

## **The marriage of farce and the play of ideas in Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers* and *Travesties***

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This focus of this thesis is an in-depth analysis of two of Stoppard's early plays in the light of the playwright's own description (according to the author) of his work as representing 'the marriage of farce and the play of ideas'.

In the first chapter the author explores the complexity of Stoppard, particular through attempting to weigh up whether his work should be defined as showing postmodern features or being rather in the modernist tradition. The second (exceptionally brief) chapter offers definitions of farce and the play of ideas. In the following chapter the author then turns to the two plays, *Jumpers* and *Travesties*, and systematically talks about their 'serious ideas' and 'farical features', comments on the two versions of the latter play, then aims to assess which of the plays represents the better 'marriage', although she rather undermines this stated intent by writing "I feel I have no right to judge the plays for being better or worse" (p.52).

The fourth, and most interesting, though short, chapter offers a comparison of Stoppard's work with the work of earlier playwrights – Ibsen, Chekhov and Shaw – in terms of the extent to which his plays compare with 'plays of ideas'. Her conclusion is that "The similarity of Stoppard's plays and the play of ideas in general consists in raising awareness of problems." (p.54). The author concludes her thesis by reiterating that Stoppard's strength lies precisely in his combination of "seriousness and frivolity" and that this is "the most natural expression of what goes on in real life" (57).

The thesis is obviously based on a passion for, and deep knowledge of the work of Stoppard. The author was clearly intrigued by Stoppard's reference to "marrying" categories. The witty and intriguing description she herself offers towards the end of the thesis is that his plays represent rather a "wild cohabitation". But it is never made clear how this differs from marriage. Or whether Stoppard himself, as he is quoted as saying (the quote isn't referenced and is first used on p.7), believed he wanted to "create a perfect marriage of the play of ideas and farce" (p.55), or whether in fact he spoke only of "a kind of marriage" (p.54). Which might surely encompass wild cohabitation!

A further lack of clarity occurs when the author broadens her terms of reference to go beyond an actual focus on farce as a specific category. For example, on the first page of the thesis she talks of "seriousness and wit", "seriousness and humour", "seriousness and frivolity" and writes that "His plays show that comedy or farce does not exclude tragedy" (p.7). And in her discussion of the play of ideas in chapter 4 she writes highly contentiously, that "When you create a comic character you do not dwell on so many details as if you create a dramatic character" (p.53). The author should try to defend this claim, or clarify what she means by it.

This lack of clarity in terms of definitions means that the thesis lacks a focus, as "farce" becomes representative of comedy in general. With this blurring of definitions, couldn't you also claim his plays are a ménage a trois between the comedy of manners, farce, the play of ideas, or a ménage a quatre.....etc. etc.?

Another point is to question the relevance of such a long section discussing whether Stoppard could be described as modernist or postmodernist, interesting though many of the points are. Although the author felt it necessary in terms of understanding *Jumpers* and *Travesties* its relevance to the central thesis is not convincing.

The strength of the thesis is its sincere and passionate admiration for Stoppard and an insistence on the need to remember that the primary purpose of his plays is to entertain and engage audiences in actual theatres. The author uses her awareness of stagecraft to make many interesting points about the two plays she chooses to analyse in depth. However, because of perhaps getting too entranced by the notion of marriage, the stated aim of the thesis is not really wholly supported by the content of the thesis itself, which is more of a general exploration of Stoppard's work, emphasising its complexity and its mixing of many categories, not simply farce and the play of ideas.

The work shows a great deal of thought and independent research and I am happy to recommend it for acceptance with a mark of 2.