

*Tom Stoppard: A Life*

by Hermione Lee. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021). Pp. 896. ISBN 978045143224. Hardcover, \$35.

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Hermione Lee's *Tom Stoppard: A Life* is a massive compendium of information that will become not simply a valuable but a necessary resource for Stoppard scholars. Proceeding chronologically, Lee covers every dimension of Stoppard's personal and professional lives: his birth as Tomas (or Tomik) Straussler in Czechoslovakia, followed by living as a refugee in Singapore and India before he arrived in England at age nine; his schooling; his writing and social lives while a journalist in Bristol; the origins of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; the major and less major plays throughout his long career; his self-presentation as a "bounced Czech" in undying gratitude to the country that took him in; his marriages, romances and affairs, and family life; his friendships and professional relationships; the financial rewards Stoppard earned, alongside the financial burdens he accumulated; the active role he takes in casting and rehearsing productions of his plays; the revisions he made to the plays in rehearsal; his thoughts on the vagaries of playwrighting and the odd contingencies of translating scripts from page to stage; his work in adapting and translating foreign-language plays, and in radio drama, TV, and film; his (perhaps belated) 1993 discovery of his Jewish roots and family members murdered in the Holocaust; his work on behalf of organizations such as the London Library and the National Theatre, as well as his efforts to aid Soviet refuseniks, Vaclav Havel, and the Belarus Free Theatre; and the continuing presence of his plays as revived and re-interpreted on British and American stages.

Lee offers numerous amusing anecdotes (Stoppard's habit of taping striking paper to his desk so he could spend less time firing up his next cigarette) and, as would be expected, instances of Stoppard's witticisms. Throughout the book, she quotes his own utterances about the unreliability or falsity of any biography, returning to this theme in the last pages of the book as she assesses her own attempt. Lee sets out connections between the life and work (such as *The Real Thing* overlapping with the breakdown of Stoppard's relationship with his second wife, Miriam Stern, and *Happgood's* themes of doubles and duality arising from his own life story), but she never overstresses these linkages. To add interpretive context, Lee uses comparisons to Harold Pinter and David Hare, writers personally connected to Stoppard (in different ways), but whose overall projects are quite distinct from Stoppard's oeuvre. Lee thoroughly documents the warm and lasting friendship between Pinter and Stoppard, while using Pinter's political theatre and activities as a counter to Stoppard's involvements with politics and history. Lee also extensively interviewed Stoppard's longtime frenemy David Hare, who becomes a representative spokesperson for leftist or socialist critiques of Stoppard. While Stoppard seems to get the last word on these debates in the book, these discussions allow Lee to acknowledge the persistent unease among at least some readers and scholars about Stoppard's right-wing themes and stances.

Lee makes a major contribution to the scholarly criticism by detailing Stoppard's discovery of his Jewish ancestry: until the early 1990s, Stoppard knew nothing about his Czech ancestors, learning only then that his mother was Jewish and that his grandparents and three of his aunts died in the Holocaust. Lee's

final chapter details how Stoppard was inspired to write *Leopoldstadt*, a time-shifting, allusive play about an assimilationist Jewish family in Vienna, before and after the Holocaust, with a character who, similarly to himself, was given refuge in England and has almost fully repressed awareness of his past. This rather moving chapter allows Lee to round out the shape of Stoppard's life and career in terms of his own recognition of fate, chance, and loss in human affairs.

If this biography is both authoritative and necessary, the experience of reading it is sometimes far from exciting. Lee never convinced Stoppard, by all accounts a man given to privacy, to talk about what the various moments of his life felt like as he lived through them. She notes that Stoppard gave her access to his friends, his appointment diaries, and his letters to his mother, but it's easy to see how a biography heavily dependent on such materials may lack intimacy and depth. While Lee had a number of conversations with Stoppard, she never quotes his words in the book, instead (apparently) paraphrasing him in a novelistic indirect discourse, making many moments in the book seem vague. Fiction writers as well as actors are advised to "show not tell," and Lee's prose too often does the latter. For instance, recounting Stoppard's changing views on the "luckiness" of his life, Lee writes, "He reproached himself for having trotted out his line so often over the years, of having had a charmed life" (735). Lee's diction makes it impossible to know how extensive or agonizingly self-critical this recognition really was. At times, Lee admits she could not lift the self-protective barriers her subject can deploy: "Somewhere in that time [while writing and rehearsing *The Real Thing*], he would say he 'got upset about something.' But that 'something' was not anything he would tell his biographer" (360). Lee's honesty is refreshing, but her failure to delve disappoints readers hoping to learn previously unknown specifics.

Of course, somewhat ironically, the shape of Stoppard's career itself may tend to dampen a reader's interest: while the sections on Stoppard's youth and his days as a journalist offer excitement, that wanes after *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* makes him a star by age 29. After we get to the opening of *R + G*, over 600 pages remain. Notes of banality and complacency creep into such sentences as "He was extremely pleased to be asked to do the screenplay of John Le Carre's *The Russia House*" (435) and "In May 2000, to his great delight, he was awarded the Order of Merit, one of the highest honors in Britain, limited to twenty-four very distinguished people at any time, chosen by the Queen" (563), and there are a number of perhaps overly-detailed lines about real estate: the house Stoppard bought with Sabrina Guinness "was a Grade II listed 1790s house . . . The outside walls were made of 'banded flint and ashlar,' which gave the house a black-and-white stripey effect" (693).

Stoppard's behavior, character, decisions, work, relationships are described consistently in positive, admiring terms, perhaps in response to the recent biographical trend of portraying writers' lives warts and all, or maybe only the warts. Either Stoppard might be exactly as wonderful a human being as Lee makes him out to be, or this biography tends to hagiography. In fact, Lee mentions that upon reading the book Stoppard noted that "he is good at performing niceness, but he is not as nice as some people think" (752). On page 752 of a 754-page book, Lee devotes part of a paragraph to a few unnamed people skeptical of Stoppard's benevolence – but that is the definition of too little, too late. Also, Lee's phrasings sometimes work to absolve or minimize what could otherwise be phrased as much nearer to clear criticism. For instance, when discussing the devolution of Stoppard's second marriage, she writes of how Stoppard "confided [to friends] his difficulties with Miriam's intense involvement with her work" (380). Would it not have been possible to note forthrightly that one of the factors in this divorce was Stoppard's (presumably agonized) jealousy over his wife's success, renown, and dedication? At another curious moment, Lee writes that it was "impossible [for Stoppard] to ask" his mother about her own

origins and her life before and during the early years of World War II – but surely Stoppard could have asked such questions if he had chosen to. In discussing the reception of *The Coast of Utopia*, Lee writes “There was some right-wing appropriation of his arguments” (599), a sentence the English might call po-faced, as it ignores that the play makes it very easy indeed for its ideas to be assimilated into larger structures of conservative belief.

Readers may be surprised to learn how much time Stoppard spent on TV and film projects (as well other activities that Lee describes accurately as distractions). Not all of these are defensible on the grounds of artistic integrity or vision. While Stoppard worked on film adaptations of worthy material such as John Le Carre’s *The Russia House*, or J. G. Ballard’s *Empire of the Sun*, other screenplays he contributed to, with or without an official writing credit, include *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (from which Lee quotes admiringly), *Mom*, *Poodle Springs*, *Beethoven* (yes, the one about the big dog), *Sleepy Hollow*, and *102 Dalmatians*. This list is hard to square with the claim that Stoppard would never work on “any old screenplay” simply for the money (429). Lee documents precisely how lucrative such writing was while sympathetically noting “He often found this kind of work frustrating, burdensome, and time wasting, especially if it cut across play-writing” (430) – true enough, but it’s not as if it wasn’t his choice to do one thing versus another. Even granting Stoppard’s point that “there’s a difference between completely wasted time and time which would have been better spent” (430), learning that Stoppard expresses pride in inventing a line for Keira Knightley on the set of *Anna Karenina* is a little dismaying.

Lee studies the plays (and movies) themselves more deeply than is usually the case in literary biography. Her appendix, titled “Abbreviations and Bibliography,” demonstrates her familiarity with some major books of Stoppard criticism up to 2012, although she cites none of their authors’ names in the book itself. For each play Lee describes the texts Stoppard engaged with in conceiving his plays, proceeds to a descriptive and interpretive summary of the play, and then encapsulates the journalistic reviews, often particularly concerned with rebutting the persistent complaint that the plays lack emotion. Each of these interpretive strategies has advantages but also flaws. In the first case, simply because a source text may be interesting and insightful does not ensure a play based on them will be either dramatically or intellectually vital. Secondly, while Lee’s readings are always careful and well-supported, they fail to convey that special quality of Stoppard’s plays (the best among them, at least), their contradiction-and-skepticism-fueled intellectual vertiginousness. Also, the plays are treated as literary objects, with no careful analysis of how they might feel in the moment to a spectator. Finally, focusing on theatre critics complaining about the plays’ lack of “emotion” is not all that useful. What is “emotion”? How does one provoke affective response without appealing to cliché and sentimentality? Interestingly, the book allows us to imagine that Stoppard himself began to take this criticism seriously, I would argue to the detriment of the plays themselves. Indeed, it was his wife Miriam, as Lee notes, who urged him to write “the love play” that became *The Real Thing* (359). In *The Real Thing*, *Rock ‘n’ Roll*, and *The Coast of Utopia* trilogy, Stoppard arguably offers discrete quanta of emotions based on love relationships to sustain audience engagement with the political themes of the plays.

While the dramatic analysis lends intellectual weight to the biography, the fact that Lee seems to like and admire all of Stoppard’s plays is not a strong strategy. The uneven quality of Stoppard’s plays, as perceived by both reviewers and scholars, has been an issue throughout his career. While discussing *The Real Thing*, Lee writes “In general, Stoppard maintains that however good his plays are, they usually have at least one thing wrong with them” (357). This is not an insight Lee elaborates upon; she did not get Stoppard to divulge what these flaws might be, in what amounts to a lapse of biographical curiosity

and critical thinking. There's a difference between finding the value in one-off experiments, or in minor, flawed, or ambitious but not well-executed work, and feeling compelled to defend such pieces as largely or thoroughly successful; Lee tends toward the latter. She might have earned more credibility by forthrightly criticizing some of the plays and reserving higher praise for others.

In the case of *The Real Thing*, though, Lee writes some interesting sentences that express indirectly the serious reservations Stoppard has about the play. "He knew that the argument about Brodie was heavily weighted in Henry's favour" (357). (In fact, this wording undersells the point: Brodie is presented as fundamentally fake, so there really is no debate to speak of here.) It would have been helpful if we knew exactly what words the ever-articulate Stoppard used in this regard, but Lee doesn't provide them, nor apparently did she engage Stoppard in a discussion of the obvious question that follows the thought – to put it bluntly, if he knew this was a fault of the play, why didn't he fix it? Letting such a flaw linger means Stoppard was ultimately fine with how he manipulated the play's central political debate, making him seem as dishonest as Brodie is in the play, supporting Neil Sammells' conclusion in *Tom Stoppard: The Artist as Critic* that in plays such as *Night and Day* and *The Real Thing* Stoppard "promote[s] a conservative message . . . political thesis which is at best self-contradictory and banal and, at worst, cynical and dishonest" (142). A few pages later, however, Lee seems to have forgotten this criticism when she notes, with a tone of disapproval, that "*The Real Thing* settled the view of him in some quarters as England's most right-wing playwright" (365).

Stoppard's politics have presented problems for a significant segment of his audience and readers. Can we enjoy the plays while acknowledging Stoppard's right-wing companions, associations, stances, remarks, and opinions? Literary critics are taught to assess texts without reference to their creators – trust the tale and not the teller. But this separation between art and artist necessarily becomes harder to maintain in the context of a biography that conjoins the work and the life. Lee records many of Stoppard's political utterances, but she relates these opinions without much explicit reservation or qualification. Readers may be surprised to learn that Stoppard often went to lunch with Margaret Thatcher when she was Prime Minister. And he often hung out with the deeply (some say rabidly) conservative historian and commentator Paul Johnson. If what I knew about a person included that he found Maggie Thatcher and similar company congenial, I would label that person a reactionary right-winger. Lee writes, "In retrospect, he noted her [Thatcher's] philistinism and her divisiveness" (313). Well, yes. Even at the time, it was not impossible to observe that the divisiveness was pretty much the point (as we've learned to say in the Trump era.) As even a vaguely sympathetic supporter of Trump in 2022 can be rightly suspected of harboring racist thoughts, palling around with Maggie Thatcher raises suspicions about her pals' politics, however social their friendship appeared to be. Nor do these instances lack contemporary corroboration. In an August 2021 interview, Stoppard is quoted on how "cancel culture" is "eroding free speech." Such language means you've picked a side.

Lee allows Stoppard to express his more recent criticism of what conservatism has become in recent decades. His relationship with Sinead Cusack coincided with his being "less attracted to Thatcherism" (571). When Pinter noted to Stoppard that the British government and its institutions protect individual rights such as the freedom to protest and dissent "only up to a point" (239), Stoppard took that idea to heart. Lee leaves the impression that, even as far as these self-criticisms go, it is a matter of conservatism failing Stoppard, rather than the reverse. Given what we have lived through in the last five years, Lee might have challenged him to think of conservatism's autocratic tendencies as the apotheosis

not the decline of conservatism. One wishes that Lee had asked Stoppard to discuss his thoughts contemporary political issues such as Brexit, Boris Johnson, and Donald Trump.

As with politics, so with postmodernism: the record of Stoppard's words in this book will complicate how scholarship has so frequently positioned his plays within the canon of postmodernism. For instance, Lee refers several times to Stoppard's remark that "Without God, we're just marking our own homework." It is a comment, I find, that gets less rather than more persuasive with repetition (if it is an argument for God, it's not a very good one, as it is quite human-centric – although Lee gets Stoppard to note that he does pray [737]). It's a remark that suggests Stoppard's perspective ultimately is not postmodernist but explicitly pre-modernist, refusing the groundless yet dizzying freedom offered by the modernist agenda. The remark "Public postures have the configuration of private derangement" has, in the context of Stoppard's beliefs, the implication that it is only oppositional stances that are thusly deranged, since "postures" in favor of the status quo need not ever be articulated (356). To marginalize oppositional stances runs against any version of postmodernism.

*Tom Stoppard: A Life* is a flattering and comprehensive, if overstuffed, portrait that will serve as a vital resource for future scholars of both Stoppard and postwar British drama. Given the near-hagiographic tone of the book, and the number of important and valued plays by Stoppard, however, the conclusion of the book oddly betrays an ambivalence about Stoppard's legacy. "I am given the sense that he *matters*," writes Lee, ". . . that he will be remembered" (752). Does any contemporary critic doubt this banal observation for a moment? It would be perverse of her to have devoted a 754-page book to someone she felt didn't matter and would soon be forgotten. Moments later, Lee offers another perspective on her subject, even more redolent of doubt, uncertainty, and a sense of transience and loss: "But in the end this person, Tom Stoppard, will vanish into the darkness, and all those things that made this person who he was will vanish with him. He will live on in his work: you will find him there, as he has always wanted you to. Once he vanishes, he becomes his admirers" (753). It is a farewell from biographer to subject that incorporates Stoppard's themes of loss, absence, melancholy, and the vagaries of fate. Presumably, Lee wants us to recall that the last line of this farewell quotes W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" – a poem most noted for its pessimistic tagline about literature: "poetry makes nothing happen."