

Sentimentalism and Sophistry: A Real Sham
The Arts Club production of Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*:
A response and review in four parts

John Kemp

Part 1:

The Producers: A Fable

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

Lights come up on two men, Dick and Harry, in a grotty dungeon of a room in the bowels of a London playhouse. Harry is older, wizened, graying, with a few extra inches around the middle – evidence of the good life when he can afford it. His clothes are good, but wearing out. Dick is younger, Machiavellian to the core. He is dressed similarly to Harry, but a little more fashionable.

Harry: (*Resigned.*) So that's about it then?

Dick: We need money Harry. We need a hit, we need new benefactors, and we need them now.

Harry: (*Sighs. Pause. Looks up at Dick.*) You have an idea then?

Dick: I do. (*Hesitates.*)

Harry: (*A little impatient.*) Well, let's have it.

Dick: (*A slight pause. Starts a little hesitantly then warms to it. By the middle of the scene they are both excited.*) A love story, Harry.

Harry: (*Dubious.*) A love story.

Dick: A new kind of love story, Harry. Have you seen the back pages of the Weeklies lately? There are more ads now than stories. And they're all sado this and masochism that. What we need is to get it out of the papers and back into the theatre where it belongs. *Of Human Bondage*, but new and graphic. Obvious like a pie in the face. Dirty handkerchiefs. The lot.

Harry: Go on.

Dick: Okay, look. Thatcher's here to stay. If we want their money, we need something that'll get the upper class on our side. So we go after the left. We have speeches that ridicule ideas against the class system. Those hunger strikers are a big deal right now, so we'll put the lead female into an affair with a young I.R.A. man. That'll assuage upper-class guilt and is probably a fantasy anyway. At the same time we blast the hunger strikers ideology.

Harry: Jesus, Dick. The I.R.A.! They'll bomb us!

Dick: We'll make him a Scottish rebel then. They're all the same to the rich. *(Beat.)* Or better still the character can be an actor *playing* a Scottish rebel.

Harry: *(beat)* Who'll write it?

Dick: *(beat)* Tom Stoppard.

Harry: *(incredulous)* You're not bloody serious!

Dick: I bloody well am! Listen, he's been dropping like a stone since R and G. "Too literary." "Too bloody clever." This'll be his opportunity to write about love... to prove to his critics that he *is* a great writer. *And* we'll offer him the biggest guarantee he's seen in years. And it's his literary cache that wins the day. Then all we need is a female lead the men like. Someone they'll pant after. A good pair of legs and we're set.

Harry: You really think it'll work?

Dick: It'll work Harry. And not only that, but we take the money and we go into film.

Harry: Film?

Dick: Film, Harry. A new genre: 'films for females', 'chick flicks'. Same themes. A sordid affair – he forgives her. A promiscuous past – he wants her anyway. A Jane Austen slash racy bodice-ripper! The worse the better! *(Holds up his hands like a camera shot.)* Successful businessman meets prostitute -- they fall in love... I've even got a title for that one: "Pretty Lady". We're gonna be millionaires, Harry!

Harry: *(With quiet admiration.)* If it comes off you're bloody brilliant.

Dick: We plant a few reviews and we're set. Joey at *The Times* is always short and

will do a proper job for a few quid... (*beat*) Like you always said, Harry: "If it makes money, it's art."

Blackout

Part 2: Payola

Joseph Bellow

Special to *The Times*

The London theatre world has been buzzing for months now, anticipating the new play by Tom Stoppard. Last night the buzz turned to a roar after the opening night of *The Real Thing*. And this play is indeed "the real thing". Tom Stoppard has finally fulfilled the promise of the early *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and has written a deep and moving portrayal of modern love and betrayal, profoundly exploring matters of the heart. Using his trademark wit and cleverness to prise open and expose the workings of Cupid's arrows, Stoppard carves out and serves up the human heart like a scene from *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (one of the 'plays within the play' of the confidently constructed plot). This must-see play will move and unsettle you, and show you your own needs and desires.

Stoppard has proven that he is one of the great playwrights of the 20th century, and this audacious play sizzles with new insight into love and sex. (And that's not all that sizzles – Felicity Kendall is a revelation as a brave new 'good' wife.) The only question about this play is how many awards will it win...

Part 3: A short criticism

Reading over *The Real Thing* I get the general impression that Stoppard suffered from a lack of courage. I think that I see places in the script where ideas are

starting to be explored, but the play is left without the strong final rewrite that would make it a much stronger piece.

Stoppard has been quoted as saying,

Yesterday I started work at half past nine in the morning and ended up at five o'clock in the afternoon in a foul mood because I'd been interrupted every twelve minutes by one of my four children or one of their three or four friends or telephone calls and having to talk to applicants to be our housekeeper, our housekeeper having just retired. It's domestic life. I wouldn't have it any other way. I can't bear that sort of monk writer. I knew one once who worked in a garage and they had to slip notes under the door. I think one should stop for the children and not make the children stop for the writing [Hayman 141].

That's all well and good and very admirable, but I doubt that many people would get good work done that way. I can't imagine a University professor bringing his kids to work to interrupt the class every twelve minutes. When I read that quote it explained for me the jerkiness that I found in the play – ideas would start but then be left unexplored because we'd jumped to a new idea.

I believe that Stoppard's own comment on the play comes via Henry talking to his daughter Debbie, ostensibly about the play-within-the-play, "*House of Cards*":

DEBBIE: ...it wasn't about anything, except did she have it off or didn't she?

What a crisis. Infidelity among the architect class. Again.

HENRY: It was about self-knowledge through pain.

DEBBIE: No, it was about did she have it off or didn't she. As if having it off is infidelity.

HENRY: Most people think it is.

DEBBIE: Most people think that *not* having it off is *fidelity*. They think all relationships hinge in the middle. Sex or no sex. What a fantastic

range of possibilities. Like an on/off switch. Did she or didn't she. By Henry Ibsen. Why would you want to make it such a crisis? [61].

If the play were aimed at asking the question "what is fidelity/infidelity"?, and/or "why do we care so much about sexual fidelity in our relationships"?, then perhaps Stoppard might have had something. But the scene with the above quote segues into a reminiscence of adolescent sexual obsession, and we don't really go anywhere interesting.

A telling line is "Announcing every stale revelation of the newly enlightened like stout Cortez coming upon the Pacific – war is profits, politicians are puppets, Parliament is a farce, justice is a fraud, property is theft... It's all here: pages and pages of it" [52]. This to me is Stoppard's unpretentious and (albeit probably unconscious) honest appraisal of his play. If we change the stale revelations to "Sex, disrespect, selfishness, and masochism are love", we get the 'pages and pages' of *this* play. Another line that stands out for me is: "There's something scary about stupidity made coherent" [50].

There are some witty lines in the play, and there are *some* ideas expressed quite nicely. I think of the first scene of Act 2 where Henry and Annie banter about writing. Perhaps it is Stoppard coming through, but still it is good. One apt line is, "Shakespeare out in front by a mile, and the rest of the field strung out behind trying to close the gap [48]. Also, the metaphor of the cricket bat is especially nice. [51]

If we want a treatise on love we have a concise and concentrated poem in 1 Corinthians 13. If we want to see a jealous and suffering man, we have *A Winter's Tale*. Undoubtedly Tom Stoppard is a fine maker of 'cricket bats'; unfortunately, in *The Real Thing*, he hasn't chosen much of anything at which to swing his bat. In an exchange that I read as Tom Stoppard giving himself some advice, Henry says to his daughter: "Don't get too good at that." She answers, "What?" And Henry answers, "Persuasive nonsense. Sophistry in a phrase [play?] so nice that you can't see the loose end to unravel it. It's flawless but wrong. A perfect dud. You can do that with words, bless 'em" [62].

Part 4: A Short Review

The Arts Club Theatre's production of Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing* was for me a real disappointment. At some point during the play I became very cynical about the theatre, thinking, "Why don't these people (i.e. the cast and crew and director and producers and anyone involved in the company) get jobs and do something productive?" Perhaps this is unfair; nevertheless, that's the idea that occurred to me.

Succinctly, I liked these things about the production: the Spartan set, including the platform that spun in the centre of the stage after each scene, which did great work to signal the changes; and some of the acting – Jennifer Lines as Annie was excellent, and Vincent Gale as Henry was very good (I got the idea that he would be an excellent Guildenstern), and Charlie Gallant, as Billy, and Julie McIsaac, as Debbie, were both good in less demanding roles.

Other elements jarred. The play itself, including the obviousness of some of its plot-points, was especially disappointing. (In scene 2 it was plain to me that as soon as Annie and Henry were left alone we would discover that they were having a fling, and in Act 2 it was becoming increasingly obvious that Annie was again going to be unfaithful, or perhaps had been in some way all along.) Most of the actors had varying degrees of trouble with inflection -- Jennifer Clement as Charlotte seemed especially challenged. I had difficulty with believability overall, and part of that was that I couldn't see Ms. Clement as anything but an actor onstage. I thought that both Ms. Clement and Ms. McIsaac had trouble walking in stilettos, and as I didn't see any pressing need for them I think that the director could have been sympathetic. Also, the character of Brophy didn't need to have such a thick brogue that he was difficult to understand. Or was it a class thing – the thicker the accent, the bigger the boor? And if we were pre-CD in the early scenes why did we have Mac-books so soon?

Although the play clocked in at about two and a half hours (and dragged at times), a lot of the dialogue was quick, and it was hard to catch everything said, or to be able to explore the subtleties of the ideas expressed, before we were on to something different. The banter was a bit frantic for my tastes, which, combined with the dragging effect, gave me the impression that the pace of the dialogue was mainly to keep me from seeing that there wasn't much there. Tom Stoppard has said,

I realized quite a long time ago that I was in it for the theatre rather than because of the literature. I like theatre, I like showbiz, and that's what I'm true to.... 'If a thing doesn't work, why is it there in that form?' is roughly the philosophy, and I've benefited greatly from Peter Wood's down-to-earth way of telling me, "Right, I'm sitting in J 16 and I don't understand what you're trying to tell me. It's not clear.' There's none of this stuff about 'When Faber and Faber bring it out, I'll be able to read it six times and work it out for myself.' Too late. [Hayman 8]

Well, I was in J 21 and it didn't work for me -- definitely not as theatre, and neither as literature when I picked up the Faber and Faber. I left the theatre feeling very cynical and I don't feel much less so now. As for the play as literature, I have the idea that if the play had a different title it might have got a slightly different reaction from me. If it had a somewhat Conradian title, like *Hearts of Barrenness* (of course it is a ridiculous title but it serves my point), then I might be able to see the play as a social critique -- "see how far we have fallen" or some such. Without at least a different title, it comes across as clever, witty, and stylized -- full of sound and fury -- yet signifying nothing. I entered the theatre expecting an enjoyable, witty play that might hopefully shed new light on my understanding of love, but left as a cynic disillusioned about art, questioning whether theatre has any value except as a pretentious dalliance for the privileged, and a sly way to redistribute wealth.

Works Cited

Stoppard, Tom. *The Real Thing*. Boston: Faber & Faber, 1984.

Hayman, Ronald. *Tom Stoppard*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978.