“Writing Cricket Bats” : The Unsettling Intersections of Art and Life
In Tom Stoppard’s Travesties and The Real Thing

Bonnie Kinsey Dowd

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“Writing Cricket Bats”:
The Unsettling Intersections of Art and Life
In Tom Stoppard’s *Travesties* and
*The Real Thing*

by

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Abstract

In both *Travesties* and *The Real Thing*, Tom Stoppard investigates the role of the artist in society and the connection of art to history, politics, reality, and emotion. Through his characters, Stoppard voices conflicting, but often equally credible, arguments regarding the various intersections of art with life to illustrate his contention that “there is no static viewpoint” of events (Chetta 133), in Stoppard’s own words: “There is no observer. There is no safe point around which everything takes its proper place, so that you see things flat and see how they relate to each other” (Hayman, *Tom Stoppard* 141).

Stoppard uses this investigation of art’s interconnectedness to human life to underscore the absolute necessity that art remain free of political manipulation. This contention arises from his belief that art is “the moral matrix, the moral sensibility from which we make our judgments about the world” (Jenkins 118), and thus must be unfettered. Since those judgments affect behavior towards others, individually, nationally, and globally, he strongly advocates discovery of “what is real” as regards politics, emotion, and history and demonstrates the nightmarish results of using art to serve a political agenda.

Stoppard’s style—the use of parody, repetition, debate, and pastiche—illustrates the difficulty in discerning reality from illusion, separating history from fiction, and limiting politics from saturating the everyday life of citizens. His underlying theme is that individuals must make their judgments about the world, each other, and crucial issues with benefit of intellect and with the understanding that perception is often faulty and always skewed.
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THE REAL THING

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in English

By
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Montclair State University
Montclair, NJ
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A Note on Punctuation

Stoppard regularly uses three or more dots (…), not enclosed in brackets or parentheses, in his own writing, whereas brackets enclosing three dots […] have been used to denote material missing from quotations in mine. Stoppard’s original punctuation has been left untouched where a quote has not been shortened. In addition, occasionally two spellings of particular words appear in the text, Stoppard’s or critics’ British spelling is left unchanged inside of quotations and common American spelling is used throughout the rest of the text.
Introduction

Tom Stoppard does not write plays merely to entertain, although they certainly do. Each play centers on a “serious core” of ideas (Brassell 3), with connections to larger issues outside the dramatic realm. Under consideration in this study are two of Stoppard’s plays, *Travesties* and *The Real Thing*, in which he presents a variety of viewpoints of art and the role of the artist. Through the dynamic of debate, Stoppard exposes the potency of art and the inherent danger to the individual when art is confused with life, and he stresses the essential indispensability of the artist’s integrity. This study investigates the various ways art intersects with history, politics, reality, and emotion in these works and explores the possibility that Stoppard is writing cautionary tales.

“Art is important,” Stoppard has said, “because it provides the moral matrix, the moral sensibility from which we make our judgments about the world” (Jenkins 118). Clearly, Stoppard acknowledges that art and, by extension, the artist occupy a position of power and authority that implies social responsibility. Stoppard appreciates that although the artist is capable of enriching human experience, conversely the artist is equally capable of negatively affecting that experience, hence his insistence on artistic integrity. While Stoppard “opposes fixity” (Nadel xii) and political absolutes, he asserts that all human behavior must originate from a rigid framework of moral absolutes. By this Stoppard means adherence to fundamental principles that guide treatment of one another personally, nationally, and globally. Paramount among these principles is the concept of the freedom of the individual.

Chapter One of this study provides a context in which to place Stoppard, tracing certain aspects of his art, such as his emphasis on the primacy of artistic integrity and his
practice of writing from uncertainty, to his biographical roots, integrating Stoppard’s belief: “Plays are the people who write them” (Nadel 9). The chapter additionally addresses the critique of Stoppard’s apolitical approach to writing and discusses Stoppard’s penchant for pastiche, the use of “borrowed” elements in the construction of his own art.

The discussion of *Travesties* in Chapter Two centers on both the overt and covert interconnections between art, politics, and history. Art, as demonstrated in the play, envelops and animates history. Art allows man and his deeds, placed in the center of history, to be immortalized and, as *Travesties*’ Joyce says, “[I]t is we who stand enriched” (42) by the artistic enfolding of history in narrative. Nevertheless, glorious as histories may be, Stoppard warns that because of their intersection with art, they are an amalgam of fact, fiction, and perspective and, as such, they are a representation of events and people from a particular point of view. He is concerned with how the individual makes meaning based on the perception of a single event, how distinct and different each individual’s reality is from the other, and how one man’s truth is another man’s fiction just as one individual’s or nation’s history is invention to another.

Stoppard alerts audiences to the danger of relying on perception to make judgments. He posits perception as skewed and untrustworthy by structuring both plays to reveal how it is often difficult to discern reality from illusion. *Travesties* takes place in the faulty memory of an old man whose personal prejudices color every event while the play within a play technique in *The Real Thing* purposely confuses audiences who cannot be sure if what they are seeing is life or art. Stoppard plays upon the individual’s reliance on perception to make sense of the world, hoping to shake faith in the practice.
John William Cooke provides a synopsis of Stoppard’s *After Magritte*, which illustrates how perception influences individual reality:

A one-legged man with a white beard, who may in fact have been a handicapped football player with shaving cream on his face, has been seen hopping, or perhaps playing hop-scotch, along an English street, wearing striped pajamas, convict garb, or possibly a West Bromwich Albion football jersey, waving with one arm a white stick, a crutch, or a furled parasol while carrying under the other what may have been a football, a wine-skin, an alligator handbag, or a tortoise. (88)

Cooke suggests that “each witness saw the same object yet went home believing he saw a different thing: a handicapped football player, a convict with a handbag, or a pajama-clad gentleman with a tortoise” (88). The observer becomes the author of his or her individual reality based not only on what he or she has seen but also past experience and personal referents.

Stoppard also calls attention to the world of language in both plays, and although *The Real Thing*’s Henry posits words as “innocent, neutral, precise, standing for this, describing that” (207), Stoppard demonstrates that once they are contextualized, their neutrality and innocence slip away. Words are in the service of the writer and his or her agenda. Stoppard illustrates the malleability of concepts “like politics, justice, patriotism” (*The Real Thing* 206) and distrusts abstractions because of the potential for misapplication leading to abuse of human rights. “Patriotism,” for example, generally carries a positive connotation. However, in Stoppard’s personal history, he suffered dispossession because an inflated sense of patriotism, an excessive, emotionally charged,
and engineered love of the "Fatherland," resulted in the rapid rise of Nazi power and its brutal consequences. A more contemporary example of using a form of the same word [patriot] to further a political agenda is the naming of the measure, which curbs some individual freedoms to ostensibly increase safety in the United States, the "Patriot Act." The implication is that those who object to following its dictates may not be "patriots," in this case, people who love America.

Stoppard warns of putting art in the service of politics. Art, he contends, should be for art's sake, echoing the sentiments of Oscar Wilde, and not manipulated and harnessed to serve any political agenda. Art must remain free and unfettered, as must the artist. Stoppard's depiction of Travesties' Lenin exemplifies the nightmare of what happens when art must serve a political aim. In Travesties, Carr wisely says, "The easiest way of knowing whether good has triumphed over evil is to examine the freedom of the artist" (22). Carr echoes Stoppard's own sentiments as Kenneth Reckford reports: "He had consistently seen artistic and intellectual freedom and integrity as the best sign, and guarantee, of a free society. To subordinate art to politics to expose less than the whole, many-sided truth, would seem a betrayal" (148).

Exhibiting the "many-sided truth" of any subject is precisely Stoppard's method. He consistently offers competing views of the issue under discussion and balances characters so that the audience cannot universally denote a single voice as the voice of reason or truth. "Stoppard's work invariably demands much from its audiences—head, heart, libido—and credits them with the capacity to learn. They must come prepared to laugh and to ponder the gravest of thoughts," Amy Reiter asserts. Indeed, what Stoppard is demanding is that audiences think and not blindly accept that what they are seeing,
hearing or reading is the absolute truth. Through his intelligent, complicated dramas, Stoppard asks that we, as rational beings, take in the stimuli and process them by applying intellect. He also asks that we examine the underlying absolutes of our belief system to make sure we are building on an unshakable and incorruptible foundation.

Finally, in these two works, Stoppard tackles the subject of emotion. In *Travesties*, Stoppard demonstrates the power of emotion through his depiction of Lenin. As an apt student of his own emotional response to art and the resulting softening of his will, Stoppard’s Lenin realizes the danger of an unbridled response to art and the necessity of suppressing emotion to enforce the singular will of the dictator in a totalitarian regime.

In *The Real Thing*, discussed in the third chapter of this study, Stoppard explores what is real in art, politics, and love and questions how we can ever know “the real thing.” While love’s destructive potential is clearly seen in the ruined relationships marred by betrayal, Stoppard investigates the power of love to illuminate and exhilarate, to remake and redeem.

Chapter Three also includes a brief response to the critique that with *The Real Thing*, Stoppard has finally written realistic and fully realized female characters. However, in tackling the coupling of women and emotion, Stoppard has created female characters that embody traits traditionally considered masculine, notably pragmatism and insensitivity. It is not until later in his career, past the point of consideration in this study, that Stoppard will offer female characters who are more fully developed, being logically motivated but retaining sensitivity and warmth.
Chapter One—Tom Stoppard: The Unsettling Intersection of Art, Integrity, and Uncertainty

While biographical criticism is generally a flawed lens through which to view an artist’s work, Stoppard’s biography, nevertheless, provides a context for some of his stylistic trademarks, especially his use of pastiche. In the least sense, Stoppard’s work appears to reflect his personal history as regards what his biographer, Ira Nadel, terms his “distrust of history—his belief that it is always incomplete” ("Writing" 21).

"the magic and nightmare" of Life

Stoppard claims that in the “magic and nightmare of theater […] anything can happen” (Farnsworth), and that contrast is a part of what attracted him to theatre. However, what at first seems magical can turn nightmarish, and nightmares often have the whiff of magic in them, so the terms are not as much at odds as it initially seems. “Magic and nightmare” is also an apt description for Stoppard’s childhood, and the randomness and chance of the events of his early biography play out in both his career path and the plays themselves.

The playwright’s personal history reveals what could be termed a pastiche of identity. Born Tomáš Straüssler in Czechoslovakia in 1937 to non-practicing Jewish parents and forced to flee the Nazis in 1939, Stoppard escaped with his family to Singapore, instead of Nairobi to which they had been granted traveling documents, by switching papers with a neighbor. Relatives, unable to secure passage out of Czechoslovakia and sent to concentration camps, disappeared from the pages of the family’s history. Within a couple of years, Stoppard, with his mother and brother, fled the
Japanese invasion of Singapore on a ship bound for Australia which inexplicably returned to Singapore where the Stoppards transferred to a ship headed for India. Nadel reports that Stoppard remembers this as “another moment in his life where accident intervened” (*A Life* 24). During this time, the Japanese invaded Singapore, and Stoppard’s father died while trying to escape. In the confusion of that time, the suitcase containing all the documents of the Stoppards’ personal history was lost; as Nadel writes: “Stoppard’s documented past was gone” (*A Life* 25). Within a few years, Stoppard’s mother married the very proper and anti-Semitic British Army Major Kenneth Stoppard in India and the family moved to England.

Stoppard, by the age of eight, had lived in four different countries and had lost his father, his homeland, and his language. Paul Delaney explains:

> [H]e had a new father [... a] new language, English, which he had learned at Mount Hermon, a Darjeeling school run by American Methodists, [... a] new nationality—neither American nor Indian nor Czech but British, [...] and he had a new name. Three weeks after arriving in England, the Straüssler brothers received, from their stepfather, the surname Stoppard.

(25)

From the moment he arrived in England, Stoppard claims he knew he “had found a home” (Nadel, *A Life* 39). He had found a home, however, in the house of a man who admitted to not being “pleased to be the step-father to two half-Jewish children” and who set out to erase any trace of foreign influence and instill solid British values and modes of behavior (Nadel, *A Life* 43). Major Stoppard believed in racial and ethnic superiority and the distinct separation of classes based not only on blood but also on breeding—such
characteristics as education, diction, and taste. Stoppard's decision to leave school without attending university was partially grounded in his need to seek freedom from his stepfather's oppressive control and find his own voice. Nevertheless, echoes of his past would resound, consciously or unconsciously, throughout his life and work.

The Emerging Artist

Stoppard first appeared on the dramatic scene as a critic and, by his own admission, he was "an awful critic. I operated on the assumption that there was an absolute scale of values against which art could be measured" (Reiter 3). Reiter correctly surmises: "Stoppard longed, it seemed, to write for the theater rather than about it" (3). Stoppard recalls that like many of his contemporaries, he began to write plays after "being moved to tears and laughter by Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and that young writers became playwrights "not because what they had to say I think was particularly suited to dramatic form but because the theatre was clearly the most interesting and dynamic medium" (qtd. in Rusinko 7).

Another reason for a young man's captivation by playwriting is revealed in a retrospective personal statement made in 1993, which encapsulates the heady atmosphere and magnetic allure of the drama scene of the early sixties, simply put: "Plays were sexy," Stoppard remembers (Nadel, *A Life* 311). It could be argued also that Stoppard may have been attracted to writing in general as a method of finding his voice and to dramatic writing in particular as a pathway to finding himself by inventing a persona and imagining a history.

As mentioned, Stoppard's attraction to work in an arena "where anything can happen" speaks to his appreciation of the fluidity of drama. The play as written is not
necessarily the play that is performed. Discretionary artistic influence in lighting, costume, and scenery, as well as interpretation by directors and performers, reinvigorates and alters the work with each new production. To illustrate his understanding of the dramatic form, Stoppard has proposed a mathematical formula, which reflects his ethic as a playwright: “[P]lay = text + acting + sound + lighting” (Nadel, A Life 311). John Fleming adds that Stoppard “views the play text as but one of many production elements” and “this view of the text as a kinetic object has resulted in plays that have evolved over the years and through different productions” (6).

Stoppard is a welcome visitor at the staging of his work and frequently rewrites lines on the spot to accommodate a new vision or in response to suggestions from others involved in the production like actors, for example. His lack of resistance to change and appreciation for the perspective of others speak to his belief in a living art and a conviction that the work of writing is never finished.

In discussing his art, Stoppard is critical of those who attempt to separate theatre from drama (theatre being posited as the less-intellectual, less-academic sibling of drama), believing that the two are indivisible. Tim Brassell explains Stoppard’s contention that “an over-literary attitude towards drama is a contradiction since it cannot sensibly exist in separation from the performing conditions that nurture it” (2). Raymond Williams further validates Stoppard’s concerns: “drama is, or can be, both literature and theatre, not the one at the expense of the other, but each because of the other” (qtd. in Brassell 2). Academics, for example, concerned that it was beneath their standards to seriously consider works that were popular with the public, largely ignored Stoppard. The commercial aspects of the theatre tainted the work for some theoreticians who preferred
an exclusionary highbrow work to one that attained commercial success. Not only was Stoppard a successful writer, but also he was one without benefit of a university education, which may have soured the taste of his work for some.

In 1972, Stoppard addressed the seeming necessity of the literary elite to elevate his art to an acceptable academic status in order to be able to publicly or professionally embrace it:

> It is understandable that in seeking its own raison d'être, the vast oracular Lego set of Lit Crit with its chairs and lectureships, its colloquia and symposia, its presses, reprints, off-prints, monographs, reviews, footnotes and fireside chats, should come up with something than that it beats working for a living. (qtd. in Brassell 2)

Stoppard’s apprehension of the resistance of academia to allow that they appreciated the same work as the common theatergoer rests within his understanding of class resistance to the achievements of those members of one class that another class considers inferior. The Real Thing’s Annie could be speaking to the same group as she echoes Stoppard’s sentiments:

> You’re bigoted about what writing is supposed to be like. You judge everything as though everyone starts off from the same place, aiming at the same prize. Eng. Lit. Shakespeare out in front by a mile, and the rest of the field strung out behind trying to close the gap. You all write for people who would like to write like you if only they could write. Well, sod you and sod Eng. sodding Lit! (201)
In the same play, Henry, often considered Stoppard’s alter-ego, struggles with the problem of who dictates which art is acceptable and which is less desirable (Critics? Artists? The public?), what can be considered “good” art as opposed to “bad” art, and the repercussions of choosing one over the other. He is willing to lie about his tastes in literature and music to tailor his public persona to fulfill the expectations of his audience. Henry is engaged in a deceit, but he rationalizes the attempt because although he feels certain that his choices will reveal deficiencies, he is uncertain about the answer to the greater question of why that should matter.

“If it’s worth doing once...”

When Ronald Hayman asked Stoppard why his plays contained so much “borrowed” material, he glibly replied, “If it’s worth using once, it’s worth using twice” (Hayman, Stoppard 2), but his work references so many other works, including his own, that one must search a bit deeper for a satisfactory answer. Harold Bloom calls Stoppard “an almost obsessive contaminator” as his work “relies so crucially upon the trope of interlacing”—the connecting of an old play with a new one, what the Romans called “contaminatio” (1).

Stoppard has raided the work of novelists, composers, poets and other playwrights, to name a few sources of his ideas, characters, and dialogue. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is a prime example of a Stoppardian theme: two minor characters from Hamlet elevated to central importance in a new play. William Beare defends Stoppard’s penchant for reinvention of existing characters: “A character in a play, when removed from his setting, ceases to exist; everything he said in his original context [...] would be meaningless in a different context. Hence the part would have to
be written afresh. The dramatist would have to write the new words himself. This is not borrowing, but original composition” (qtd. in Bloom 1). As Beare asserts, Stoppard’s plays, which incorporate characters, settings, themes, and even dialogue from other works, are completely new creations.

Both plays in this study are rife with echoes and reflections of other art and artists. *Travesties* relies heavily on “borrowing” elements from other works and recontextualizes characters and dialogue. In *Travesties*, Stoppard creates a pastiche of the work of various artists: Shakespeare, Joyce, and Lenin, as well as earlier works of his own. Stoppard reuses an entire speech from *Artist Descending a Staircase* in *Travesties*, for example. But it is Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* that provides a framework for Stoppard’s debate on art and artistic responsibility and integrity. Stoppard hangs his play on the skeleton of Wilde’s work of art, matching characters from *Travesties* to those of *Earnest*.

Stoppard may have been drawn to Wilde the artist for many reasons, but certainly Wilde’s theatricality and brilliant use of language had major appeal as did *Earnest*’s social commentary. Stoppard may have been drawn to Wilde the man because he represents duality: Wilde’s own identity could be described as a pastiche—married with children but also homosexual. The Victorian social climate forced Wilde to live a double life, subjugating his sexuality, a hallmark of individual freedom, to the mores and laws of an oppressive system (Bronson). Nadel suggests that Stoppard’s identity was also “something of a patchwork, drawing on several countries [. . .] and multiple cultures [. . .] but always presented as ‘English’” (“Writing” 21). Nadel concludes that the impact of Stoppard’s biography on his writing might be seen in his “preference for pastiche” which
might well be “the literary consequence of the re-emergence of his diverse social and
cultural past” (“Writing” 21). Stoppard’s mother, in hiding the truth of his Jewish
ancestry, in effect created duality in the boy who grew up in the presence of the anti-
Semitic father-figure only to discover he was the minority his father despised.

_The Real Thing_ utilizes dialogue from other artists—John Ford’s ‘_Tis Pity She’s a
Whore_ and August Strindberg’s _Miss Julie_, for example, but _The Real Thing_ also owes a
debt to Henry James and his short story of the same name. James, like Stoppard, also
spent his childhood away from his native land and eventually became a naturalized
British citizen. In his short story, James discusses art, perception, and reality, concluding
that art or illusion is often more desirable than reality. James’s artist discovers that while
art imitates life or what is real, what is real often cannot be transformed into art. James
posits that art can be better than what is real in that the creation of the artist is a result of
the vision of the artist, and that “the ideal thing” (18) may be a representation of “the real
thing.” As James’s artist states: “the real thing could be so much less precious than the
unreal” (18).

Stoppard’s Henry, whose name may well be homage to James (Jacobs), is an
artist in search of what is real in his life while creating representations of reality in his art.
Henry prefers to write dialogue for characters, mimicking life by orchestrating what is
said and how it is said rather than dealing with the real situations that arise in his own
life. In matters of adultery, for example, Henry’s words mouthed by an actor are clever
and cool. In real life, however, Henry’s words dissolve; the real is uncontrollable, messy
and uncertain. James’s artist succinctly voices Henry’s dilemma, [I have] “an innate
preference for the represented subject over the real one: the defect of the real one was so apt to be a lack of representation. I liked things that appeared; then one was sure” (6).

“I just don’t know”

Stoppard’s characters do not pretend to know everything, nor does Stoppard. Uncertainty frames and expands his writing but this uncertainty has provoked wide critical response, most notably that he is an apolitical writer who writes about political subjects. While critics have generally been enthusiastic about Stoppard’s plays, consistently heaping praise for this “intellectual agility” (Hobson 29) and “brilliant language” (Hunter 4), some critics thought “his ideas, though clever, were not, in their opinion, sufficiently thought through” (Jenkins 99). Additionally, those who appreciated the seriousness of some of his themes “felt nonetheless that weighty subjects should, somewhere along the way, arrive at sober statement” (Jenkins 99). Although critics appreciated Stoppard’s intelligent exploration into complex subject matter, some were disturbed that his mix of humor and probing resulted not only in a lack of resolution, but also in less surety than existed before he began writing. Stoppard responds to this critique:

There is very often no single, clear statement in my plays. What there is, is a series of conflicting statements made by conflicting characters, and they tend to play a sort of infinite leap-frog. You know, an argument, a refutation, then a rebuttal of the refutation, then a counter-rebuttal, so that there is never any point in this intellectual leap-frog at which I feel that is the speech to stop it on, that is the last word. (qtd. in Rusinko 8)
Stoppard clearly privileges uncertainty; it is the position from which he writes. "My plays are a lot to do with the fact that I just don't know," Stoppard affirms (Hudson 13). Through his art, Stoppard is able to share his uncertainty with his audience and permit them to experience the open-mindedness that can inform debate when one operates from the position of "not knowing." Uncertainty allows for possibilities and creates a liminal space that provides room to wonder, to consider other options.

It is precisely because Stoppard writes from a position of uncertainty that his plays have been criticized for leaving his audiences with a vague sense of incompleteness, a certain edginess that is akin to a nagging mental itch. The itch is what Stoppard hopes to achieve. It is the consummate compliment to a so-called apolitical artist that long after a reader has put down the book, or an audience member has tossed the program into a forgotten stack, the nagging, prickly, "not quite finished" feeling remains. It is Stoppard's refusal to enforce a political ideology through his work that produces this lack of closure with which many Stoppard fans are left.

Stoppard does not confuse uncertainty with a lack of moral conviction. His convictions are most likely born from the same root as his disinterest in using art to advance a political agenda. As a victim of political oppression, he has witnessed the devastation and upheaval that cleverly disguised propaganda and loss of individual voice incites. He is dedicated to the idea of art kept free of political intent in order to function as the "moral matrix" of society. Both Travesties and The Real Thing demonstrate Stoppard's deft handling of controversial political issues without enforcing a limited single viewpoint. Travesties offers competing opinions in the form of almost constant debate between different combinations of pairs of characters. In The Real Thing,
Stoppard uses repetition of situation and setting, but the characters all revolve around Henry and disclose their conflicting views while in conversation with him. One finishes reading both plays with the sense that each character’s point of view, while widely separated morally, ethically, and practically, is understandable. This in turn provokes inner questioning.

G. B. Crump contends that Stoppard harbors the “conviction that art shapes our perception of the world, in effect creating the world for us in our imaginations” (322). To Stoppard, then, in re-imagining a world, artistic integrity is supreme. Declaring a single viewpoint the only “right” conclusion one could reasonably reach through art is tinkering with the individual’s prerogative to decide what is right as framed by his or her own moral framework—it is “putting in the fix,” so to speak, through art.

“Not knowing,” then, is a potent position from which to write since it implies a dynamic engagement with the world, a non-static relationship, which allows inquiry and intellect to guide re-imagination and reinvention. Stoppard’s Septimus of Arcadia, whose vocation it is to guide his pupil’s educational journey and develop her mind on the path to “knowing,” speaks to the experience of learning as we travel about in the world: “We shed as we pick up, like travelers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind” (57). Septimus reveals Stoppard’s belief that “not knowing” is not a finished state in which one endeavors to remain, but the initial point of inquiry, the beginning of wonder which leads to greater knowledge. Arcadia’s Hannah verifies Stoppard’s belief in the human need to discover truth: “It’s wanting to know that makes us matter. Otherwise we’re going out the way we came in” (106).
Stoppard’s refusal to politicize his work is itself a political act. His philosophy is uniquely present in all of his work, but he bases it on moral, not political, absolutes. The following line from his play, *Jumpers*, illuminates his trust in a static underlying core of values: “The difference between moral rules and the rules of tennis is that the rules of tennis can be changed” (3).

Stoppard states issues, asks questions, and presents arguments on all sides of any debate, but does not provide the answers. He trusts in the intelligence and innate human values of his audience to respond to his art. His job as a writer, as he suggests through the voice of Henry, is to “nudge the world a little” (207). That is not to tell it what to think, but, through his art, to reveal particular ideas or issues that could bear attention. Possibly, if an audience member is “itchy” enough, he or she will be moved to appropriate action commensurate with a personal moral framework.
Chapter Two - *Travesties*: The Dangerous Intersection of Art, History, and Politics

*Travesties* opens a discussion on the interconnectedness of art, history, and politics, and it is Stoppard’s judgment that while art is a necessary component of history, one needs to be aware of it as an element of history’s creation. Art and politics, however, are dangerous bedfellows, together capable of much damage. Since art is the “moral matrix” on which individuals base their behavior, it is imperative that it remain free of a political message.

History as Construct

Although not categorized as one of Stoppard’s “political plays,” *Travesties* nevertheless demonstrates Stoppard’s ability to present a political debate centering on four distinctly oppositional views of art and the artist. A trio of revolutionary thinkers (James Joyce, Tristan Tzara, and Lenin), as well as a lesser luminary (Henry Carr), all voice divergent views couched within a structure that invites, even demands, questioning from its opening scene.

Stoppard imagines a setting where the three revolutionaries, who were all actually living in Zurich at some point during the same period, intersect for a time. As Ronald Hayman posits in Peter Chetta’s “Multiplicities,” “Stoppard does not need or want to base his plays in any particular realm of reality. He creates his own world” (133). The world that Stoppard creates “dislocate[s] the audience’s assumptions” (Chetta 134) and opens for them the possibility that these historical figures could have met entirely by chance and therein lies the potential to have changed the course of world history. As far
as we know, all three did not meet together to share ideas, and history is what it is—or what we have been told that it is.

Stoppard's use of historical figures in a fictional art form points to a crucial political question involving the conflation of history and fiction and suggests that history as a narrative may be simply another form of fiction. Stoppard's choice of the Zurich Public Library as the site of convergence is provocative on several levels. A library is the site of the classification of various texts—written, audio, visual—into separate categories: fiction, non-fiction, history, literature, biography, and so on. The works of or about the three revolutionaries will eventually find their way onto the shelves of libraries around the world, placed into specific sections based not only on the works themselves, but also on the political ideology of the classifying system. The subject of Tzara, for example, will eventually be classified under several headings in libraries around the world: art, literature, history, biography, and fiction. Even within the same section, there may appear alternate renderings of a particular event. That one man's history is another's fiction further extends Stoppard's concept of uncertainty into a realm where certainty is daily practiced in the categorization of texts.

The library as the nexus of revolutionary thought speaks also to its being the repository of the knowledge of a culture. What has been thought, created, or written before becomes the historical foundation that revolutionaries, including artists, build on or react to in the creation of new knowledge. It is facile, therefore, to view history and art as interrelated, inevitably bound together through the library. Lenin was in Zurich during this time specifically to use the library, which was superior to one he had been using in a smaller city; it is what attracted him to that particular city at that particular time.
Stoppard’s placement of all three within the library is also fitting since, as the play opens, each is engaged in writing, and the library is the chief repository of that art form.

Stoppard further complicates the notion of history as being pure and unfettered by his use of Carr as the narrator in *Travesties*. Viewed outside the constructed narrative that links occurrences to each other, history can be seen as a “random and mysterious course of events” (Billman 47). In Carr’s memory, the past is reconstructed, with Carr in a pivotal role, which in a Carr-centric view is logical. As Cooke notes: “Memory, even Carr’s memory, is never random; it attempts to unify even the most disjointed events of the past” (94). The human mind’s endeavor to bring order to strings of isolated events results in the enfolding of fact in fiction. Carr’s lengthy first speech begins as he remembers the past as an old man, safely ensconced in his home, his possessions and books surrounding him. Having outlasted the three principle subjects of his story, all of whom have become quite famous, he maintains a certain power since they cannot protest how he will depict them.

Historical placement is important to Carr; he does not want to be relegated to “the dustbin of history” (55). He attempts to establish his own place in history first by association with the revolutionaries, using the phrase, “To those of us who knew him” (6, 8), to begin rambling reminiscences of both Joyce and Lenin, thus sharing the spotlight with the more famous figures. He imagines books he could write based on his intimate knowledge and experience in their company: “Memories of James Joyce, James Joyce as I Knew Him” (6) and “Lenin as I Knew Him. The Lenin I Knew” (7).

Second, he attempts to establish his own star-power: “I’m mentioned in the books,” he says, and in a bit of self-aggrandizement, titles himself “Carr of the
Consulate” (9), seeking the permanence of those who are noted in the pages of the books in the library. As he imagines titles of the books he could write about others, he dreams of titles that might grace books he could write about himself: “Further recollections of a Consular Official in Whitest Switzerland. The Ups and Downs of Consular Life in Zurich During the Great War: A Sketch” (7), again seeking to “place” himself among the movers and shakers. As the “internal author” of Travesties (Shultz and Astley 213), Stoppard has endowed Carr with immortality. Ironically, Joyce also immortalizes him by naming a disreputable character in Ulysses, Private Carr, after him, and Stoppard may well be both mirroring Joyce and paying homage to him by doing the same thing.

Using Carr as the narrator of the play enforces Stoppard’s contention that perspective is unreliable and history is its unfortunate beneficiary. Although Carr paradoxically remarks that he “well remember[s] as though it were yesteryear” (9), an analogy that hardly inspires belief, his memory fails often as he futilely attempts to relate an event, a meeting, or an argument. Carr reveals that he stands “open to correction on all points” with the exception of his height, his success as an actor, and his relief at being in Switzerland in wartime” (9). Carr is certain, then, only of those things that are uniquely his—personal physical characteristics, opinion, and feelings. Carr, as historian, is stating that he writes from a position of uncertainty about anything that does not pertain to his physical, mental, or emotional being. He is confirming that one can be certain of experiencing specific emotions and holding particular opinions, but one cannot be certain that the perceptions that evoked those emotions or formed those opinions are truth.

Cecily, as Carr’s wife, steps in at various times to act as narrator or to disabuse Carr of his misperceptions. Carr remembers Cecily, who agrees with many of Lenin’s
ideas, as seeing Lenin off at the train station by waving “a red handkerchief at the departing train” (57). In Carr’s memory, the basic elements of the train, the red hanky, and Cecily have been reconstructed into a narrative, which elevates Carr by placing him in an historically pivotal position, possibly able to alter the course of history by removing Lenin before he reaches his potential:

OLD CARR. I’d got pretty close to him […] I’d got a pretty good idea of his intentions, in fact I might have stopped the whole Bolshevik thing in its tracks, but –here’s the point. I was torn. On the one hand, the future of the civilized world. On the other hand, my feelings for Cecily […] There I was, the lives of millions of people hanging on which way I’d move. (58)

Carr remembers himself as a crucial player in world history, a man whose decisions affected “millions.” He appears to be equating his blossoming love for Cecily with the ability to affect “the future of the civilized world,” weighing his options but ultimately choosing the gratification of his own emotions above saving “millions” of lives. There is a suggestion, in this scene, of Stoppard’s uneasiness with emotions and their power.

At the play’s conclusion, Cecily² tries to clear up Carr’s confusion about Joyce, Tzara, and Lenin and the events that apparently brought them [Carr and Cecily] together:

OLD CECILY. No, no, no, no it’s pathetic though there was a court case, I admit, and your trousers came into it, I don’t deny, but you never got close to Vladimir Ilyich, and I don’t remember the other one. I do remember Joyce, yes,
you are quite right and he was Irish with glasses but that was the year after—1918—and the train had long gone from the station! I waved a red hanky and cried long live the revolution as the carriage took him away in his bowler hat. (70)

Cecily is able to put the events into context for Carr by granting him the benefit of her perspective as one of the participants. She patiently attempts to provide him with markers that may spur his memory to reconstruct the narrative along lines that encompass a less ego-centric viewpoint:

OLD CECILY. You never even saw Lenin.

CARR. Yes I did. Saw him in the cafés. I knew them all.

Part of the job.

OLD CECILY. And you were never the Consul.

CARR. Never said I was. (70)

However, attempting to steer Carr to a more balanced view is impossible. He views Cecily’s efforts as pedantic, as if she is meddling with trifling details that do not alter the bigger picture. Carr’s egotism does not allow him to admit that the larger view reveals that Lenin, Tzara and the detested Joyce all went beyond his own accomplishments:

CARR. [...] Wasn’t this—Didn’t do that [...] What of it? I was here. They were here. They went on. I went on. We all went on.

OLD CECILY. No, we didn’t. We stayed. [...] They all went on.

(71)
Indeed, Carr is correct in a sense. He does “go on” verbally, conflating fiction with scant facts to create reality for himself. His journey takes place in his mind while the others move forward in reality to become players on the world stage.

Carr refers to Joyce at various times in the play as “Doris” (31), “Janice” (33), or “Deidre” (68), which could be further illustration of his faulty memory or an opportunity for Carr to mock Joyce purposefully in retaliation for Joyce’s implied loutish behavior and legal battle6 with him. Carr’s initial speech begins with recollections of Joyce, peppering his early comments with descriptors such as “genius,” “amazing intellect,” “prudent” (6), but in spite of his obvious admiration for his achievements and talent, he is unable to sustain an unprejudiced portrait of him. Carr’s description devolves into a diatribe splattered with acrimonious commentary soaked in personal prejudice: “an obsessive litigant [. . .] a liar and a hypocrite, a tight-fisted, sponging, fornicating drunk not worth the paper” (7). If it is, indeed, retaliation on Carr’s part, then that is evidence of the power of the story-teller or historian to color the subject based on prejudice, and it is Carr’s references to the bitter court battle that give greater credence to that assertion.

“History is built on the improbabilities of art” (68), Cooke asserts. This is precisely the point Stoppard makes by using Carr as the storyteller, the creator of the artful narrative that is spun as history. Stoppard draws a parallel between art and history through Carr. History is as unreliable as the inventors of the narrative, but it is the narrative that becomes the history, and the history that becomes fact.

Stoppard is not devaluing narrative, rather he is simply pointing out that history is cloaked in artistic creation. Indeed, he is stating that it is narrative that animates history
and lends to it an authority and immortality. Stoppard’s Joyce questions the likelihood of history surviving without art:

What now of the Trojan War if it had been passed over by the artist’s touch? Dust. A forgotten expedition [. . .] a minor redistribution of broken pots. But it is we who stand enriched, by a tale of heroes, of a golden apple, a wooden horse, a face that launched a thousand ships. (42)

According to Kinereth Meyer, “history is significant, even immortalized, according to Stoppard’s Joyce, only because of the power of the artist to present it in words” (109). Art colors history, to be sure, but in the process, it manipulates and spins it as well to create a more interesting story. Cooke suggests that Wilde’s comment is especially relevant: “The ancient historians gave us delightful fiction in the form of fact; the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction” (90).

It is not only the writer of the narrative who is complicit in the rewriting of history. Stoppard reveals that the visual artist can also influence perception of historical events. By mention of a well-known photograph of Lenin—stage directions characterize it as “a justly famous image”—speaking to the citizens of Moscow in Red Square in May, 1920, Stoppard illustrates that photographs do not provide concrete evidence of reality. Carr describes Lenin as “balding, bearded, in the three-piece suit” standing as “though leaning into a gale, his chin jutting, his hands gripping the edge of the rostrum [. . .] the right hand at the same time gripping a cloth cap” (58), but the description is of a photograph that has been doctored by “selective removal of the politically inconvenient” (Mitchell 201). As William Mitchell, writing in The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era explains:
One of the most notorious photographs of the twentieth century exists in two versions. The first, taken on May 5, 1920, shows a dramatically posed Lenin addressing a meeting with the conspicuous figure of Trotsky at his side. In the second, Trotsky is absent—deleted from the image as he was in general from Stalinist history. Those who want to rewrite political narratives know such strategies well. (200)

In effect, Stalin was rewriting history to serve his own purposes using another art form to support his narrative. Mitchell reveals that the deception results in “an image that tells the truth up to a point, but not the whole truth” (Mitchell 200). Mitchell further offers “Roland Barthes’s influential suggestion that the press photograph should not be regarded as ‘an isolated structure.’ It is always […] in communication with at least one other structure, namely the text” (192). In the absence of a written text—caption or corresponding article—the photograph must communicate with the text that is not present, that is, the internal text the viewer creates from the communion of image with the human need to contextualize. As Mitchell explains, “modifying what the photograph explicitly shows has the more important effect of changing what it implicitly constructs” (197). By referring to this particular photograph, Stoppard indicates that the evidence used to support historical claims is itself often corrupted. History, in Stoppard’s world, is a fluid fragile entity, open, of course, to interpretation, but also dangerously susceptible to political manipulation. Travesties clearly illustrates Stoppard’s contention that what we call “history” is a work of art and as such is open to interpretation as much as any other work of art. Susan Sontag once said: “Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect on art” (qtd. in Brassell ix), and after reading or seeing Travesties with its unrelenting debate and
various rational points of view, one could argue that Stoppard is in agreement with her. With this in mind, the play seems cautionary in nature in that Stoppard is urging individuals to employ intellect as the major influence in deciding what information they accept and what information bears further questioning.

Portraits of the Artist

In *Travesties*, Stoppard explores the concept of the artist as well as competing views of art and the social responsibilities of the artist. Carr, whose only claim to art is in his creation of the story he tells in the drama, has the most to say about what an artist is. Early in the play, he reveals an underlying prejudice in that he equates calling someone an artist with hurling insults.

BENNETT. I’m sorry sir, It is only that Mr. Tzara being an artist –

CARR. I will not have you passing moral judgments on my friends. If Mr. Tzara is an artist that is his misfortune. (14)

Carr explains his vision of the artist during a conversation with Tzara: “An artist is someone who is gifted in some way that enables him to do something more or less well which can only be done badly or not at all by someone who is not thus gifted” (21). An artist, therefore, is merely performing the task for which he is capably equipped. Carr’s vision does not elevate the artist to a higher level than a good butcher, baker, or soldier.

Carr also makes a distinction between what is art and what is real. Reality, for Carr, has been a self-sacrificing gritty experience in the trenches of the war. Artists, to Carr, are narcissistic, not motivated as he is by a response to what he considers genuine feelings like “patriotism, duty, [. . .] love of freedom” (20). Artists, of course, do respond
to their emotions, but Carr believes that artists operate in a self-absorbed fog, a neutral territory in which sacrifice for the common good is not a goal. Carr frostily asserts, that “artists are members of a privileged class” (28) and perpetuate notions of themselves as “special kind[s] of human being[s]” (29). He exhibits a cold hostility towards what he considers the exclusive status of the artist, suggesting that artists are exempt from working like the rest of the human race.

Carr formed his impressions of the artist at an early age. While in school, he remembers that everyone had to pitch in to do chores unless one had a pass: “[I]f you had a chit from Matron you were let off to spend the afternoon messing about in the Art Room. Labour or Art” (28). The choice seems obvious to him: “messing about” certainly beats work. Carr rails at Tzara for the inequity of their situation. His past toil as a soldier cannot be compared to Tzara’s work as an artist: “And you’ve got a chit for life? (Passionately) Where did you get it? What is an artist? For every thousand people there’s nine hundred doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good, and one lucky bastard who’s the artist” (28).

Tzara is not Carr’s only target. Exasperated with Joyce, Carr dreams of an encounter in which he cross-examines him about his productive contribution to the war: “I flung at him—‘And what did you do in the Great War?’ ‘I wrote Ulysses, he said. ‘What did you do?’ Bloody nerve” (44). Shultz and Astley suggest that Carr’s violent reaction to artists like Joyce and Tzara rises from a latent sense of guilt: “[H]is enjoyment of being invalided out of the horrors of the first world war into placid, pleasant Zurich stirs in him a guilt too distressing to confront squarely. And he resentfully criticizes the non-combatant artists for their very lack of such guilt” (213).
Carr contends that Joyce’s contribution to humanity, a mere artistic endeavor, a work of literature, is nothing compared to his concrete gift, the “real” physical sacrifice of the soldier. The fact that Joyce’s work heralds a new form of expression that will revolutionize writing is of little merit to Carr. Carr would have to believe that any artist living in Switzerland during the war, undamaged and productive, is the recipient of the largest chit possible. To Joyce, Carr’s efforts may have led to someone’s pain or death, but, conversely, it must also be allowed, may have led to the continuation of all freedom, including artistic freedom. Carr believes:

[W]ars are fought to make the world safe for artists [. . .] the easiest way to know if good has triumphed over evil is to examine the freedom of the artist. The ingratitude of artists, indeed their hostility [. . .] merely demonstrate the freedom of the artist to be ungrateful [. . .] for which freedom I went to war. (22)

Carr, ultimately, is resentful of the exercise of the very freedom he had pledged to protect as a soldier.

The “freedom of the artist” appears to be Stoppard’s main interest in the play. Brassell concurs: “[H]is concern, underlying the whole of Travesties, is whether artists of any persuasion can survive in a climate dominated by a man such as Lenin” (160). A political dictatorship will necessitate an artistic dictatorship, Brassell asserts (160). If the artist chooses to use art to serve a political aim, he or she is risking the enslavement of art to that purpose and the eventual loss of all artistic freedom.

Tzara views the artist “nowadays,” after the advent of war, as “someone who makes art mean the things he does. A man may be an artist by exhibiting his hindquarters.
He may be a poet by drawing words out of a hat” (21). The concept of the artist has been subverted for Tzara by the conversion of art into a bourgeois form of expression. Tzara traces the tradition of the artist back to the beginning of civilization and claims:

When the strongest began to fight for the tribe, and the fastest to hunt, it was the artist who became the priest-guardian of the magic that conjured the intelligence out of the appetites. Without him, man would be a coffee-mill. Eat – grind – shit. Hunt – eat – fight – grind – saw the logs – shit.

The difference between being a man and being a coffee-mill is art. (29)

Tzara acknowledges that art used to be the necessary and transformational agent that elevated and endowed human existence. He sadly recounts the fall of the prestige and integrity of the artist because of the prostitution involved in the patronage system:

“[P]aint – eat – sculpt – grind – write – shit. Without art man was a coffee-mill: but with art, man – is a coffee-mill!” (29). Under patronage, art does not spring forth from the artist’s need to create and his or her unshackled interaction with the world. The artist produces “art” as a commodity—predictable and measurable.

Still later, Tzara impugns his own craft: “all poets are cheats” (35) and rails at Joyce that “making poetry should be as natural as making water” (41). For Tzara, tragically, the naturalness of artistic expression has been destroyed by the horror and unspeakable devastation of World War I. For him, art as a reflection of human achievement has now been as fragmented as have been the cities, lives, and even the actual bodies and psyches of those involved in the war. Tzara has seen the reality of war and the carnage and brutality that men have unleashed. He does not want art to mask the horror by encasing it within the beauty of artistic expression or to make it understandable.
It is the character of Joyce who appears to come closest to Stoppard's concept of the artist, and Stoppard admits "Joyce was an artist with whom I sympathize a great deal" (Fleming 102). Stoppard's Joyce proclaims, "as an artist, naturally I attach no importance to the swings and roundabout of political history" (32), declaring, with the use of the word "naturally," that being an artist absolutely precludes any involvement with politics.

Joyce defines the artist as the "magician put among men to gratify – capriciously – their urge for immortality. The temples are built and brought down around him, continuously and contiguously, from Troy to the fields of Flanders" (41). Mortal accomplishments, buildings, and institutions, monuments to man's presence on earth, are created and destroyed, as time plows each generation under, but it is the artist who allows men to live on because it is he or she who creates narratives with man at the center. Ulysses, Joyce's hero, is the prime example of a man granted immortality because of the hand of the author. Likewise, Carr, a completely negligible figure in history, will be immortalized by virtue of inclusion in a work of art—Stoppard's play. The artist, in Joyce's view, is God-like; he has the power to create and to grant life everlasting.

Lenin holds a dim public view of artists, warning that surrounding oneself with "the very worst elements of bourgeois intelligentsia" may lead one to give in to "their whining" (60). He proclaims, "Artists are irresponsible people" (60). His powerful personal reaction to art strongly suggests that he believes artists also to be dangerous people in that he realizes the potential of art to provoke emotion and motivate action. His wife, Nadya, discloses that Lenin "enjoyed" literature and "was moved to tears when he saw La Dame aux Camélias" (59).
In private moments, Lenin reveals a weakness towards music, a soul-stirring response that reveals to him the potency of that which can touch places in the individual that “doing violence to people” cannot match (62). Listening to Beethoven’s *Appasionata* affects him deeply, causing him to wonder how artists, living in terrible circumstances “can create such beauty” (62), and he muses that “[a]mazing, superhuman music . . . always makes me feel proud of the miracles that human beings can perform [. . .] I can’t listen to music often. It affects my nerves, makes me want to say nice stupid things” (62). He cites the “immature dreaming and political flabbiness” of artists like Tolstoy as reasons revolutions fail (60).

Lenin knows well the power of the artist and the danger inherent in that power and will attempt to harness it. In his regime, “Publishing and distributing centers, bookshops and reading rooms, libraries and similar establishments must all be under party control” (59). As Marx believed religion is the opiate of the people, so Lenin believes art is the stimulant and in his dream of a totalitarian society, the only acceptable stimuli will be state-ordained.

In “From Zurich to Brazil with Tom Stoppard,” Felicia Londre comments on Lenin’s preference for traditional art: “[W]hatever the intrinsic value may or may not be, he wants an art that he can understand and thus keep in its place” (352). In elucidating Lenin’s fears of contemporary artistic expressions, Londre reveals the potency of art that provokes unpredictable response. Abstract art, for example, is less likely to produce a common interpretation than is a traditional still life and thus has a greater potential to evoke a more varied range of emotion in the public. As Lenin cannot anticipate the effect the writing of artists such as Kafka or Neruda might have on a citizenry, his state will not
have room for variety. In deciding what art will be allowed, to a degree, Lenin is controlling what feelings will be provoked and thus extending his control into the human mind and soul, breaching intimate barriers.

All four characters have equally strong and divergent notions about the responsibility of the artist. Stoppard does not intend to pit one view of the artist’s role against another, but he endeavors to demonstrate, for example, that “both Joyce and Lenin’s views are simply different attitudes to the same problem: how the artist serves society for the common good” (Jenkins 119). The extent of Stoppard’s desire to present balance without forcing opinion is obvious in his attempting to equate Joyce’s views with Lenin’s as there obviously exists a preference.

In a conversation with Tzara that illuminates Carr’s mundane appreciation of art and devalued concept of the artist, Carr concretizes his feelings about artistic responsibility: “It is the duty of the artist to beautify existence” (20). Since Carr concedes that art “gratifies a hunger that is common to princes and peasants” (50), one could infer that he believes artists have a responsibility to produce art that will nourish a universal need. It is a perfunctory view of art that speaks to his concept of artists as workmen fortunate enough to be engaged in work for which they are aptly suited and for which there is a market. It is less clear that he understands the root of the human craving for this emotional or cerebral nourishment.

Tzara’s concept of artistic responsibility has undoubtedly shifted from a pre-World War I disposition to his current position as the force behind Dadaism—the movement formed as a reaction to the unprecedented carnage of the great war. “The artists associated with Dada felt that any civilization that could tolerate such brutality
must be swept away, and all of its institutions, including traditional art, along with it. Dada, therefore, was anti-everything” (Gilbert 475). Since Dada rejected all previous art, Tzara, as a true believer, renounces even his own art as being without merit or meaning, as meaningless “as Nature is” (38). As Pearce asserts, “[A] meaningless world frees art of the responsibility to reflect it truly or to serve it profitably” (71). Tzara’s use of nature as a measure of meaninglessness speaks to his intuition of a disjuncture between man and the natural world and echoes the schism created by the power and force unleashed by man and used against man during the war. Ileana Orlich discusses how Dadaism transforms “the artist into a brutal activist” whose art “deliberately scrapped the border between artistic and political action, an art whose professed goal was to crash the monsters of imperialism, Victorian morals and prejudices, and classical art” (376). When Tzara comes up against Joyce’s continuing endeavor and success in the field of literature, he verbally assaults him (“supercilious streak of Irish puke... four-eyed, bog-ignorant, potato-eating ponce”) and expounds on his theory of revolution:

Your art has failed. You’ve turned literature into a religion and it’s as dead as all the rest, it’s an overripe corpse and you’re cutting fancy figures at the wake. It’s too late for geniuses! Now we need vandals and desecrators, simple-minded demolition men to smash centuries of baroque subtlety, to bring down the temple, and thus finally, to reconcile the shame and the necessity of being an artist! (41)

Tzara now believes “it is the duty of the artist to jeer and howl and belch at the delusion that infinite generations of real effects can be inferred from the gross expression of apparent cause” (20). Tzara is advocating that artists abandon any attempt to bring order
to the chaos or explain, through their expression, how the world devolved into its chaotic state.

Tzara also reserves the privilege of “the conscience of the revolution” (57) for the artist and claims the “right to urinate in different colors” as an example that “making poetry should be as natural as making water” (41). In a moment of clarity, Carr, chiding Tzara for his naïve revolutionary zeal and enlightening him as to what his real experience as an artist will be in a totalitarian regime, explains: “You’re nothing. You’re an artist. And multi-colored micturition is no trick to those boys, they’ll have you pissing blood” (57). Through Carr, Stoppard’s internal author, Stoppard makes a direct political statement about the lack of freedom and individuality under totalitarianism.

Joyce claims a more divine purpose for artists; that is, to be the enricher of man by creating tales that will inform the human experience by breathing new life into classic stories. In answer to Tzara’s image of literature as a “corpse,” Joyce enthusiastically envisions his “Dublin Odyssey,” *Ulysses*, as “a corpse that will dance for some time yet and leave the world precisely as it finds it” (42). The preceding statement of Joyce’s is problematic if one interprets it as meaning art does not change the world in any way. Joyce is speaking here of a particular work of art, his *Ulysses*, and not necessarily all art. Billington queries, “How can *Ulysses* be said to have left the world as it found it? Is changing people’s consciousness and extending the range of the novel not as much a way of affecting the world as passing a piece of legislation?” (102). Did Joyce know that his creation was ground breaking and would inform writing from its initial reception? Billington continues: “Joyce enlarged our vision; and that seems to me a legitimate way of changing the world” (102). Fleming “suspect[s] what Stoppard intended was a sense of
art not having an immediate efficacious impact on society,” so that, unlike journalism, the impact of art occurs over a greater span of time (114).

In any case, the statement appears in stark contrast to Tzara’s destructive sentiments and Lenin’s manipulative ones. By reviving once dead stories, Joyce assigns to the artist the power of a deity. His concept of artistic responsibility is in binary opposition to Tzara’s in that instead of rejecting the art of the past, he advises embracing it with fervor to recreate the essence of classical artistic tradition. Joyce is celebrating a rebirth while Tzara is burying the dead. In addressing the slaughter and horror that men have perpetrated on each other since the beginning of time, Joyce, in complete opposition to the Dadaist ideology, suggests, “If there is to be any meaning in any of it, it is in what survives as art” (43). Joyce’s concept includes the artist as historian, as both creator and protector of man’s place in history. Through his art, the facts, mores, culture, and politics of the human condition are captured and encased in narrative so that man is moved to the center of history, responsible for what has happened in the past, and, by virtue of the retrospective of history, doubly responsible for what will happen in the future.

Lenin’s sense of the responsibility of the artist is that he or she should serve only in the interests of the state. The ideal artist should only produce literature that enhances and promotes the state ideology—a purely propagandist functionary. Lenin proclaims: “[L]iterature must become party literature. Down with non-partisan literature! Down with literary supermen! Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, a cog in the Social democratic mechanism” (58). The artist, to Lenin, is the anonymous talent who animates the party line. If the artist has a purpose in the revolution, it is to use his talent exclusively to package the message, to make it palatable to the masses. The
artist who creates emotional art, whose art is temporizing, is an enemy of the state. Although privately moved by the beauty and creativity of artists like Beethoven, Lenin will hold no place for such self-serving indulgences in his vision of the perfect state and consequently no place for artists who create "art for art's sake."

Balancing Act

Through the process of the debate on art and the responsibility of the artist to society, Stoppard clearly demonstrates the difficulty individuals encounter in attempting to form opinion and the necessity of striving for the most accurate rendering of an event, and he illustrates the burden of perception in attempting to achieve balance.

Stoppard attempts to present his debate as fairly as possible given the obvious destructive potential of Lenin versus the other characters. Although it can be surmised that Stoppard aligns most closely with Joyce's artistic sentiment, certainly as much a creation of Stoppard's as any of the characters of Travesties, Joyce is the most verbally elusive of all the revolutionary artists. Carr, while not a revolutionary or an artist, save for his creation of the narrative of his memory, appears to have much to say on the subject, and although Stoppard paints Carr to be clownish and entirely self-promoting, he does grant his character the occasional burst of insight.

Likewise, Tzara has fiery speeches and a multitude of witticisms that render him an easy favorite, while Joyce, except for a few well-placed speeches, seems eccentric and his behavior is, simply put, just plain odd. Stoppard characterizes Joyce as a parody of negative Irish stereotypes, often broke, begging money, unsuitably and absent-mindedly clothed—in the 1974 Royal Shakespeare Company production, Joyce is attired in a jacket featuring enormous shamrocks, offering limericks for every occasion (Kelly 122).
Although Joyce’s presence in the play doesn’t have the flash and glamour of Tzara’s, his influence on Stoppard is obviously greater than any of the others. Stoppard pays clear homage to Joyce as *Travesties* mirrors Joyce’s recreation of a figure worthy of repetition. As Joyce re-imagines Homer, Stoppard re-imagines Joyce.

Stoppard’s treatment of Lenin in the play sets him apart from the other characters. Lenin is not toyed with here, nor is he made to seem witty, endearing, or amusing. Neither he nor Nadya correspond to characters in *Earnest*. Stoppard is clearly making a political statement by the exclusive treatment of Lenin’s character in that there are certain individuals who present such a menace to mankind that to travesty them is to lighten the view of them. The character of Lenin allows Stoppard to demonstrate the danger to a society when art is subverted for political purposes. As Brassell illuminates the essential difference between Lenin and the other revolutionaries:

Lenin, as an absolute dogmatist, provides a yardstick by which art is throttled in the grip of political intolerance, and it is towards his direct challenge to the artist that Stoppard relentlessly draws our attention […] Lenin is free to love the *Appassionata* and hate Dadaism, just as Tzara is free to do the opposite, but Tzara did not force his views onto a nation of several hundred million people. (160)

Lenin, Brassell suggests, heralds a departure for Stoppard into more politically-based drama since his character “personifies […] dogmatism” and is “without precedent in any of his previous plays,” but “his shadow is firmly cast over several of those that follow” (162).
Travesties is a perfect example of Stoppard’s ability to address sophisticated political issues with subtlety and panache, offering audiences competing sides of a debate and providing a liminal space in which to consider all arguments. The vastness of the issues surrounding art and the social responsibility of the artist could not be adequately explored within the confines of a two-hour performance, so it is obviously not Stoppard’s intention to present a comprehensive discussion of those topics. What he does, however, is to present questions about the connections between art and history, politics, freedom, and integrity without providing definitive answers. Readers and viewers are left with the unsettling feeling that they need to think more deeply about what they have previously accepted as truth simply because it is packaged as history.
Chapter Three - *The Real Thing*: The Disturbing Intersection of Art, Reality, and Emotion

*The Real Thing*'s central question is "what is real in art, love and politics?"

Throughout the play, Stoppard complicates the discovery with demonstrations of how language and perception intersect with the concepts under question to provoke a more intense examination of one's system of belief.

"Perhaps from where he's standing you'd see it the same way"

*The Real Thing* complements *Travesties* and echoes of the latter play's discussion of the power of art and the responsibility of the artist resound throughout *The Real Thing*. Additionally, in *The Real Thing*, Stoppard broadens the discussion of emotion barely touched upon in the earlier play revealing not only its potential for inflicting pain and its use as a method of control, but also its power to elevate human interaction and enrich life. Henry's struggle in *The Real Thing* to write about love appears to mirror Stoppard's difficulty with the subject and subsequent hesitancy to write "the love play". Finally, or perhaps firstly, *The Real Thing* continues to investigate the connection between art and reality debated throughout *Travesties*.

The underlying quest for the protagonist, Henry, in *The Real Thing* is to determine what is real as regards love as opposed to what masquerades as authentic, and Henry's aim mirrors the mission of the audience. As in *Travesties*, Stoppard offers audiences the luxury of liminality—the space created when conflicting views of a subject or event are granted reasonable credence—to consider what they believe and to question the basis on which those beliefs are formed. In the earlier play, Carr's faulty memory allows several interpretations of a singular event, underscoring the often-impossible task
of separating perception from actuality. Likewise, in *The Real Thing*, Stoppard layers performances of Henry’s plays with scenes from his life to demonstrate the difficulty in distinguishing art from reality. The effect is disarming and disconcerting: the audience is no longer certain of what it is they are seeing or reading.

Stoppard has been accused of ambushing his audiences by pulling the carpet out from under them just when they are beginning to applaud their own ability to “get it.” *The Real Thing* adeptly demonstrates how perception is often deceptive and not helpful in discovering the reality of a situation. In the opening scene, the audience perceives an adulterous wife, Charlotte, lying to her cuckolded husband, Max, regarding her whereabouts. Scene Two opens with Charlotte, in a state of rumpled undress, appearing “hopeless,” weakly uttering, “What a mess,” seemingly alarmed at Henry’s revelation that he has invited Max to join them (154). An audience member might expect that the play is building to an explosive scene in which the betrayed husband confronts his wife and her lover. However, before Max arrives, Stoppard plants seeds of doubt in the form of textual clues that undermine the conclusions one has reached based on perception. Later in the scene, it is revealed that Henry and Charlotte are married, and Max and Charlotte are actors in Henry’s latest drama—it is a play within the play. Ah . . . we get it. However, a moment or two later, Annie’s arrival signals another shift in perception. Words in her first speech to Henry when they are alone, “touch me” (169), set off alarm bells in the minds of the audience. What’s going on? Is Henry’s art imitating his life or is his life imitating his art?

Stoppard has just treated his audience to the experience of “not knowing.” In effect, he is demanding that they admit there may be more than one way to view an
event—that even though all the elements are present that usually make up X, there is another possibility: it could just as easily be Y. Mel Gussow asserts: “In the plays, things are never quite what they seem to be” (22). Stoppard plays upon the individual’s reliance on perception to make sense of the world in order to stress that it is often skewed and undependable. The result is an appreciation that reality and illusion are more alike than is comfortable and a suggestion that acting on perception without investigation is acting in the absence of intellect.

Reflection and Echoes

Gussow reveals that in Stoppard’s dramas “the image is that of an endless series of Chinese boxes” (22). In *The Real Thing*, one can unpack the “Chinese box” of the play to find that one scene is followed by another that looks exactly like the first, reflecting elements of the original and increasing the likelihood of mistaking the illusion for what is real. While *Travesties* largely uses incidents, characters, and dialogue from outside itself—from history and Wilde, for example, *The Real Thing* is more self-reflective, even though it incorporates dialogue from other plays.

Echoes resound throughout the play doubling the difficulty of discerning what is real. The first five scenes of the play take place in living rooms occupied by different arrangements of the couples. Max, playing Charlotte’s husband, is an architect. In *The Real Thing*, Charlotte becomes involved with an architect. In *House of Cards*, Charlotte presents the betrayed Max with a snow globe souvenir, representative of her alleged trip to the Alps while later, Annie, Henry’s then wife, gives him a tartan scarf, a reminder of time spent in Scotland with Billy. A door opens and closes upon Max twice signaling the end of a relationship—once through Charlotte’s action in *House of Cards* and again
through Annie’s in *The Real Thing*. Certainly, Henry’s pre-marital affair with Annie mimics the portrayal in *House of Cards* of adultery by his then wife Charlotte. Annie’s involvement with Billy has the appearance of an affair because we think we have seen this pattern before in the play, but we have also been warned about jumping to conclusions. Both Charlotte and Annie prefer classical music to popular music, but each tolerates Henry’s musical proclivities. Indeed, music, in the form of pop tunes, ends many scenes in the play, their lyrics suggesting the hand of the author directing the audience as to the mood, intent, or belief of the characters. Stoppard’s repetitive use of themes, roles, and situations displays for the audience the untrustworthiness not only of their observations, couched as they are in prejudice, but also of their own experience. Stoppard presents a scene to audiences that necessitates their making meaning of the words and actions of the players. The result is experience with that particular situation—a base on which to form future judgments. Within a short time, what looks to be an identical situation appears, and the audience member refers to his or her base of experience combined with observation to make sense of the scene—the moment of recognition, but, alas, he or she reaches the wrong conclusion. Indeed, Stoppard has held up a mirror, and mirror images are never exact.

Stoppard mirrors the invasion of personal space as well. It is Henry’s knife that penetrates Max’s body and causes his finger to bleed. Max borrows Henry’s handkerchief to staunch the flow, staining Henry’s “clean white” linen with his body fluid (171). Max’s blood is symbolic in several ways. As the embodiment of a sacrificial lamb, Max’s blood is shed for Henry and Annie’s affair, as Max would not have been in Henry’s apartment had Henry not invented a pretext to lure Annie there, and the accident would
not have occurred. Additionally, the bloodstain on the pristine linen suggests the rupture of virgin territory. Adultery has defiled the sanctity of Max and Annie’s marriage, and it can never be the same again. Max’s bloodshed later provides evidence of Annie’s betrayal. Max discovers the now “soiled and blood-stained” (183) handkerchief in his car, left either consciously or by accident, and proclaims that it is “filthy” (183) by virtue of it containing additional stains: “It was a clean handkerchief, apart from my blood. Have you got a cold? It looks filthy” (183). In a strikingly metaphoric imposition, Henry’s voice in the guise of his crafted persona, intrudes on Max and Annie’s private space and the intimacy of their discussion via the radio broadcast of his interview on *Desert Island Discs*.

Charlotte and Annie mirror each other repeatedly in the play. Both played the part of Annabella in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, and both became romantically involved with the actor who played Giovanni. In scene two, Charlotte enters “barefoot, wearing Henry’s dressing gown which is too big for her” (153); in scene four, Annie enters “barefoot and wearing Henry’s robe, which is too big for her” (185). Annie twins Charlotte so completely, that she not only occupies the same position relative to Henry, even her body takes up the same space inside Henry’s clothing. Indeed, Henry will occupy the same space within Annie’s body that he did in Charlotte’s.

Paul Delaney connects Stoppard’s patchwork past to what he terms his thematic use of “unidentical twins.” Delaney quotes Stoppard: “To me it’s so obvious. Many of my plays are about unidentical twins, about double acts” (26). In spite of Stoppard’s notorious comments about the uselessness of biography—his Wilde of *Invention of Love* calls biography “the mesh through which our real life escapes” (93)—Stoppard agrees
that one’s past influences artistic output. “One is the beneficiary and victim of one’s personal history, experience and environment,” Stoppard asserts, commenting on the power of the subconscious: “[S]tuff is there, but I can’t for the life of me remember packing it” (Delaney 25). Delaney posits that Stoppard’s frequent reliance on unidentical twins, both through characters and situations, the echoes and mirrors that are obvious in *Travesties* and *The Real Thing*, suggests the “sense that inside any self may be some other self waiting to be revealed” (11) and concludes:

In Stoppard’s career the reflections and intersections of life and art also form a swirling kaleidoscope as he has doubled and redoubled his explorations of double acts. From Tomáš or Tomik to Tommy to Tom and then Sir Tom; from Straußler to Stoppard […] from Czech to British while belatedly ‘turning out to be Jewish,’ Tom Stoppard turns out to be his own unidentical twin in a way he could not have imagined. Or, to rephrase that, the playwright who throughout his career had written about unidentical twins, about double acts, turns out to be his own unidentical twin in a way he had always imagined. (35)

Kelly confirms “both the plays and the author’s life have been marked by a commingling—of idioms, of nations, of families, and of identities” (11). This assertion seems to suggest that, in contrast to his own stated opinion, Stoppard’s plays may be the mesh woven with threads that capture his biography.
"You’re not anyone I know"

The underlying theme, as stated in the title of the play, is the search for what is real—in life, in art, and in love. To Henry, distinguishing what is real from "ersatz" (221) is vital. However, he is a writer, an artist, a creator of illusion; he daily engages in the intersection of art and reality, and manipulation of reality is part of his art. As such, he is willing to create a persona for himself for an upcoming appearance on Desert Island Discs. His preference for pop over highbrow classical music embarrasses him, and he strives to create a favorable, though inaccurate, impression by fraudulently misrepresenting his debatably plebian musical tastes. "I’m supposed to be one of your intellectual playwrights" (156), Henry protests, fretting about presenting the proper image to the public. Used to writing characters, he attempts to write himself as he thinks he should be perceived. Revealing that his true tastes reside in the music of The Crystals and The Righteous Brothers would make him look "a total prick" (156) when he attempts to market himself as a force able to counter existentialism and could possibly undermine his authority to discuss serious subjects in the future. He worries that his "credibility is already hanging by a thread" (188). It must be allowed that an equal consideration of Henry’s might be the translation of credibility into cold hard cash. Writing for television, for example, to make money to pay alimony while maintaining an upscale lifestyle, is acceptable to him. "Alimony doesn’t count," Henry explains: "If Charlotte made it legal with that architect she’s shacked up with, I’d be writing the real stuff" (207). Henry, who appears so unwilling to compromise—in the matter of artistic integrity, for example—is comfortable in this instance with altering his identity. Perhaps, in Henry’s rational view, the real conditions of one’s life usurp one’s convictions.
Henry traces the history of his so-called musical dysfunction in his recollection of being taken to hear the magnificent Maria Callas perform on the pretext that he “would be cured of [his] strange disability” (167) once exposed to art that is acknowledged by experts to be great. The experiment failed because he believed the “Righteous Brothers’ recording of You’ve Lost that Lovin’ Feelin’ […] was possibly the most deeply moving noise ever produced by the human spirit” (167). He refines the problem with his musical preferences: “I don’t like the pop music which is all right to like” (166). He likes the music to which he physically reacts. “It moves me, the way people are supposed to be moved by real music” (167). He is verbalizing that he has found the real thing, for him, in a plebian form of musical art, but for all his posturing, he cannot publicly embrace his taste because he feels it reveals a flaw. Although Henry is questing for the genuine, the real, he is not able to own his choices because in this case what is “real” music does not jive with his notion of the profile of a “real” intellectual. Henry’s own prejudiced perspective of the tastes to which an intellectual would ascribe and those that he or she would disdain limits his understanding of himself and creates internal tension. By admitting that his musical taste is lowbrow, he is exempting himself from the distinction of being intellectual by virtue of his own limited and exclusionary definition.

“writing cricket bats”

Although Henry is able to excuse himself for his preference for less than lofty taste in one area, and rationalize his writing for the inferior medium of television, he is unforgiving about any abuse of language, and it is in this arena that one clearly sees the strength of his convictions. It is apparent that Henry strives for excellence in his art, as he is, by nature and occupation, a crafter of language. He practices a “professional
fastidiousness” (179) that makes him cringe at poorly executed art and this ideology further links him to Stoppard’s Joyce. While Henry does not “think writers are sacred,” he knows “that words are” (207). He speaks to the artist’s power to immortalize by his ability to “get the right ones [words] in the right order” to create, for example, “a poem which children will speak for you when you’re dead” (207). Like Joyce’s assertion that his art will have an impact, Henry also believes that art can “nudge the world a little” (207), so he is sensitive to its potency and hypercritical of those who might seek to corrupt its purpose.

Early in the play, he corrects Max twice for inappropriate use of language, criticizing him for mixing metaphors and using the incorrect pronoun. “No, no, you can’t [...] I mean ‘hammer’ and ‘backlash’. You can’t do it!” (180), Henry moans to Max, enunciating the pain he feels inflicted by the murder of language. “I’m sorry but it actually hurts” (181). The pain he feels from Max’s linguistic blunders pale in comparison to the agony caused by Brodie’s “ham-fisted” (206), poorly-written, ill-conceived drama and his clumsy abuse of words.

Henry charges Brodie with being “a lout with language” (207), a hack who abuses words for his own selfish gain and has no inkling of the damage he causes. “Words don’t deserve that kind of malarkey,” Henry charges, “They’re innocent, neutral, precise, standing for this, describing that, meaning the other, so if you look after them you can build bridges across incomprehension and chaos” (207). Words, though, cannot withstand misuse without suffering damage: “But when they get their corners knocked off, they’re no good any more, and Brodie knocks corners off without knowing he’s doing it” (207). Obviously, Brodie is not an artist as he does not possess the talent nor does he appear to
have any artistic motivation. His one attempt at writing is entirely self-serving and results not in a crafted artistic representation of truth but in a clumsy effort to deceive.

As Henry reveres words as the building blocks of his art, he and Annie clash over what is more important, the message behind the art or the art itself. Henry, like Joyce, contends that art stands alone. Rusinko concurs that “for Joyce art is its own excuse for being, and he is obviously Stoppard’s *raisonneur*” (46-47). When Annie challenges him as to “who wrote it, why he wrote it, where he wrote it” (207) as being important considerations in appreciating art, Henry counters that artists “don’t count” (207), that the background of the artist should have nothing to do with the perception of his or her art. During the discussion of his lack of musical taste, Henry’s revelation, “I don’t like artists. I like singles” (166), speaks further to his conception of the artist as separate from the art and offers the possibility of the artist only being as good as his or her last offering.

Annie, however, believes that Brodie’s purpose in writing, which she asserts is motivated by “pure moral conscience” (177), outranks the ability to write well in the greater scheme of things. It is her assertion that content far outweighs form. She sees Brodie in romanticized terms as “a prisoner shouting over the wall” (201), a man with a message burning to be heard but lacking the credentials to be accepted by the “Lit Crit” set—those who read the right papers and converse in the power circles—and therefore, he is a victim of an unfair system. She rails at Henry:

He’s not a writer. He’s a convict. You’re a writer. You write *because* you’re a writer. Even when you write *about* something, you have to think up something to write about just so you can keep writing. More well
chosen words nicely put together. So what? Why should that be it? Who says? (203)

Annie further charges Henry with wishing to keep the “idea of the writer [...] sacred, special, not something anybody can do” (203), like an exclusive club to which people like Brodie could never gain access.

Annie has a point; Henry is protecting his position as writer, one who has access to a readership and is able to convey opinion and ideas. He is denying the right to that opportunity, not only to people like Brodie, whose message is flawed and corrupt, but also to those whose message has merit and deserves to be heard, but who lack the talent to express it. Henry is doing to Brodie exactly what Stoppard criticized the “Lit Crit” set of doing to him. That said, however, the underlying motivation for Henry’s elevation of the writer must still lie within Stoppard’s contention of art remaining free from political directive. Henry’s refusal is protecting more than just the sanctity of the writer; it is guarding the “moral matrix” from corruption.

Apart from the fact that Henry does not believe Brodie’s motivation is what Annie thinks it is, he defends the skill of the writer as essential. Without the writer’s ability to transform the idea into art, the idea cannot be communicated and falls to the ground like a dead ball on a field of play. In a very Joycean defense of the power of the artist, Henry demonstrates the difference between what something that is finely-crafted can do in comparison to something that is “jerrybuilt” and hackneyed. Using the example of a well-sprung cricket bat, Henry illustrates that art can have an effect that projects an idea or, one might add, a political agenda, a great distance as opposed to an idea attached to a clumsily inarticulate work: “What we’re trying to do is write cricket bats, so that
when we throw up an idea and give it a little knock, it might . . . *travel,*” as opposed to “a lump of wood of roughly the same shape trying to be a cricket bat” (205). Henry rightly contends that inelastic collision, the ability to create bounce and distance, is what makes some writing art and other writing lumps of wood. “This isn’t better because someone says it’s better […] It’s better because it’s better” (205). Rusinko comments: “For Henry, style is all, and whether or not a play ‘will travel’ depends on style, not message” (139).

Annie asserts that the underlying message is the important component to writing, not the style. When Henry condemns Brodie’s work as “no good,” Annie counters that Henry is an intellectual snob and does not like it because “it’s not literary” (200). Annie, echoing Carr’s sentiments about experience taking precedence over the representation of experience—art, believes it is important that Brodie’s message be heard and appeals to Henry to use his skill to swaddle Brodie’s message in an artistic wrapper. Henry’s condemnation of Brodie is not merely that he is a poor artist, but that his message is flawed, “silly and bigoted” (200). Here, Henry mirrors Stoppard’s hesitancy to use art to deliver a political message. According to Neil Sammels, Henry “demonstrates not just the necessity of saying things correctly, but of saying the correct things” (137).

Max and Charlotte, as actors, rely on Henry’s craft to animate their talent and view art as a concept that must be tied to reality. For actors as well as playwrights, reality translates to commercial success. Both Max and Charlotte realize that their careers hinge, to a degree, on Henry’s skill and urge him to tailor his writing to suit the preferences of the audience, whose approval will boost their popularity and marketability. Max points out, while linguistically tap dancing in an attempt not to offend Henry, that he includes scenes in his plays that may satisfy his artistic sensibilities but that confuse and alienate
the audience: "They did say – I mean, it’s a tiny thing but I thought I’d pass it on because I do feel rather the same way . . . I mean all that stuff about the Japanese and digital watches – they suddenly have no idea what I’m talking about, you see" (160). Max observes that Henry’s artistic indulgences directly relate to the ability of the actor to continue to practice his art.

Although Henry allows Max to express multiple compliments received from audience members, he cuts Max off when he begins to offer suggestions to improve the play, resisting Stoppard’s practice of artistic collaboration. As an actor, Max straddles the line between the audience and the text; as a writer, Henry is one step removed from that engagement. Even though Henry writes the lines, Max must make them seem like “the real thing” and may have a clearer idea at times of what works best.

So then, what is “the real thing” as regards art? Meyer, discussing the intertextuality of Travesties and The Real Thing, suggests that Stoppard struggles with the very questions his characters debate:

Which is the real thing? The language of romantic idealism? Witty badinage? Revolutionary rhetoric? Amateur plays with words that go clunk? […] Reverberating in every scene of the play, this question points up the many difficulties facing the writer—including the writer of The Real Thing—who attempts to connect the word with human interaction.

(110)

Meyer points out that in The Real Thing Stoppard utilizes the intertext to “highlight the flawed attempts of human beings—both Brodie and Henry—to tie words to human
action” (110). It is in this intersection, the substitution of words to replicate events or feelings, where the “real thing” hides.

At the conclusion of the play, Brodie, also echoing Carr, chaffs Henry by comparing art to experience: “I lived it and put my guts into it, and you came along and wrote it clever” (242). Indeed, Henry does rewrite Brodie’s play, at the expense of his integrity and in opposition to his convictions about what art is and what its purpose should be. Henry perverts his art by making it serve to glorify what turns out to be a lie, so if he has built a bridge to further understanding by applying his words to Brodie’s ideas, he has done so with a faulty foundation. One can hear the echo of Tzara here as regards the perversion of art because of the prostitution of the artist. Henry has reduced art to a commodity as Tzara predicted would happen. By allowing himself to be “bought,” Henry becomes a “coffee mill” and this particular piece of art will not enrich anyone. While Henry has not prostituted himself for money, he has done so for a currency he considers more rare—love.

“I can’t write love”

Henry is clearly uncomfortable speaking from emotion and unsettled writing about it. “I don’t know how to write love,” he confesses. “[I]t comes out embarrassing” (188). He attributes this lack to the fact that “[l]oving and being loved is unliterary. It’s happiness expressed in banality and lust. It makes me nervous to see three-quarters of a page and no writing on it” (188). In his endeavor to write a play about love as a gift for Annie, he proposes that he “should write it completely artificial. Blank verse. Poetic imagery” (188). Because he is out of his element in this genre and suffers from a disconnect in his emotional wiring, Henry surely cannot “write love” because he doesn’t
trust it. It is not a component of his base of knowledge—he doesn’t “know” it—so his writing about it cannot be “real.”

Henry’s power is based on “knowing,” a concept he values as the bedrock from which all that is “real” originates. He writes as well as interacts with the world from this rational cerebral center. Henry can “manage knowing” (230) if he has been betrayed, for example, but he can’t manage “not knowing” (230) as it places him in the uncomfortable liminal space uncertainty provides. It is in this uneasy space, however, where Henry learns about love and trust and begins to grow emotionally. Robinson asserts, “Stoppard’s characters are unnerved by uncertainty. They are plagued by the thought of having to ‘take everything on trust’” (38). Certainty eliminates questioning by closing out possibilities and making us feel safe. Uncertainty demands examination, forcing us, as rational beings, to use reason and intellect to come to terms with what we do not know and possibly fear.

Henry’s comfort zone is compromised by the erosion of those things he believes to be absolutes and the elevation of abstract concepts. In attempting to justify his position to Annie regarding his privileging of the solid over the ephemeral, his well-written, thoughtful plays over Brodie’s poorly-crafted, banal one, he compares the unchangeable form of a coffee mug with abstract concepts like “politics, justice, patriotism” (206) and concludes that abstract values do not deserve the same respect as the humble solid object because perception renders them mutable and, therefore, corruptible. Although Henry has chosen to omit “love” from his list of abstracts, one can assume he mistrusts it at least as much as the other concepts mentioned. Here, Henry echoes *Travesties*’ Tzara’s contention that “patriotism, duty, love, freedom” (22) are merely words whose meanings
can be changed to suit the user’s purpose. By closing off his mind to possibilities, by believing only in the concrete, he has suffered in his personal development as a human being. His “knowing” has not brought him either emotional fulfillment or personal satisfaction in his marriages.

However, knowledge of “the other” is central to Henry’s defense of his privileging of the tangible over the abstract. In a discussion about fidelity, Henry speaks of carnal knowledge as a transforming element in a relationship:

It’s to do with knowing and being known. I remember how it stopped seeming odd that in biblical Greek knowing was used for making love [...] Carnal knowledge. It’s what lovers trust each other with. Knowledge of each other, not of the flesh but through the flesh, knowledge of self, the real him, the real her, in extremis, the mask slipped from the face. (220)

Fleming calls Henry’s speech “the play’s most passionate pronouncement on the importance of fidelity and on the mystery, transcendence, and sacredness that can be achieved through carnal knowledge” and asserts: “This articulation of carnal knowledge as the ultimate, personal knowledge [...] is an affirmation of monogamy” (165).

However, Fleming’s pronouncements aside, Henry and Charlotte had intimate knowledge of the other but that did not prevent either of them from engaging in adultery. Even though Henry speaks convincingly about the value and primacy he awards carnal knowledge, for him it appears to be but one type of knowledge essential to a relationship.

Couples in the play who are intimately involved often penetrate each other’s personal space in ways that are not carnal in attempts to uncover information—to better know the other by eliminating doubts that could fester and bubble up to destroy the
relationship. By rifling through personal possessions, the Max of *House of Cards* discovers Charlotte has left her passport home, and Charlotte’s architect in *The Real Thing* discovers she has taken her diaphragm with her on a business trip. Both the omission and the inclusion suggest betrayal. On separate occasions, Henry and Annie also rummage through the other’s personal effects to discover evidence of betrayal. Henry rifles Annie’s things while she is away but is unable to satisfy his overwhelming need to know the truth about her fidelity. Since he uncovers nothing in this invasion of privacy, Henry is left in the morass of “not knowing”—a decidedly discomforting milieu for him, as both playwright and human being. While Henry elevates carnal knowledge to a nearly sacred element in a relationship, it appears he needs far more than this type of knowledge to feel secure. The quest for further knowledge will result in his seeking and receiving an education in love.

The three women central to Henry’s world, Charlotte, Annie, and Debbie, each attempt to teach Henry what they believe to be true about love based on their experiences. Henry undergoes a transformation of sorts, a grinding down of his outer shell to allow emotion to both penetrate and emanate through his contact with the female characters in the play.

*The Real Thing* marks a departure for Stoppard in that his female characters have more depth than those of his previous plays. They are agents of change, central to the plot and to Henry’s development. They are also strong, sexually independent women who seek equality in their relationships. Although in an effort to create the “real” female character, not a caricature of feminine qualities, he seems to have swung the pendulum too far to the opposite side.
The women in *The Real Thing* are outspoken, certainly, but lack sensitivity as evidenced not only by what they say but by how they live. Charlotte claims her nine affairs were in retaliation for Henry's presumed dalliances and rues her misapprehension, but once in a new relationship, she continues to seek sexual satisfaction outside of it. Debbie is pragmatic to the point of separating sex from love. To her, "having it off" (218) is little more than biology—possibly evidence of her age or the age of free love, but she is Henry's daughter and, perhaps, has learned from the master how to downplay emotion. It is the character of Annie, however, who behaves the most insensitively. Max disintegrates, wounded to his core by Annie's revelation of a love affair with Henry, and he reacts physically. Stage directions require that Annie do "no more than suffer the embrace, looking over Max's shoulder, her face blank" (184). Some time later, in conversation with Henry, Annie coolly appraises Max's response: "Isn't it awful? Max is so unhappy while I feel so . . . thrilled. His misery just seems . . . not in very good taste" (186). Max tries various ploys to get her to come to the phone but Annie "can't come up with the proper guilt. I'm sort of irritated by it. It's so tiring and so uninteresting" (186). Her lack of feeling for Max's broken heart makes her certainly a less appealing love interest for Henry and makes the audience question Henry's apprehension of her as "the real thing."

Obviously, Henry values what he thinks is genuine over what *might* be so, especially as it involves relationships. He is willing to stay with one woman even though in love with another just to be certain he is not abandoning "the real thing." Annie states his logical motivation: "[Y]ou want to give it time . . . time to go wrong, change, spoil."
Then you’ll know it wasn’t the real thing” (171). He is unable to dissolve his floundering marriage to Charlotte until he has exhausted every possibility that it is real.

Annie finds Henry’s lack of jealousy foreign and views it as a lack of emotional connection: “[Y]ou don’t care enough to care. Jealousy is normal” (193). However, it is not normal for him because once he has wooed and won, the work appears to be done for him. He is secure within the boundaries of however he defines a particular relationship. Once Henry realizes that Annie may be having an affair, however, he confesses that he believes “in mess, tears, pain, self-abasement, loss of self-respect, nakedness” (231), whatever it takes to prove that he cares. Annie points out that it was Henry’s lack of caring that precipitated interest in an affair: “If I had an affair, it would be out of need. Care about that” (231), she advises him.

Charlotte points to his tendency to see things as absolute as a limiting viewpoint: “You think making a commitment is it. Finish. You think it sets like a concrete platform” (223), and asserts that Henry, trusting in the faultless ideal of commitment, fails to consider the elements that may erode that concept such as sarcasm, neglect, and isolation (223). Like Annie, Charlotte charges Henry with failing to maintain love.

Charlotte, by virtue of her marriage to Henry, knows that commitment is the starting point, not the end. She reveals that during their marriage she engaged in multiple affairs because she mistakenly assumed his lack of interest in her was evidence of extramarital interests. “It used to bother me that you were never bothered […] so I decided you were having it off right left and centre and it wasn’t supposed to matter. By the time I realized you were the last romantic it was too late” (222), Charlotte remembers and offers Henry advice: “There are no commitments, only bargains. And they have to be
made again every day” (223). Billington concludes that Charlotte is wary of “the heedless romanticism that assumes relationships are infinitely durable” (153) and attempts to warn Henry that even if, indeed, his love for Annie is “the real thing,” it will still require attention and care.

Debbie discusses the concept of fidelity with him from her younger and more sexually liberated viewpoint and disputes the belief that “having it off is infidelity”: “Most people think not having it off is fidelity. They think all relationships hinge in the middle. Sex or no sex” (218). Debbie’s assertions are in direct contrast to Henry’s avowal of the supremacy of fidelity in a relationship and are borne of her “limited personal experience in which sex is just ‘biology after all’” (Fleming 165). Nevertheless, in the brief expanse of her sexual activity, she has at least learned that “fidelity involves more than monogamy” (Fleming 165), a lesson Henry is just beginning to understand.

Debbie knows that Henry is much more at ease writing dialogue for his plays than speaking in real life because of his ability to control everything that can and will happen. Henry’s attempt to describe falling in love to Debbie in literary terms—“the first time I succumbed to the sensation that the universe was dispensable minus one lady” (219)—prompts her to plead for his release from his self-imposed imprisonment within the guarded confines of correctness and linguistic precision. She urges him to let his thoughts flow uncensored and unedited from the internal place that is unprotected by the sentries of reason and language: “Don’t write it Fa. Just say it” (219). This is a difficult demand for Henry to meet. He has become his art. He writes the dialogue for himself so that what he speaks is an artistic arrangement of what he feels, a representation of a man in love, or a man in pain, for example.
The contrast between what is real in emotion as compared to what is representational is evidenced in the character of Max. The Max of *House of Cards* speaks Henry's words with Henry's control; actor Max responds to Charlotte's betrayal cleverly with sarcasm and wit. The Max of *The Real Thing* meets the news of Annie's betrayal with a raw emotional torrent that dissolves into physical action. "Oh, no [...] Oh, no [...] I love you. Please don't—[...] How long for? And him – oh, God." He has lost control. Stage directions reveal "He starts to cry, barely audible, immobile" and eventually explodes, "kicks the radio savagely," and "flings himself upon Annie in something like an assault which turns immediately into an embrace" (184). Max is shattered, heartbroken and inarticulate, and we feel it.

Henry describes the theme of *House of Cards* as "self-knowledge through pain" (218) but it seems a poor second, educationally, to Max's example. Henry has not seen Max *in extremis* so cannot benefit from his example. However, he has been an apt pupil of the women in his life, absorbing the lessons they have tried to share with him. The success of his schooling begins to show in the breakdown of his ability to produce appropriately erudite comments to cover any situation, which previously was a part of his modus operandi. As Annie leaves for the theatre to act opposite Billy, the young actor who aggressively pursues her, Henry realizes that Annie's affair is real and his system of protection gives way. Hersh Zeifman comments that "when the adultery is "real"—not in a play, and not somebody else's problem—Henry finds himself mute with pain. The theatrical brittleness [...] so evident in *House of Cards* cracks under the strain of "real life" (148). Zeifman observes that Henry is so shaken that his usual linguistic facility fails him and "even his sentence structure goes to pot; Annie actually has to correct his
grammar" (148). When Annie exits, Henry dissolves verbally: “Oh, please, please, please, please, don’t” (238).

By the play’s end, Stoppard offers hope for Henry. His spontaneous “Isn’t love wonderful?” (244) spoken to Max seems like a type of communion, a statement of solidarity uniting two people who have come through the fire changed, but stronger. Max still believes in love, and Henry, for possibly the first time, is willing to trust it even though it is uncontrollable and abstract. He is impatient to join Annie in their bedroom, through the door of which light is spilling into the darkness where he stands. She has literally illuminated a path for him. According to stage directions, the Monkees’ “I’m a Believer” swells as the curtain falls, helping the audience to imagine a Henry who will now be able to grant faith the same respect as knowledge and be able to trust an abstract concept such as love as he would a coffee mug or cricket bat.

Henry has long struggled to “write love.” However, he has now been milled by the very dynamic he used to describe the subject of his House of Cards: “self-knowledge through pain” (Stoppard, The Real Thing 218). His life has imitated his art, and, indeed, he has gained knowledge through pain. One surmises that Henry will now be able to write emotion as he has appreciated both the representation and “the real thing.” Stoppard here shows that although self-realization is painful and often requires a leap of faith, it is balanced by the richness of achieving the illusive “real thing.”
Conclusion

Storytellers, novelists, playwrights, photographers, painters, actors, politicians, historians, and liars, to name but a few artists, package their reality in myriad ways with varying degrees of truth and fiction—some might call it employing artistic license. Human beings (spectators, readers, and listeners) are not neutral entities who filter information and repackage it without the imprint of their prejudices and mores. Throughout his work, Stoppard implores individuals to be cognizant of this dual lack of neutrality, on the part of both the artist and his or her audience. It is in that sense that one can read Stoppard’s works as cautionary tales.

Since art, as Stoppard has said, “provides the moral matrix, the moral sensibility from which we make our judgments about the world” (Jenkins 118), it is absolutely crucial that it remain free of political manipulation and unattached to political agenda. For this reason, the integrity of the artist is of paramount importance. Liars, for example, are artists who operate without integrity. Historians who attempt to tell the truth about events have integrity, but even so, their artful product is skewed as it is told from their perspective, which may make it true to them, but not necessarily true to all.

Stoppard illustrates that language also loses its neutrality once the writer contextualizes words, as they become his or her tools, expressing his or her thoughts and springing from personal ideology. The Real Thing’s Henry avows the sanctity of words but also acknowledges that their use renders them malleable and, therefore, one must use them with care. Stoppard is concerned with how one can misuse art and language to serve an anti-humanistic purpose and strongly warns of this potential.
The easiest way to know if good has triumphed over evil is to examine the freedom of the artist,” Carr states in *Travesties* (22). Artistic freedom lies at the heart of the two works examined in this study. Stoppard emphasizes the fragility and vulnerability of that freedom, and he investigates various ways in which the freedom of the individual hinges on the freedom of the artist. The artists under Lenin, for example, either profess the party line or face extermination, and for those who choose to sacrifice integrity to save their lives, their art, corrupted and adulterated, becomes a vehicle for political aim, used to promote the bending of millions of individual wills to the singular will of one vision.

Cautionary though Stoppard may be, his writing also demonstrates his confidence in the intelligence of his audiences, which in a broader sense expresses both confidence and faith in humanity. He presents multiple views of each issue and does not offer answers to the questions he poses, but rather provides opportunities for audiences to explore their own beliefs and the foundations that support those beliefs. Stoppard demonstrates, throughout both works, that it is often the case that there is more than one right answer, more than one voice of reason.

Stoppard’s work demands thinking and examining, not seeing and believing. Seeing, in fact, is the opposite of believing in Stoppard’s world. Stoppard is appealing to individuals to take the dynamic which they have applied to understanding his plays and now apply it to the way in which they interpret the world, the way in which they conduct their lives. Don’t take things at face value, don’t be sure that what you are seeing is truth, don’t be afraid to wonder about another side of an argument or to explore another way of looking at something, he seems to be urging. “Not knowing” is a perfect position from
which to read, listen, see, and study. In *The Real Thing*, Henry is able to grow and change in those liminal spaces where he does not truly know a thing; “not knowing” forces him to explore, to test his beliefs, to attempt to discover the truth. In *Travesties*, Joyce, Tzara, Lenin, and Carr all think they know, and based on that belief, they all think they are right. As a reader or viewer of Stoppardian drama, one finds that position more than limiting.

What is Stoppard saying about art itself? Art is never a closed entity. It is a type of communication between creator and interpreter. It is more than a reflection of the world; it is a world unto itself. Within the world of *The Real Thing*, Stoppard’s Henry embodies the artist who sanctifies the tools of his trade—words and language—and tries to hold his art separate from life to avoid the contaminating effects of “the real” on the ideal. Henry also embodies the artist who, after much pontificating, is willing to sacrifice that sacrosanct ideal to save what he thinks might be “the real thing”—writing Brodie’s story to keep Annie.

*Travesties’* Joyce, Tzara, and Lenin all appreciate the beauty and danger in artistic communication. Joyce sees art as the wrapping that granted history glory and immortality and knows that “[i]f there is any meaning in any of it, it is in what survives as art” (41). Tzara sees art as the world of human expression and, horrified at the destruction of which man is capable, wants to “reconcile the shame and the necessity of being and artist” (41). Lenin knows that art is the way into man’s heart, soul, and mind. It is he who bends art to his will and wields enormous power over hundreds of millions of people by depriving them of the right of interpretation, by depriving them of art, free and unfettered. And it is we, readers and spectators of art, who bear the responsibility that our intellects impose on us—to examine how we treat each other individually, nationally, and globally.
As Hunter asserts, Stoppard wants his characters’ conflicting ideas and beliefs, the basis of their “knowing,” to be heard, “and he wants us to care: about the horror of the trenches, about the commercial and political immoralities that led to that horror” (Plays 213), and by extension, about the horrors being perpetrated in present time and the corporate and political climate that contribute to those horrors. It is clear, in spite of the vast body of criticism that proclaims him as apolitical, that Stoppard is, in fact, political in the best possible way.
Notes

1 Major Stoppard requested that Tom Stoppard cease using his surname after he became interested in his Jewish roots. Major Stoppard referred to it as his “tribalization.” This occurred shortly after Tom Stoppard’s mother’s death (Delaney 35).

2 John Osborne’s seminal play written in 1956 that ushered in the “Angry Young Man” Movement and impressed a legion of young artists mostly because of the subject matter he chose to present.

3 From The Real Thing, Henry’s lack of ease with “not knowing” (230) things illustrates the controlling power of knowledge on the mind. Knowledge or certainty, while providing a base from which to write can also close the mind to further illumination.

4 Between 1975 and 1982, Stoppard became interested in the political power of theater and Eastern Bloc repression. The plays written during that period reflect that interest and have been called his “political plays.” They include: Dirty Linen, Every Good Boy Deserves Favor, Professional Foul, Cahoot’s Macbeth, and Dogg’s Hamlet.

5 Cecily is referred to as “Old Cecily” in this scene.

6 Carr and Joyce sued each other as a result of their collaboration in a production of Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest. Joyce, as business manager, claimed Carr did not pay for tickets for a particular performance but sold them and pocketed the money. Carr, as actor, claims Joyce did not pay for his “costumes,” which turned out to be normal clothing—suits and trousers—that Carr used in everyday life.

7 Stoppard called The Real Thing “the love play” in an interview with Mel Gussow commenting that it took 25 years of “shedding inhibition[s] about self-revelation” to be able to write it (Nadel 324).
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