

## Tom Stoppard: Craft and Craftiness

To the Editor:

Elissa S. Guralnick's reading of Tom Stoppard's *Artist Descending a Staircase*, one of the most exuberant of the playwright's postmodern parodies, is right on the mark ("*Artist Descending a Staircase*: Stoppard Captures the Radio Station—and Duchamp," 105 [1990]: 286–300). Paul Delaney's objection to her characterization of the play as resisting a single unified "meaning" raises more questions than it could hope to answer (Forum, 106 [1991]: 1170–71), but one of these should at least be acknowledged: what is the relation between the Stoppard who, for over twenty years, has granted (and expertly orchestrated) media interviews about his plays and their meaning and the Stoppard who speaks through his dramatic characters? Put a slightly different way, what is the difference between the Stoppard persona carefully constructed for interviews (dedicated father, sincere patriot, antiacademic, earnest moralist, etc.) and the "voice" of the author Stoppard as it emerges through the characters in his plays and through his journalism? Confusingly, these voices sometimes sound identical, while at other times they sound distinct. Not in *Artist* but certainly in other plays, notably *Travesties*, Stoppard's manipulation of his personas is less than completely ingenuous. In *Travesties*, he wishes to give the impression of straddling the fence in the art-politics debates, but he stacks the cards in favor of art (i.e., limerick-spouting "James Joyce" emerges the clear hero of the play, while "Lenin" is consigned to a mock-documentary but aesthetically inferior position). My point is not that Stoppard should have treated Lenin with greater respect (on the contrary, the playwright's error was to shrink from parodying Lenin as vigorously as he parodied the artist figures) but that the "truth" about the author Stoppard and his declarations of intent is, to echo Oscar Wilde, rarely pure and never simple. As an admirer of Stoppardian virtuosity, I concede the correctness of Delaney's insistence on the playwright as an ingenious craftsman. But Stoppard is nowhere so crafty as in his description of *Artist Descending a Staircase* as seventy-four minutes of airtime spun out as "filler" for a one-minute tape gag.

Why not ask "Stoppard himself" which of his many voices to believe? By all means go ahead, but be sure you have heard all of them before deciding which one speaks the Truth.

KATHERINE E. KELLY  
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## Reply:

Although Katherine E. Kelly raises an interesting question about the relative authority of Stoppard's various personas as they emerge from his interviews and plays, nothing short of a full-scale biography is likely to yield a satisfactory answer. To my mind, at any rate, no reading of the plays can do the job.

What I have pursued in addressing *Artist Descending a Staircase* is not Stoppard's true voice but the play's implicit meaning. Having settled on an interpretation that persuades me, I am naturally inclined to use it as a touchstone in judging the forthrightness of Stoppard's comments about his achievements and intentions. But such a procedure—the same one, I suspect, that Kelly uses when deciding which of Stoppard's voices "speaks the Truth"—may very well create just another persona, instead of revealing "Stoppard himself."

If so, no harm done; or so I would argue. To give a play precedence over the playwright's personal opinions, even his opinions of the play itself, is fair enough. After all, the play's the thing. Without it, the playwright's opinions would not strike us as important. Thus my argument with Paul Delaney: he seems to me to trust the playwright farther than the play.

For the record, however, I would stress that I, too, consider Stoppard an ingenious craftsman. If the emphasis on paradox in my essay gives a different impression, I am not sure why. My contention that Stoppard demurs to answer the riddles that he poses in *Artist* should not brand the play inartistic. On the contrary, as I have tried to demonstrate, there is more ingenuity and craftsmanship in Stoppard's demurral than in many an assertion of certitude.

ELISSA S. GURALNICK  
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## Reply:

I am happy to concur with Katherine E. Kelly that in seeking to understand Tom Stoppard's plays we should listen to "his many voices." I appreciate Kelly's concurrence regarding Stoppard's craftsmanship. For my part I gladly concede that when he describes *Artist Descending a Staircase* as seventy-four minutes of padding for a one-minute tape gag, the normally self-effacing Stoppard is more than usually sly. In arguing that "the 'truth' about the author Stoppard" is "rarely pure and never simple," Kelly advances a proposition that is, quite simply, true. Indeed, I find myself applauding almost everything Kelly says.