
Forum

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Structure and Anarchy in Tom Stoppard

To the Editor:

Elissa S. Guralnick brilliantly demonstrates the extent to which Tom Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase* exploits the medium of radio ("*Artist Descending a Staircase*: Stoppard Captures the Radio Station—and Duchamp," 105 [1990]: 286–300). She aptly describes the play as "an inquiry into how we know the things we know, or the things we think we know" (286). But perhaps we know more than Guralnick seems willing to concede. She may go too far when she concludes that Stoppard's play renders it impossible to distinguish art from craftsmanship or charlatanism (290) or that we "should look to Stoppard's play simply for representations of a riddling reality" (294) without expecting to find any answers regarding "questions about the value of modern art" (293).

Oscar Mandel persuades Guralnick to acknowledge that "Stoppard may be said to side with Sophie (i.e., traditionalism), not with Donner and company (i.e., avant-gardism)." But what she gives with one hand, she takes away with the other. Presuming that she is praising the play by describing it as "an optical illusion, gaily oscillating between mutually exclusive meanings right before our eyes" (Forum, 106 [1991]: 125), Guralnick reverts to a notion expressed in her article: instead of finding any coherent meaning in Stoppard's play, "[w]e are simply left bemused by a host of contradictions" (294–95). If Guralnick had taken more seriously Mandel's concluding question, "Why not ask Stoppard himself?" (125), the results might have proved illuminating. She does not quote what Stoppard has said *about* his most important radio play, although he has been unambiguous on the subject.

Four days before *Artist* was broadcast, Stoppard confided to Richard Mayne on the program *Arts Commentary* that in his desire "to try to do something which was unstageable" he spent time in the BBC library attempting to construct a play almost exclusively from sounds, with just the odd line of dialogue here and there (BBC Radio Three, 10 Nov. 1972). That anecdote prompted the interviewer to venture that "in a way, I suppose, Beauchamp is you, because here he is playing with these tapes and producing what Donner describes as rubbish." Stoppard deflated Mayne's notion by bluntly asserting, "No. Donner is me." "I'm a very square, conservative and traditional sort of mind," Stoppard continued. "I absolutely think that Beauchamp's tapes *are* rubbish, and I think that what Donner says about them is *absolutely* true. I think when Donner says that much of modern art is the mechanical expression of a very simple idea which might have occurred to an intelligent

man in his bath and be forgotten in the business of drying between his toes, that is me."

As opposed to being "an apologist for modern art," which Guralnick suggests he is (294), Stoppard over the years has repeatedly affirmed that he has "no interest in anarchic or unstructured art" (*San Francisco Examiner* 28 Mar. 1977). What he values, instead, is "a free mind working within a disciplined form": "What I can't take is an anarchic mind—not an anarchic spirit, which I admire, but a mind which has no formality to it when it comes to structuring and communicating its thoughts. And a great deal of modern art, I mean pictorial art, I look at it and what I don't get is what went in" (*Our Changing Theatre*, BBC Radio Four, 23 Nov. 1970). Nineteen years later, when *Artist* descended onto a New York stage, he repeated much the same view: "Someone in the play says that art is something which should be difficult. And I've always felt that" (*New York Times* 26 Nov. 1989, sec. H: 39).

To be sure, Stoppard's comments on his own play may be illuminating without being exhaustive. But I find it hard to square Stoppard's affirmations that he "absolutely" regards Beauchamp's tapes as rubbish, sees Donner's remarks about them as "absolutely true," and has "always" advocated the discipline of structure in art with Guralnick's insistence that the play is a gay oscillation between mutually exclusive meanings that simply leaves us bemused by a host of contradictions. Ponderous interpretations of the play's thematic significance tend to leave Stoppard as the one bemused. "It's a much more mundane sort of world I live in," Stoppard says, explaining that the play emerged from his idea for a "tape gag where we play a tape at the beginning and 75 minutes later we'd peg it off by showing that the whole thing had been, as it were, misinterpreted. So there was the need for 74 minutes of padding or brilliant improvisation if you like or very carefully structured and meticulously built-up plot" (*Arts Commentary*). I can quite agree with Guralnick insofar as she finds brilliance and meticulous structure in *Artist*. But to conclude that the play ends not with a jolt of recognition but with baffled bemusement advances an argument that is too clever by half. Stating that Stoppard's "point" is "[p]resumably that what we take for truth is merely paradox" (287), Guralnick attributes to Stoppard's play the academically fashionable view that there is no such thing as truth. But if the play, as Stoppard intends, demonstrates that the tape has been "misinterpreted," it implies that a correct interpretation is possible—not that all is paradox. To be sure, there are difficulties and ambiguities within this play. But to insist that *everything* is elusive, that

nothing can be known, obscures the merits of a play that, as Guralnick rightly insists, ill deserves obscurity. Perhaps the question we should ask ourselves is, What would this intricately structured, carefully crafted radio play have sounded like if it had sounded as if it were a major play affirming intricacy and craftsmanship and structure in art?

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Reply:

Although claiming to quote Stoppard on the subject of his play, Paul Delaney actually quotes him on the subject of himself. The difference, I submit, is monumental.

Were Stoppard inclined to write polemics, the man and his plays might speak in unison. Then *Artist Descending a Staircase* would no doubt flay Beauchamp and exalt Donner. But by his own admission, Stoppard favors dialectic. Witness his remarks to Mel Gussow, as quoted in Thomas Whitaker's superb volume on Stoppard in the Grove Press Modern Dramatists series (New York, 1983). From an interview in 1972: "I write plays because dialogue is the most respectable way of contradicting yourself" (4). And from an interview in 1979: "I don't write plays with heroes who express my point of view. I write argument plays. I tend to write for two people rather than for One Voice" (5).

Thus, whatever Stoppard's private verdict about the relative merits of Beauchamp and Donner, he has produced in *Artist Descending a Staircase* a play that must yield a hung jury, so persuasive is the evidence on either side. However eager Delaney may be, in the light of Stoppard's comments, to credit the elderly Donner, he ought to set store by Beauchamp's response to Donner's idea of "painting what the eye sees." "Well," says Beauchamp, "I've never seen a naked woman sitting about a garden with a unicorn eating roses. . . . [S]urely you can see that a post-Pop pre-Raphaelite is pure dada brought up to date—" Donner has neither anticipated nor solved the central problem of the traditional artist: namely, how to avoid, on the one hand, the trap of appearing quaint and, on the other, the accident of stumbling into modernism by default.

As it happens, Delaney does not deal with *Artist Descending a Staircase* in his book about Stoppard (*Tom Stoppard: The Moral Vision of the Major Plays*, New York, 1990). Quoting the playwright's distinction between his "plays of ideas" and his mere "entertainments," Delaney explicitly limits his attention to the