

Tom Stoppard: A Life by Hermione Lee
(review in the *New York Times Book Review*)

In his early 20's, Tom Stoppard – rather like young Aladdin and his lamp – told his mother, “I’d like to be famous!”

The lad in this case played genie to himself and made his own wish come true by pouring out, over more than five decades, a glistening stream of gloriously articulate, brilliantly intricate plays. A fulfilling home and social life seems to have accompanied the wished-for fame. An early unhappy marriage gave way to two much jollier ones, there’ve been terrific children, grouse shooting and rare book collecting, friendship with Mick Jagger and cricket with Harold Pinter, the whole unimaginable public and private sundae topped off in 1997 by a knighthood. Over the course of his extraordinary life – he’s now 83 – Sir Tom has even magically managed to collaborate twice with Shakespeare, once in theatre (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*), once in film (*Shakespeare In Love*).

Mike Nichols said Stoppard was “the only writer I know who is completely happy.” Simon Gray said, “It is actually one of Tom’s achievements that one envies him nothing, except possibly his looks, his talents, his money and his luck.” Stoppard himself has called himself “lucky.”

Luck doesn’t seem sufficient to describe the sheer Merchant-Ivory unlikelyness of Stoppard’s early life: born Tomas Sträussler on Kafka’s birthday in 1937 to Czechoslovakian Jews, he was taken to Singapore at 18 months to flee the Nazis, then to India at 4 to flee the Japanese. In Darjeeling he attended a school in view of the Himalayas. He acquired a reactionary English stepfather and a new name, moved to England at 8, skipped university and got his education, like his lifelong hero Hemingway, through bottom-up journalism. After scraping

along as a reporter in Bristol and falling in love with the theatre there, he had his first astonishing hit at 29 and has continued to astonish audiences right through last year's *Leopoldstadt*, whose sold-out London run the pandemic interrupted.

The kind of astonishment Stoppard's provided us has changed over time. As if scrambling to hold our attention, early plays like *Jumpers* and *Travesties* combined high and low jinx, with cascades of quick, bright banter and jaw-dropper Newtonian jokes generating bel canto monologues on theatre ("We're *actors* – we're the opposite of people!"), theology ("Is God?") and the unpleasantness of being dead in a box ("That's the bit I don't like, frankly"). Those theatrical whirligigs gave way to less frantic works like *Arcadia*, *The Coast Of Utopia* and *The Hard Problem*, in which characters unhurriedly talk, supported by Stoppard's acquired confidence that his public will listen.

And why shouldn't it listen? His fans can exit the theatre after one of his plays with a heady feeling of freedom, stoic and ready for life, ignited by his aphoristic wit and two hours' traffic with *The Big Questions*. His classically balanced sentences allay our contemporary panic. Whether the death of liberal arts education, our ping-pong-ball-sized attention spans and the financial realities of the theatre will continue to afford his challenging plays a place onstage, only the future can tell us and – as always – it's not here yet.

About Shakespeare we famously possess a small, precious handful of facts. In her encyclopedic new biography Hermione Lee seems to provide several million about Tom Stoppard. She greets us, rather forebodingly, with a genealogical tree, as if the extended Stoppard family were a medieval royal house. The book's chapter heads tease us with delicious epigraphs but to find the sources of those quotes you have to flip to the back and ransack the microscopic endnotes. These are quibbles. The lack of an editor's blue pencil is not. In the

course of 750 pages of text we get not only detailed play sources, production histories and plot summaries (one of them eight pages long), but seemingly everything Tom Stoppard ever wore and every room in every house he ever bought and every “posh” friend he ever made. This biography is every bit as informed and intelligent as any Stoppard play. If only it were as pointed or as agile. Stoppard himself, dodging puckishly, seems to get lost amidst the facts.

One can’t help recalling the flair with which Kenneth Tynan in his glittering, swift, not unkvetching *New Yorker* profile from 1977 caught Stoppard’s spirit like lightning in a platinum martini shaker. Lee calls Tynan’s piece inaccurate and unjust. But she, now an Emeritus Professor of literature at Oxford, comes at Stoppard from the academy. Tynan, like Stoppard, started as a journalist, writing for years with dishy mischief about show folk in London, Hollywood and New York. More crucially, while serving as literary manager at the National Theatre, he frequented rehearsal rooms, assisted on scripts and was involved in *Jumpers*’ first production. He knew how from the inside how theatre works day by day, and four-plus decades have not dimmed the illuminations of his essay. It remains a vivid close-up.

That said, Lee is very good on Stoppard’s sometimes painful experiences with the movies and fills us in about some tantalizing writing projects – like a screenplay about Galileo – that came to nothing. She’s wonderful on the wives and girlfriends and home life. She gives a full and fascinating account of Stoppard’s amazed discovery, in middle middle-age, of his Jewishness, when he learned, not only about the Jewish family roots his beloved mother had concealed, but of the relatives who’d died in the camps – a revelation that ultimately gave birth to the Viennese lives, fondly told over decades, of *Leopoldstadt*. The book also dishes up generous helpings of sparkling Stoppardisms. A typical example: “Talent without imagination: wicker baskets. Imagination without talent: modern art.”

That said, if there's a whiff of conservatism in that last epigram, it's not surprising. Maybe most eye-opening in Lee's telling is how politically conservative if not right-wing-to-reactionary Stoppard was in his central years, openly admiring Margaret Thatcher, openly not admiring trade unions, at one point boycotting a boycott on productions in South Africa. He has been – with well-articulated reservations – an outspoken defender of the West and its values, a position almost unheard of now that the words “Western civilization” require a trigger warning. Whatever his politics, he's been a moral explorer in his plays and a moral activist in his life, eloquent about freedom of expression and busily working on behalf of Eastern European writers and Russian refuseniks. Those political concerns, conjoined with his Czech connection, came to life in *Rock 'n' Roll*, wherein Stoppard created a sort of alternative existence by imagining the tested principles of a Tomas Sträussler-like figure living under Soviet rule.

With justly celebrated volumes behind her on the likes of Edith Wharton and Penelope Fitzgerald, Lee is an expert biographer. In her superb *Virginia Woolf*, she boldly and woolfishly rethought biographical form and managed to bring a complicated novelist alive. Clearly she admires Stoppard no end, and the devotion and expertise with which she's assembled his bright materials is a testament to her own high and rightly esteemed gifts. Unlike many another writer, Tom Stoppard has enjoyed a rich, inimitable, event-filled life that begs to be told and her generous, event-packed volume is the proof.

All this said, it goes without saying: if you love his work, you need to read her book.

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