

SUNDAY 18 APRIL 1993

Theatre Michael Coveney

# Head-scratching in Stoppard's *Arcadia*

AS I POSSESS a son called Thomas Coveney and a colleague called Benedict Nightingale, I had better read carefully in grappling with Tom Stoppard's new play at the National, *Arcadia* (Lyttelton), in which the two chief activating characters are named Thomas Coveney and Bernard Nightingale.

Stoppard has already written the nightmare of a critic turning up in a play he has innocently gone along to review in *The Real Inspector Hound*; and if there is one predominant theme in the new firework display of coincidence and collision in a nineteenth-century Derbyshire country house, it is that if you really exist, and sometimes even if you don't, you will, one day, finally appear in a Tom Stoppard play.

Thomasina is a pupil of Byron's fictional Cambridge contemporary, Septimus Hodge, in 1809, two years before Byron high-tailed it to Europe (for reasons soon to be tentatively explained) on the Lisbon packet; Nightingale is a querulous academic visiting the Coveney household in the 1990s. The sumptuous classical room, designed by Mark Thompson, is a period setting and an alterable habitation. There is a theodolite for surveyors and a tortoise (called Lightning) for a paperweight.

Claret cups and coffee mugs. Landscape gardening. Puns. Ponds. Lacks and lakes. Seduction and learning. Future and the past. Research and speculation. Classicism and romanticism.

The trigger was Stoppard's reading of James Glick's *Chaos*, an American pop-scientific treatise about the chaotic reaction theory of historical incidence; I find all this much less fascinating than the world of alternative science and synchronicity which has been so brilliantly exploited in performance by Ken Campbell. Campbell imposes order where none exists; Stoppard tweaks chaos from suppositions of intellectual rigour.

At Tuesday night's premiere, I was enthralled by Trevor Nunn's witty and transparent production, set in Mark Thompson's handsome, curving country mansion, but frankly perplexed. Nightingale is not the only sleuth. Stoppard makes detectives of us

all. And there is also Felicity Kendal as Hannah Jarvis, who is writing a history of this garden at Sidley Park. She has also written a book about Lady Caroline Lamb, which Nightingale reviewed with a pat on the bottom and a thousand words in *The Observer*.

Floating through the house are a minor poet; a butler; a landscape gardener called Culpepper Nookley; Thomasina's mother, Lady Croom (Harriet Walter dispensing brutish politeness); and various other descendants. Coverly, one of whom, energetically played by Samuel West, an example of 'brideshead Regurgitated', is tracing details of past grooves through a system of iterated algorithms.

No one like Stoppard for making you feel both spoilt and inadequate as an audience. There has been an erotic encounter in the gazebo and

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Ezra Chater, a poet whom Byron excoriated in his *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, has been shot. Chater never existed; the reference has been divined by Nightingale in a pencilled superscription on Septimus Hodge's edition. But this fictional Chater may also have been a botanist who discovered a dwarf dahlia in Martinique in 1810 and died there of a monkey bite.

The genius of the place is described as a hermit with a tortoise, and that explains, or at least contributes to an understanding of, the scientific investigation running parallel to the literary speculations. The combustion-Stoppard seeks is in getting a murder mystery with intellectual acrobatics.

Nunn's production does everything possible to ignite the proceedings and the acting all round is superb; the central duel, echoing the supposed tiff between Byron and Chater, is joined with fire and precision by Bill Nighy as the hapless Nightingale and Felicity Kendal as

Hannah. The relationship between Hodge and his pupil is engagingly played by Rufus Sewell and Emma Fielding. The play finally bursts its bounds in the sensual submission to the strains of the waltz, which invades the past and the present. A discussion about carnal embrace was the play's starting point.

As a Stoppard actress, Ms Kendal has quite subverted her reputation for daffy decorousness. She speaks his sinewy, supple lines with pungency and bravado. In *Happosod*, she stepped fully clothed from a shower as a spy chief whose smart toughness was only gradually thawed by emotional considerations. And in Stoppard's recent, magisterial radio play *In the Name of the State*, she embodied to perfection this classic Stoppardian conflict of sense and sensuality as the poetess Flora Crewe sitting for her portrait in India ('Heat has had its way with me').

The elevation of footnotes in cultural history is all part of Stoppard's humanist instinct as a writer. He installs pride in people's identity, moves them centre stage, be they Rousset and Guildebert, or the minor British consular official Henry Carr in *Travesties*, or Flora Crewe who apparently just failed to sit for Modigliani, or poor old insignificant and cuckolded Ezra Chater.

*Arcadia* has been heralded as some kind of rebirth for Stoppard. But he has never really gone away, although writing movie scripts sometimes amounts to the same thing. In *The Native State*, split like *Arcadia* between past and present, may be his finest work to date, a novelistic, Forsterian epic of painting, poetry, imperialism and literary reputations.

In *Arcadia* he doesn't change tack, but in a general sense, picks up from where he left off.

Brief notes on two striking London fringe productions. Schiller's *The Robbers*, in the Penguin translation by Frank Lamport, has been heavily cut and courageously presented by the London Stage Company at the Latchmere in Battersea Park Road. Pre-Byronic Romantic passion curses through and fraternal strife, and Paul Miller's production in a cool, blue box is by no means under-

THE OBSERVER



Felicity Kendal. Speaks with pungency and bravado. Photograph by Richard Mildenhall.

sized. It is very well acted by Colm O'Neill as the duped, tragic Count and Alan Gilechrist and Dominic Taylor as his fractious sons.

And welcome back to Nava Zuckerman's astonishing Tmu-Na company from Tel Aviv in *Real Time* at the Lyric

Hammersmith studio. I first saw this compelling troupe in a sexy conflagration inspired by *The Undesirable Lightness of Being* in its pre-Daniel Day Lewis state. The prompt here was Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, but the scenario of

the Yom Kippur War is entirely engulfed in its own special character, and those of the impassioned, gestural company. Some of the show is so impenetrable as Stoppard, but there is no mistaking its quality or its luminous intensity. Or its creative debt to Pina Bausch.

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