

ARTS



It's electrifying: Nicola McAuliffe and Desmond Barritt in 'Black Comedy'

**STOPPARD & SHAFFER** from page 19 Strindberg and Tom.  
**Stoppard:** I don't know the answer to that question. I did write an even shorter play, an extended sketch called *After Margrite*, which is done with *Hound* now and again. I suppose *Hound* is done with other plays, but I don't know what they are.  
**Shaffer:** Well, wasn't it done at the National?  
**Stoppard:** Oh, that's right. I'd forgotten that. I should have remembered that because I directed it.  
**Shaffer:** That was with *The Critic* by Sheridan.  
**Stoppard:** I'm getting ancient, aren't I? Of course, it was so long ago, six, seven years ago. [He later remembers it was 1985.]  
**Shaffer:** It would be nice, if people found this an agreeable combination, if they were paired together.  
**Stoppard:** We're quite interested to find out whether comedy plus comedy is actually that good an idea. Or whether Strindberg is actually a much better idea to go in front of *Black Comedy*.

*Do these two plays strike you as period pieces?*  
**Stoppard:** In a particular sense. I think of mine as a play I wouldn't write now. So it's a period piece in my life. I suppose these plays belong in some different decade. I'm not sure you would wish to set the play-within-the-play as something happening in 1998. It would

seem a bit archaic probably.  
**Shaffer:** Even though *The Mousetrap* is still running.  
**Stoppard:** That's true. But your play ... I think of it as being set in its decade.  
**Shaffer:** Oh yes. You have to.  
**Stoppard:** It's built in, isn't it? I'm trying to remember if there's a plot reason for that.  
**Shaffer:** There is a plot reason. No one has fuses like that any more.  
**Stoppard:** Oh really?  
**Shaffer:** You sent for an electrician.  
**Stoppard:** And you needed wire to wind round ...  
**Shaffer:** And you had those awful little ivory bits from a hardware shop.  
**Stoppard:** That's right.  
**Shaffer:** That you could do for yourself. What you couldn't do for yourself was if you had a mains fuse. Which was in a box in a cellar and sealed up. You asked the London Electricity people to send someone round, and you waited until they came. It did occur to me that three of my plays, that one and *Five Finger Exercise* and *The Private Ear*, are all in that sense period plays. Both *Five Finger Exercise* and *Private Ear* involve a gramophone record.  
**Stoppard:** Oh yes.  
**Shaffer:** One that sticks, and betrays the fact that the German tutor is unconscious and trying to kill himself.  
**Stoppard:** Very important.  
**Shaffer:** Yes. You just hear this bit of this Brahms symphony going round and

round. And there's a boy who actually scratches a gramophone record at the end of *Private Ear*. And of course you can't injure a CD in that way. I thought of issuing them under the title "Three Outdated Plays".  
**Stoppard:** I wrote one which was all about a Telex machine in the middle of Africa. And now people have mobile phones and satellites in little attaché cases, so they can phone New York or London from the middle of the Kalahari Desert. You have to say, this is a long time ago when all this happened. Before we had Cellnet.  
**Shaffer:** We have to have the boy saying the mains is in the cellar, etc. etc. Otherwise a lot of people would not know. What's the trouble? Flick the switch.  
*Did you both know these ideas were one-act ideas?*  
**Stoppard:** Yes.  
**Shaffer:** Yes.  
**Stoppard:** It didn't feel like the long haul as an idea.  
**Shaffer:** I don't think *Black Comedy* would stretch to it. Although Zeffirelli, when he directed it, put an interval in - which I would have thought let the gas out of the balloon.  
**Stoppard:** Quite nice to have an interval in pitch darkness.  
 □ *'The Real Inspector Hound' & 'Black Comedy': Comedy Theatre, WC2. (0171) 369 1731, previews from Thurs, opens 22 Apr.*

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**ianlharris**  
 Sun, Apr 16, 2023