

# MEET THEIR MATCH



Waldhorn and Chancellor in Stoppard's 'The Real Inspector Hound', soon to be seen in the West End with 'Black Comedy'

**Stoppard:** Could I say, in parentheses, what I've said to countless people in the last 33 years – is it? – but never to you as far as I know, which is that *Black Comedy* is the only time, in a time-span as long as the life of Christ, when I've ever been envious of another writer's idea. The only time I've ever felt a moment of envy: oh God, what a great idea!

**Shaffer:** I'm very delighted.

**Stoppard:** I don't know why that stops one doing one's own, but it does. You can't say, well I'm going to do my own, so sod it. I've sometimes wondered whether Alan Ayckbourn felt the way I did, because it would appear to him enormously.

**Shaffer:** It would.

**Did 'The Real Inspector Hound' also start with a formal idea?**

**Stoppard:** I began with the small notion of having two people watching an Agatha Christie kind of thriller and getting involved with it and ending up dead. That's all I had. And I wrote that I had had a store page. For some reason in red biro, which is most unlike me. I remember I kept the coffee-stained red biro pages for about five years and – in 1967 – after *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* was done in London, I think Michael Codron must have asked me to write a play, or whether I had a play. And I had hung on to these half a dozen pages because I just liked the central idea, which, by the way, was very much an idea of that time. It was the tag-end of a period of labia, like 'Theatre of the Absurd, which I wasn't, and so forth, and the idea of crossing the fourth wall and doing something unconventional with time and space and logic and all that was very much in the air, and that was my tiny contribution.

Then, at some point, I realised that life would be a lot easier for me if the two people watching were actually theatre critics. It gave me something to write for them. I was doing parody or pastiche, and I needed some archetype. And after that, I just hoped for the best. The play – to me, anyway – looks as though it was carefully plotted, practically on graph paper, but in fact I didn't know who the body was until I got to the moment. I had to work out the identity of the corpse. There's a corpse on stage from the beginning. It was an early reminder of something very important. That if it's OK not to know what you're doing for a while. And probably better not to know what you're doing, because then the game unfolds according to what's in your hand, and so you avoid, not always, but you hope to avoid the sense of the play being rather too premeditated.

**Shaffer:** Had you seen *The Mousetrap* when you wrote it?

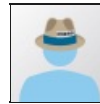
**Stoppard:** No. I read it at one point. I suppose I thought I'd better read this thing. I suppose I thought I'd better go and see it, but I'm fairly lazy, and so I read it. There was another thing I'd remembered. Do you remember a man called Paul Dehn? He was a critic, actually. The *New Chronicle*. He wrote a little book of pieces, and one of these pieces took off from a comment by Noel Coward – I think it was Noel Coward – that if you were ever stuck in a play, have someone come on and offer everyone else a cup of tea. It was that sort of remark. I haven't got this book any more because I once lent it to Richard Attenborough and never got it back. In 1960, I think, there's a scene in *Hound*, a completely pointless scene where everyone's offered coffee, milk and sugar. Anyway, when Michael Codron showed up as a producer looking for half an evening, because he had a play already called *The Audience*, I dug out these half a dozen pages and said yes, I think I can do a comedy about a couple of critics watching a whodunit.

**Have your plays been paired with any other authors?**

**Shaffer:** No, this is the first time. Only

Continued on page 21

## Hound Black Indy Butler 2 of 3



Clipped By:  
**ianlharris**  
Sun, Apr 16, 2023