniformly alienated because they are not free to entertain their own ideologies but rather, as the doctor observes, must submit to the ideologies of the state:

What do you mean? – it’s not *me*! I’m told what to do (31).

As Jim Hunter explains, “the three representatives of the state...are not fanatics; they merely go through the motions expected of them” (245).

The system is quick to isolate individual minds from its “orchestra” as they threaten the entire, fragile structure; to quote Stoppard from an interview with Mel Gussow, “the dissident is a discordant note in a highly orchestrated society” (34). The play presents us three exemplars of dissidence, and the character responsible for each is shown to be as alienated (although in differing ways) as those citizens who play along with the sheet music.

Alexander cannot concur with his nation’s policy of incarcerating those whose beliefs do not align with state ideology: thus he too is incarcerated. This aspect of the play recalls Louis Althusser’s Marxist essay “Ideology and the State”, which discussed the way in which the state “interpellates” individuals as subjects of ideology through Ideological State Apparatuses (religious, educational, family, political, etcetera). Alexander is, by Althusser’s definition, a “bad subject”. The aforementioned ISAs are ineffective and, consequently, he “provokes the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive State apparatus)” (60). In this situation the repressive apparatus is a mental hospital, and it disempowers people whose views threaten society by labelling them “ill”:

Your opinions are your symptoms. Your disease is dissent. Your kind of schizophrenia does not presuppose changes of personality noticeable to others. [30]

Alexander is placed within Stoppard’s orchestra metaphor through his *inability* to play an instrument—a deficiency that suggests a great deal about his character; he is *unable* to submit to the proponents of hypocrisy, intolerance, and corruption even when on the brink of starvation. His moral fabric precludes it:

...you think I'm going to crawl out of here, thanking them for curing me of my delusions? Oh no. They lost. And they will have to see that it is so. They have forgotten their mortality. Losing might be their first touch of it for a long time. (29)

So whilst he feels alienated from the state, this quote suggests he still feels there is hope for the individual to effect change. The Soviet Union's concern that it project a positive image to rest of the world reminds us that, historically, it has been alienated on a global scale but it also grants Alexander an usual form of power, the power to tarnish his nation's image:

The bad old days were over long ago. Things are different now. Russia is a civilized country, very good at Swan Lake and space technology, and its confusing if people starve themselves to death (24).

Stoppard's earlier play, Dogg's *Hamlet*, Cahoot's *Macbeth*, recognises dissent "not as a solitary condition but as a genuinely effective, group activity" (Sammells, 111). This play implies that dissent can also be a lonely state (as it requires courage that can be mustered by few). Although he is alone in his battle, Alexander's martyrdom demonstrates a "concern for the silent suffering of all... innocent fellow countrymen and women" (Brassell, 185). His antipathy towards bureaucracy has not, therefore, led to similar feelings towards all in society. This is effectively demonstrated when he suffers a nightmare about his son Sacha's treatment at school (20). Movingly, he cries his son's name in fear the boy will be indoctrinated like so many others before him.

Sacha shows many of his father's dissident traits, although they are more instinctual than intellectual. At school he refuses to play his triangle in the ordered fashion. His teacher attempts to bring him into line by filling his head with geometric principles, suggesting additional indoctrination will follow. And Sacha confirms his non-conformity by telling his father "I've started geometry. It's horrible" (25).

However, this dissonance is not the reason for Sacha's alienation; he is, ultimately, only concerned in reconnecting with his father:

Tell them lies. Tell them they've cured you. Tell them you're grateful...
I want you to come home (35).

Although his parental loss tends to be overwhelmed by Alexander's loss, it is a significant inclusion as it lends the play emotional weight and prevents the material from becoming coldly political. We are reminded that alienation can exist on multifarious levels: "Dear Sacha, don't be sad, it could have been ten times as bad, if we hadn't had the time we had... I kiss you now, your loving dad" (34).

Ivanov, the 'genuine' mental patient who has an orchestra playing in his head, is alienated by his inability to exist outside the absurd reality he has conjured. He cannot communicate with others because they do not share his reality; this is hilariously demonstrated in the opening scene where he tries to learn more about his cellmate, Alexander, by quizzing him on the instrument he plays. The notion that Alexander is not at all musical is entirely beyond his reasoning. Ivanov's illness estranges him from others and devalues him in the state's eyes, the frustration of this manifests itself in both expressions of violence (18) and in a stronger dependence on the one thing he does have—his imaginary orchestra. Even this orchestra, though, is alien to him. He is let down by the inadequacy of their performance and apologises to Alexander, admitting:

Sorry. I can't control them (22).

Whilst Ivanov's alienation is profound, he is too much a comic device for us to really sympathise with his predicament.

All three of the play's oppressed characters share the same name—Alexander Ivanov (Sacha is its shortened form). This, like Alexander's soliloquy where men are

referred to by letters of the alphabet (23), is a subtle criticism of the way the system robs its citizens of an identity.

Although both Alexander and Ivanov are ultimately released from the asylum, Stoppard's conclusion has an ambiguous tone. It is, Felicia Londre maintains, "an ending that might be interpreted as either optimistic or pessimistic" (154). Some critics have treated the release as an affirmation of "human dignity and freedom against possible odds" (Dean, 96), as an assertion of the rights of the individual over the state. In actuality, the resolution is somewhat less triumphant than that. Alexander has comprehensively out-muscled the authorities, but is quietly aware that he has only escaped, rather than transformed, the will of the state, (shown by the Teacher and the Doctor's complacent return to seats among the orchestra). To return to Stoppard's central metaphor, discordant playing can temporarily upset the orchestra but will never change the score. Because Alexander will be returning to an unchanged society his alienation will continue.

We cannot help but be moved by Sacha's rapturous cry "Everything can be all right!" (37), his positivism is understandable (given he has his father back), but it is also misplaced. Knowing Sacha will soon face the sort of pressure that has been applied to Alexander we cannot share his enthusiasm. Katherine Kelly attests that the boy's running toward the orchestra shows him "falling back on the only position left to him, membership in the dominant social system" (120) and Corballis supports this, claiming he "falls from innocence and purity to experience and compromise" (112). I believe, however, that Sacha's strident march through the orchestra demonstrates a character that has retained his naïve ambition. Like his father, he will proceed with the hopeless struggle of individual against society.

The struggle may be hopeless but Stoppard's work nevertheless leaves us with an avenue for optimism. It is best expressed in the words of Alexander to his son, "To thine own self be true, one and one is always two" [36]. A sentiment comparable, perhaps, to Rudyard Kipling's "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs..." (273). As absurd as the world is, if one refuses to allow it to impinge on their own character they can survive any degree of alienation.

Conclusion

The plays discussed in this thesis depict protagonists confronted by a world which is dogmatic and corrupt, as with the Soviet regime of *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, excessively regimented—the mindless schedules and procedures of *If You're Glad I'll Be Frank*—and absurdly amoral, as seen in *Jumpers*. Sometimes, as with the existential wasteland of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, it is simply perplexing.

Such environments inevitably engender feelings of alienation; this can be evidenced in the resentment, apathy, morbidity, melancholia and resignation that plague so many of these characters. For many, the only counter against a loss faith in the world is in a firmness of belief in the self. George Riley with his unquestioning commitment to a string of hopelessly impractical inventions, Dottie Moore with her vain attempts to recapture former glories and the Player, taking pride and comfort in his allocated role, all characterise this form of belief. Others, however, slip into the dangerous paradox of trying to lessen, or overcome, their alienation through retreat. George Moore and Albert come to rely on their study and bridge, respectively, as a haven from the vagaries of life; in doing so, however, they endanger the quality that can best protect them—their humanity.

Despite the resilience that marks all these characters as truly admirable, a cold and inhuman society inevitably proves the victor. It manages, with monumental efficiency, to bring its sensitive spirits back into line—Gladys is, after a momentary lapse into rebellion, talked calmly back into submission by her superior. Those whose independent spirit proves too mighty are either destroyed, as with Albert's involuntary

descent—or dispelled, like Alexander, who is released but only on Soviet terms and will never, we sense, be participatory.

Alienation exists, in these early plays, well beyond that of self in relation to society, many of these characters also have difficulty relating merely on an interpersonal level. This may be a consequence of society's intervention, as with Gladys and Frank or Alexander and his son. It may, however, also be an indication of one of the many manifestations of alienation—dehumanisation, as with George, who cannot feel for his wife, or (as an ever more extreme example) Albert, for whom the human race has become nothing more than a swarming of “dots”. Sometimes there *is* no one to relate to; no one who shares their degree of recognition that society is startlingly insufficient. Despite their estrangement from others, several of these characters clearly still place great value in human relations, feeling them to be their only hope in an otherwise cold world; an example is Guildenstern's desperate attempts to keep Rosencrantz as a friend.

And there is still another form of alienation felt by many of these characters; it is what Hegel described as self-alienation. Although obsessed by “the sound of their own internal machinery”, as Johnson observes many alienated individuals are (92), they often demonstrate a surprising lack of self-knowledge. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern forget their names and their origin, Gladys is in danger of becoming a machine without feeling or thought and Albert eventually loses the ability to differentiate himself from the bridge. Consequently, they are divested of the ability to escape inwards from their strange environment; it is, for the above characters at least, equally foreign terrain.

Whilst Stoppard's protagonists present readily observable instances of alienation, there are a plethora of allusions to estrangement and dissonance elsewhere.

Characters like Albert's wife, Kate, who speaks to herself over the kitchen-sink, Linda, who yearns for a boyfriend and Ivanov, trapped inside his lunatic mind, create resonances of loneliness throughout the plays.

All of the works, however, have managed to retain their comic edge; it is, in fact, the quality for which Stoppard is most noted. Perhaps, only as we leave the theatre, after the laughter has subsided, do we recognise that the objects of our merriment have been left pondering rather grave questions about their lives; Guildenstern captures the general tone of those questions when he asks:

Can that be all? And why us?—anybody would have done. And we have contributed nothing (70).

The fact that Stoppard has managed to fuse such weighty concerns with verbal wit, parody and a general sense of vitality is testimony to his dexterity as a writer.

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