



DUALITIES AND PARADOXES IN TOM STOPPARD*

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ABSTRACT

In Tom Stoppard's almost each play a puzzle is set, waiting to be solved not only by the characters alone, but in cooperation with the audience or the reader. The whole story is centred on that riddle and the characters are bewildered and have hard times because of the difficulty and complexity of the puzzle. Trying to unfold the problem results in more confusion, and the characters cannot get rid of it. This task is so demanding that it requires the characters to work patiently and to distinguish between the appearances and the reality. This is one of the most troublesome dilemmas of the humanity in general.

Stoppard likes paradoxes and confused situations, because his own life has been full of such experiences. Therefore, he uses them in his plays effectively. From his birth conflicts and change have been unchanging parts of his life: to have a Jewish origin; immigrations; the murder of his father who had been a man of medicine; to have a stepfather; a different ethnicity and naturalized citizenship; and different lives in different countries: Czechoslovakia, Singapore, India, England. He was engaged in several jobs, such as a journalist, drama critic, and playwright. Stoppard has surely been affected by all these conflicts and changes.

This paper will reveal these dilemmas and dualities, which have never ceased to exist throughout his life and writing career, and to show how effectively and masterfully the playwright applies them in his plays, notably in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Key Words: Tom Stoppard, Dualities, Paradoxes, Confusion, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

TOM STOPPARD'IN OYUNLARINDA İKİLİK VE PARADOKSLAR

ÖZ

Tom Stoppard'ın neredeyse tüm oyunlarında sadece karakterler tarafından değil, izleyici veya okuyucu yardımıyla çözülmeyi bekleyen bir bulmaca kuruludur. Bütün öykü bu gizem üzerine odaklanır ve karakterler bu örüntünün zorluğu ve karmaşası karşısında ne yapacaklarını bilmez bir halde zor anlar yaşarlar. Sorunu çözmeye çalışma daha karmaşık bir tablo ile sonuçlanır ve karakterler bu girdaptan kurtulamazlar. Bu, öylesine çetin bir durumdur ki karakterlerin sabırla çalışmaları ve gerçeğe görüngüyü birbirinden ayırmaları gerekir. Bu, aslında insanlığın en sorunlu aşmazlarından biridir.

Stoppard ikilemleri ve karmaşık durumlara alışkın bir yazardır çünkü kendi yaşamı bu türden olaylarla doludur. Bu yüzden bu durumları oyunlarında etkin olarak kullanır. Doğumundan itibaren çatışmalar ve dönüşümler yaşamının değişmez parçası olmuştur: Yahudi kökenli olması; göçler; bir tıp adamı olan babasının katledilmesi; sonradan bir üvey babaya sahip olması; farklı bir etnik kökene sahip olması ve sonradan vatandaşlığa kabul edilmesi ve farklı ülkelerde farklı yaşantılar: Çekoslovakya, Singapur, Hindistan ve İngiltere. Yazar, gazetecilik, tiyatro eleştirmenliği, oyun yazarlığı gibi birçok işte çalışır. Stoppard'ın, bu değişim ve karmaşadan etkilenmesi kaçınılmazdır.

Bu makale, yazarın yaşamı boyunca hep var olan ikilemleri ve çelişkileri ortaya koyarak yazarın bunları başta *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* olmak üzere oyunlarında ne denli etkili ve ustaca kullandığını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Key Words: Tom Stoppard, İkilemler, Zıtlıklar, Karmaşa, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

* This article was presented at Second International IDEA Conference: Studies in English on 17-19 April 2007 at Hacettepe University, Ankara

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INTRODUCTION

Stoppard likes confused situations because his own life has been full of confusions and contradictory experiences. Therefore, he uses them in his plays effectively. From his birth, conflicts and change have been unchanging parts of his life: to have a Jewish origin; immigrations; the murder of his father who was a man of medicine; to have a stepfather; a different ethnicity and naturalized citizenship; and different lives in different countries: Czechoslovakia, Singapore, India and England. He was engaged in several jobs, such as a journalist, drama critic, and playwright. Stoppard has surely been affected by these conflicts and changes. He identifies himself as “the kind of person who embarks on an endless leapfrog down the great moral issues,” and continues emphasizing the dilemma in his life and writing, “I put a position, rebut it, refute it, refute the rebuttal, and rebut the refutation. Forever. Endlessly” (qtd. in Delaney, 1994: 31).

Interestingly, the accuracy of any knowledge does not matter to him. So unlike the common thought, he never attempts to correct any inaccuracy even it is about himself: “I never demand corrections. I quite like it really. If enough things that are untrue are said about you, no one will know what really is true” (qtd. in Nadel, 2002: xi-xiii). He reflects this thought in *Travesties* through the character Henry Carr, the narrator of the play, who has a confused memory and tells many things contradicting.

Tom Stoppard sets a puzzle or trap in almost all his plays, waiting to be solved not only by the characters alone, but in cooperation with the audience or the reader. The whole story is centred on that riddle. And the characters are bewildered and have hard times because of the difficulty and complexity of the puzzle. Trying to unfold the problem results in more confusion, and the characters cannot tackle this problem. This task is so demanding that it requires the characters to distinguish between the appearances and the reality. This is also one of the most troublesome dilemmas of the humanity in general. This paper will try to reveal how contradictions and dualities are influential in Tom Stoppard’s plays, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) as well as *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974), *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977) and *Professional Foul* (1977).

DUALITIES AND PARADOXES IN TOM STOPPARD

Stoppard usually takes his characters and plots from an imaginative condition. As he does in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Travesties*, his characters are from literary world or history but are placed totally in a new and authentic medium.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead reflects how misleading the individuals live believing that there is an absolute truth for everyone and that an objective truth is something seen by everybody. The play begins with two characters’ wasting time playing heads and tails. Summoned by the King, in the meantime, Ros and Guil do not have anything better to do. They occupy themselves in a harmless gambling. As soon as the play begins, dualities make themselves felt. Ros always wins while Guil loses without exception; and the sack of the first is full whereas that of the latter is empty. As the play progresses, Ros continues to win and Guil keeps losing. All the time Ros bets on heads and wins. There is usually one-sided earning, and one-sided losing. There is a clear reference to the injustice of the world. Ros makes a total of ninety-five estimations, and all his estimations happen to be true, and



thus he succeeds the improbable. The likely message is that in the end, the weak are to lose both in this play and in real life.

In the play the couple try to pass time doing various things such as spinning coins, watching the tragedians, and playing a sort of question game; they answer each question with another question or the repetition of the same question without any answers or explanations. In this way, many questions are asked with no answer, which sums up the existential world we live in. As a result of the uncertainties, numerous mysteries remain unsolved. Their game is interrupted by encountering a group of tragedians. Clearly there is something special with this group which seeks to perform a play, *The Murder of Gonzago* in the court upon the invitation of Hamlet. In the players' another rehearsal in the court, two spies, who resemble Ros and Guil, are put to death. One openly gets the impression that the players already have a prophecy concerning what the play will turn out to be.

Stoppard aims to reveal the hidden sides of the play *Hamlet* by trying to unearth the inner world of the two courtiers whom Shakespeare dealt with only superficially. He shares with the audience what he sees as missing and neglect. It is not possible to remain unaffected after reading or watching *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* which provides a new and different perspective for a second reading of *Hamlet*. These two characters seem to revolt against Shakespeare by getting rid of the limited world set by him. They live a different life and in a different dimension from that in the play *Hamlet*. They seem to walk out of and resigned from Shakespeare's play to get into the world of a new play. Stoppard believes that every exit is an entrance at the same time as he makes the Player say: "...if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else" (Stoppard, 1967: 28).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have dual functions in this many dimensional play. They are both characters who take part in the play and audiences who watch the Players playing an inner play in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Here the playwright seeks to provide various meanings and dimensions with this way. Besides, the characters are human beings living in a real world, like us. Furthermore, various different relationships are revealed in the text (Colby, 1978: 42). Guildenstern implies this situation by saying "...there are wheels within wheels, etcetera" (Stoppard, 1967: 110).

Seemingly Guil is the cleverer one, and poses a philosophic attitude, but he is rather weak in answering the questionings of Ros who is, in contrast with Guil, a man of panic. Ros and Guil stand not only as conflicting characters to each other, but as a pair, they contradict with the tragedians in the play. For example, in terms of awareness there is a contradictory situation between the players and the pair. Although Ros and Guil do not realize the world of the play, the tragedians have this knowledge and the direction the play is to take. They are different from the players. They are not actors by profession. It is not clear what they are in search of, and besides, their existential struggle is futile. Although the playwright feels sympathy for the pair, Players are in a privileged position since acting gives them superiority. They can distinguish role-playing from reality, which the pair cannot.

As the play progresses, we are shown more paradoxical aspects of the characters. Guil's seriousness and the actor's role playing contradict one another. Guil and Ros are direct characters while the actors are flexible. The couples see the world through a narrow perspective, but the players through a playful one. The playwright associates weakness with the courtiers, but a mysterious power with the actors. In many respects the pair is missing.



When Guil stabs the player in the stomach, he thinks he has killed the Player because he has a murderous passion in him, which is very true to life, but the Player thinks in broader terms, and does not take anything serious, even the death: his knife has a retractable blade, which is designed for acting like the Player himself. However, attributing seriousness to life brings nothing but death to the couple.

Although the events take the pair to their tragic death step by step, comic elements dominate the whole play. Two opposite genres, tragedy and comedy meet in the same point. The real life which is a combination of sorrow and humour is presented in this way. And Stoppard's characters have the ability to move as well as to amuse the audience masterfully. When the Players perform their play, which presents the couple's final death scene, Ros and Guil do not get the message and applaud their own deaths (Schwanitz, 1981: 137).

Jumpers tell an absurd situation of Dotty who tries to get rid of a corpse in her bedroom while a party is held in the other rooms. It is a play of both comic surface and philosophical depth because it also deals with the contrasting philosophies and dilemmas. For example with its ruthless and immoral positivism, the Radical Liberal Party has assumed the control of the state; an English astronaut has landed on the Moon and ignores the life of his fellow traveller in order to secure his own life, and a former Minister of Agriculture, an agnostic, becomes Archbishop of Canterbury. These conflicts give the play the feeling of absurdity. The fact that an intellectual debate and comic gymnastics appear in the same stage is another absurd element. There is no centre in the play, just like when one of the jumpers is shot dead, their balanced pyramid collapses and connections break up (Brater, 1981: 123).

Another contradiction in the play is the situation of the professor George Moore. Though he is a moralist philosopher who warns people against immorality, he cannot preclude it even in his own house. He himself is an example of what he is going to lecture on: 'Man-Good, Bad, or Indifferent.' Although he is expected to be a model for the 'good', a guide, in practice he is clearly 'indifferent' to the happenings around him, and particularly to his wife, Dotty, which is 'bad.'

Dotty is a dependable character and her vulnerability increases after her career comes to an end. Seemingly she finds a solution with Professor Archie, the rival of her husband and feels an emotional dependence upon him, which she could not get from her husband as the estrangement between the spouses. Both characters see something lack in each other: George cannot find any intellectuality in her, and she is not emotionally satisfied with him. Like the other characters in the play, she experiences dilemma in many ways. For example, although she is in a desperate need for tender feelings, she unconsciously pays lip service to Logical Positivism which does not work for her.

Dotty speaks and acts under the influence of Archie, and so she cannot behave independently. She is not aware of the fact that she lives a terrible contradiction within her life. Although she acknowledges supporting rationality, she experiences an irrational life and mental disorder. What she needs is affection instead of what Logical Positivists preach. Furthermore, unlike her assumptions, most of her utterances are intuitive and by heart rather than thoughtful and logical. For example, she is confused with a corpse in her bedroom and bewildered and cannot behave logically and passes most of the time in her bedroom throughout the play.



His historical play *Travesties*, in which he draws a conflict between art and a totalitarian state, tells an imaginary environment in which some historical figures, such as Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov Lenin, Tristan Tzara, and James Joyce, meet in Zurich during the World War I, which no historical document has confirmed. Stoppard has already no intention for the play to give accurate history. In order to strengthen how imaginary it is he uses the old man Carr, whose memory is full of contradictions.

As a consequence of a strange coincidence, these historical figures, who left a remarkable mark behind and whose common characteristics are revolutionary, hard-working, ambitious and patient for success, converge in Zurich. Each has his own different goals which they see absolute and crucial. The single truth for Lenin is to accomplish a revolution in Russia; for Tzara to develop and spread Dada; for Joyce to complete his masterpiece *Ulysses*; for Carr to carry out his formal mission as the British Consul (Polgar, 2003: 1).

The message is clear in his works. What we think to be real, in fact, is not real, and an illusionary world replaces the real one. Seeing this confused old man telling the story, one cannot rely on what he says an inch because of his missing memory. Stoppard wants us to know that what we read and live is not much different from the story of that senile old man. His characters' existence is largely sustained by self-deception and illusion: Old Carr speaks about his past, when he was young, as if he had been an important and respectable man, which the historical records deny. Therefore, most of what he says is not reliable as Stoppard implies. In the play, young Carr has close relationships with great artists and political leaders who are in exile in Zurich. He is also the central figure around whom the play is structured. Stoppard makes up a setting, as Carr informs, which mingles truth with fiction. Old Carr also does not deny the fact that he may possibly have been mistaken in recollecting the past: "Incidentally, you may or may not have noticed that I got my wires crossed a bit here and there, you know how it is when the old think-box gets stuck in a groove and before you know where you are, you've jumped the points..." (Stoppard, 1986: 64). Old Carr's monologues are full of contradictions, wrong quotations and humorous wordplays which are the mixture of second-hand memoirs, events, news and even gossips. In most of his plays, what is most obvious in his characters is their absence of memory.

The confused old Carr in *Travesties* or the pair in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* represents any human-being, and Carr's story represents a story anyone has in mind concerning any subject from history, politics to literature. What the playwright implies is clear: the accounts, documents or narrations are not reliable, and all of them may have been fabricated, so one should be sceptic about anything which is supposed to be correct and objective. Therefore, the question of reliability of the official history arises. One begins to ask a rather disturbing and puzzling question: Is what I know all about history nothing but a lie?

In *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, a political dissident, Alexander is kept with a real lunatic, Ivanov in the same cell in a mental hospital. Although Alexander can get rid of his troubled situation by just acknowledging what is expected from him, he still defies the system and its injustices. He may save himself by being obedient, but this means his defeat and the defeat of human rights supporters and the victory of the oppressors. Faced with cruelties, humiliations of male nurses, beatings, locked in cells, injections of various debilitating drugs, bindings, Alexander loses his consciousness and passes out. But still, he insists on his struggle and decides to do something challenging: "Then I went on hunger



strike. And when they saw I intended to die they lost their nerve. And now you think I'm going to crawl out of here, thanking them for curing one of my delusions? Oh no. They lost. And they will have to see that is so" (Stoppard, 1984a: 115). The Doctor then uses his son as a threatening and emotional object to make him recant what he does and says: "What about your son? He is turning into a delinquent. He is a good boy. He deserves a father" (Stoppard, 1984a: 115).

Sacha, the ten-year-old son of Alexander, losing his mother, has a strong emotional tie with his father and has no intention to lose him, so tries hard to convince his father:

SACHA: Tell them lies. Tell them they've cured you. Tell them you're grateful.

ALEXANDER: How can that be right?

SACHA: If they're wicked how can it be wrong?

ALEXANDER: It helps them to go on being wicked. It helps people to think that perhaps they're not so wicked after all.

SACHA: It doesn't matter. I want you to come home.

ALEXANDER: And what about all the other fathers? And mothers?

SACHA: (*shouts*) It's wicked to let yourself die! (Stoppard, 1984a: 121).

Apparently Alexander cannot convey his thoughts and reasons for hunger-strike to his son and cannot get his son's message reciprocally. Sacha cannot understand that deadly stubbornness which could be turned down with a childish play of telling lies. It is really beyond the comprehension of what a child can get. Therefore both father and son have a challenging task, and they seem to contradict one another. Here a conflict occurs between the father and son. They have opposite views for starving to death. It is, in a way, victory for the father because he will reach his goal in either way. But for the son it will end in loss. They will be the losers in both ways: either his father will go on hunger striking and die, or he will be exposed to more pressure and oppression. And in both situations, Sacha and Alexander will suffer.

Seemingly Sacha has learnt to survive in a country like Soviet Russia, where his father has not. These opposite characters stand for the two different people living there: the intimidated or the obedient whose representative is Sacha, but dissidents, like Alexander, have too broad and uncontrollable souls to be suppressed. But, it is not easy for Sacha; he suffers at least as much as his father does. He is alone, powerless and too young; furthermore, his isolation amplifies by being pressured at school. His teacher frequently harasses him for his father's dissidence and for Sacha's refusal to play triangle in the school orchestra.

Alexander himself also lives a dilemma within his psychology. A dilemma occurs between his ideals and emotions, between his own or son's rights, and the rights of general public, the humanity. However, again such a serious subject is again surrounded by comic elements thus making people ponder and laugh at the same time.

The Doctor responsible for Alexander in that prison-like mental hospital claims two things; one is that he has got an orchestra while Ivanov has not. Tim Brassell argues that his orchestra might symbolize the state he serves because similarly Sacha is asked to play in the



school orchestra, which is imposed by the authorities (Stoppard, 1984a: 188). Thus, the doctor threateningly implies that he is strong, not Ivanov: “I play in an orchestra occasionally... It is a real orchestra. Yours is not. I am a doctor. You are a patient. If I tell you, you do not have an orchestra, it follows that you do not have an orchestra” (Stoppard, 1984a: 107). Furthermore, what the doctor claims forms another paradox: only the insane are imprisoned in the mental hospital while all sane people are set free.

Stoppard’s concern for philosophical and moral debates is a recurrent theme in his plays, as in *Professional Foul*. Several academic philosophers are invited to Czechoslovakia to attend a conference there. In this play the characters and their actions involve some dilemmas. The contrast is not only in the debates between the philosophers Anderson and his colleague McKendrick but also in their characteristics. While Anderson is a quiet, well-mannered and principled intellectual, McKendrick is just the opposite. McKendrick claims that the difference between moral and immoral behaviours is blurred and is rather relative, while Anderson is for the concrete principles between morality and immorality. But after some unexpected events and their deep influences, both philosophy professors reverse their principles and ideas.

Anderson changes his paper, smuggles a thesis through the customs, by putting his friend’s life at risk, and finally applies the idea of McKendrick which he had previously rejected firmly: he secretly puts the thesis in his colleague’s briefcase, and thus behaves unethically:

ANDERSON: Last night. I’m afraid I reversed a principle.

(MCKENDRICK opens his briefcase and finds HOLLAR’s envelope. ANDERSON takes it from him. MCKENDRICK is furious.)

MCKENDRICK: You utter bastard.

ANDERSON: I thought you would approve.

MCKENDRICK: Don’t get clever with me. Jesus! It’s not quite playing the game is it? (Stoppard, 1984b: 179).

Both Anderson and McKendrick undergo contradictory attitudes. Anderson, in fact, carries out McKendrick’s formula to save Hollar, so McKendrick must be happy with it. However, McKendrick himself is at risk. If his briefcase had been searched in detail, the thesis would have been found and no doubt he would have been in trouble. Theoretically such behaviour is what McKendrick favours, but being chosen as the actor, or the victim, for his own philosophy makes him angry. We are perfectly shown how self-contradictorily decision or philosophy makers might act when it serves their purpose.

CONCLUSION

Stoppard is the master of parody providing confused situations, conflicts and contradictions of contemporary life. His applying parody masterfully helps to create conflicting ideas on stage. Enoch Brater claims that what keeps Stoppard’s technique to be in motion is his using “a series of conflicting statements made by conflicting characters,” later



he lets them play, as he calls it like “a sort of infinite leap-frog” (1981: 120-121). Thus, there is never an end for his world of contradictions and dualities. A continuous self-deception and illusion is what marks his characters’ existence, which is an ongoing process in real life as well. We live in an illusionary world and what we assume to be truth, in fact, is nothing but dream and thus an illusionary world replaces the real one. All records, documents and narrations are doubtful, and all of them are likely to have been fabricated, which renders us sceptic. One begins to question the reliability of anything around. The uncertainties, mysteries being all around us, we are prevailed with anxiety and uneasiness, leaving us in despair and horror. In the end, mostly the weak are to lose, which sums up the existential world we live in.

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