

ARTS

# TOM AND PETER M

BY ROBERT BUTLER

'Oh God, what a great idea!' In 30 years, only one play has outshined Tom Stoppard's envy: Peter Shaffer's 'Black Comedy'. Now it's being paired with 'The Real Inspector Hound'. The playwrights talk it over

ONE-ACT plays can be little like lonely hearts single. CSOH, WLM long-term companion. This month, two one-act plays in their thirties have a blind date in the West End. Sam Mendes's new company, Warehouse Productions, an offshoot from the Donmar, unites two hits from the States: Peter Shaffer's *Black Comedy*, which premiered in 1965 as a National Theatre production at Chichester with Maggie Smith, Albert Finney and Derek Jacobi; and Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*, which premiered in 1968 at the Cottesloe with Richard Briers and Ronnie Barker. In this new double bill, directed by Gregory Doran, one cast - which includes Deonca Barritt, Anna Chancellor and Sara Crowe - appears in both plays. Tom Stoppard and Peter Shaffer are downstairs at Pops, a club in Covent Garden of which neither is a member. While the photographer takes the pictures, these two - who have known each other for more than 30 years - have been chatting about the masterclasses you receive when you work with Peter Hall. As the photographer clears his equipment, the lights go out. We are in darkness while the club staff search for the right switch. This, as we will see, is an apt moment.

Could I take you both back to the time when you wrote these one-act plays, and the ideas that prompted them?  
Shaffer: In my case it was Chinese theatre. It was the Peking Opera, which came to London in 1955. The excerpt from the Chinese play that I had seen - I think the play was called *Where Three Roads Meet*. I know nothing about what the play was about - this excerpt was a scene in a country inn. It involved only two people, a warrior who went to bed, and through an open window - the window was merely a hand appeared. This man heard the noise of the bandit and reached for his sword and they fought. The point of it was that it was performed in the brightest possible light - white light, pouring light - that was representing, of course, darkness. And it was very scary, because the swords missed each other by a fry hair's breadth. They were quite obviously red swords. Did you see it?  
Stoppard: I saw it on film. Not the whole piece. But I have seen what you are talking about. It was a section of a film that was generally about Chinese theatre. I remember just seeing a few minutes of the fight in the dark and it was breathtaking.

Shaffer: Breathtaking.  
Stoppard: And the swords were just switching.  
Shaffer: It was terrifying. And that was fascinating, because the audience was sort of laughing, but in a hysterical way. And I began to think of farce being so like melodrama in this kind of feeling.  
Stoppard: I remember one part where they were creeping around the room, not knowing where the other was, and they were approaching each other back to back. They were terrified of being hit by a sword at any moment, and then their backs must have touched, and they just sprung apart.  
Shaffer: That's right. Even then, I was terribly aware of this electric feeling in the audience. They were divided between hysterical laughter and laughter of fear. I remember thinking what fun it



In the metaphorical dark: Anna Chancellor, Gary Wadsworth, David Tennant and Sara Crowe in Shaffer's 'Black Comedy'.  
would be if one could adapt, in some way, that convention to an English farce. That's easy to play a game with almost stock picture cards - the peppery colonel, the comic foreigner, the timid spinster.  
Stoppard: Classic characters raised to art. Did you say 1955?  
Shaffer: Yes.  
Stoppard: I was going to say, you set on that for 30 years.  
Shaffer: I didn't think anything about it until Ken Tynan said Maggie Smith and

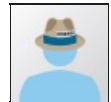
Albert Finney were wanting to do *Mis Julie* at Chichester, which is an awkward length. It's an hour and 20 minutes - it's a bit awkward asking people to come all the way down to Chichester for that time. Have you anything in your bottom drawer? And I said, no, I don't really. But as we were talking I suddenly thought, it's awfully gloomy, that play. It can be very depressing, a farcical dark play. You can't follow it, obviously, with another play of that intensity. Even if you could write one. It's almost begging for a farce. I began to talk to Ken, who had seen that mime, about that convention. I had no idea for a play. And then Ken, being very gung-ho about looking for new material - he was the dramaturg - bore me off to see Olivier, and I kept saying, there isn't a play. It's just a convention. I haven't got a play and anyway I'm going to New York. And Larry, who had had this extraordinary stare that just looked straight through you, didn't see you, an unseeing eye, he didn't say anything, he just listened and said, 'It's all going to be thrilling.'  
Stoppard: How long before rehearsals was it?  
Shaffer: About two months, or even less.  
Stoppard: Christ.  
Shaffer: It was absolutely paralyzing. I fell into a complete doldrum about this. I was actually going to ring up and say, I can't do it. I was paralysed. And I said, come on Peter, what's the problem? And you talk to yourself, or at least I do, and I said, well, the problem is that no one would stay in the dark. They wouldn't put up with it. There'd be candles and matches, whatever. Or if there weren't, they'd just abandon it and go to the pub. How do you solve such a problem? And a very clear answer came to me. There must be one of them in the room who has a reason for keeping everyone in the dark. What could that be? They must be expecting someone very important - a multi-millionaire - so you can't just leave - and why-why-why would you keep anyone in the dark? Because you've stolen something belonging to one of the others. Lots of things. And it all began to tumble out very quickly. They've stolen all the furniture. Then you have something like the sword, and the fighting, and it's also mime. The dialogue is just filler if it works well.

So the situation you gave yourself wrote the plot.  
Shaffer: I'm afraid it did. Actually, I've never thought of it like that. That's right.



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Sun, Apr 16, 2023