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The first night of Tom Stoppard's Arcadia at the Lyttelton

Hand on heart and tongue in cheek

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TOM STOPPARD'S new play, *Arcadia*, is as intricate, elaborate and allusive as anything he has yet written. It deals, amongst a hundred other things, with determinism and free will, classicism and romanticism, historical reality and academic deduction. But it is also unusually moving in its demonstration of the way genuine discoveries outlive the death of their inventors.

Stoppard makes his point by setting the action in the large room of a Derbyshire country house in two different periods: 1809 and the present day. In the earlier period we see a brilliant young girl, Thomasina, and her tutor, Septimus, and hear of off-stage scandals involving the multiple seductions of a minor versifier's wife. In the present we watch a battle of wits between Hannah, a born classicist studying the history of the house's garden, and Bernard Nightingale, a romantic hare-brained don convinced that Lord Byron was present in 1809, killed the cuckolded poet in a duel and fled the country. At first the two worlds collide; gradually they merge, as in a dream.

As in *Travesties*, Stoppard gets a lot of fun out of showing how we wantonly misconstrue the past. In 1809, for instance, the sparky Thomasina arbitrarily adds a hermitage to the picturesque development plans for her mother's garden; 180 years later the rational Hannah uses this to construct a whole theory about a hermit who

expressed "the genius of the place". Again, in 1809 we see the tutor writing an ironic inscription in the poet's rotten volume of verses; for the deluded Nightingale, this becomes proof conclusive of a sinister Byronic intrigue.

All this is good sport. But the play really takes off when Stoppard's ideas and emotions seamlessly coincide. The real heart of the play lies in an exchange between Thomasina and her tutor. She tearfully laments the loss of world civilisation experienced with the burning of the Alexandria library. But her tutor argues that mankind constantly renews itself and that ideas never die. "Mathematical discoveries glimpsed and lost to view," he cries, "will have their time again." And that is precisely what the play proves as we see Thomasina's revolutionary revision of the Newtonian universe outlasting her own tragically foreshortened life.

Many of Stoppard's previous plays, such as *The Real Thing*, have had a strong emotional undercurrent. But here his ideas and his sympathies work in total harness and give the play a strong pulse of feeling. Even the battle between a deterministic and totally random universe takes on an emotional edge. When Valentine, the present-day son of the house and a mathematical wizard, claims that "the unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is", he goes on to add that this collusion of disorder and order makes him violently happy.

In the past, Stoppard's plays have shown a kind of panic at the prospect of living in an uncertain world; here he accepts things as they are with a stoical grace.

The danger is that one makes the play sound heavy weather. But, although it is difficult on one viewing to pick up all the play's ideas, Stoppard theatricalises his themes. As always he is liberal with his jokes. Required to give satisfaction for seducing the minor poet's wife, the young tutor cries: "Mrs Chater demanded satisfaction and now you are demanding satisfaction. I cannot spend my time, day and night, satiating the Chater family." But, beyond the jokes, Stoppard makes something delicately moving out of the way past and present merge as if to cheat the logic of time.

Trevor Nunn's production, set in an elegantly curved room designed by Mark Thompson and backed by Sondheim-ish piano chords by Jeremy Sams, does everything possible to up the emotional ante. And there are good performances in the present tense from Bill Nighy as the quivering, foolish Nightingale and from Felicity Kendal as the would-be-rational, hard-headed Hannah and, in the past, from Rufus Sewell as the Byronic tutor, Emma Fielding as his genius-protégé and Harriet Walter as her amorous, Wildean mother. Just occasionally the play lapses into whimsy. But, on the whole, it is a significant breakthrough that shows Stoppard working with tongue in cheek and hand on heart at the same time.

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