

Exploring the Playwright's Self-Representation in Tom Stoppard's Dramatic Works



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ABSTRACT: This article examines two masterpieces by the British playwright and screenwriter Tom Stoppard: the two-act play *The Real Thing* and the screenplay *Shakespeare in Love*. These works employ the author-as-character technique in disparate ways. This study will endeavor to demonstrate how the playwright interweaves artistic and realist elements, as well as the ways in which his intricate techniques of synthesis impact the written page and the theatrical stage.

KEYWORDS: Tom Stoppard, author as character, love, art, reality, authenticity

The Real Thing employs the reflexive technique of the author as character, both thematically and structurally, allowing Tom Stoppard to express himself more intimately and engage his audience more effectively. Such a scheme gives rise to the question of the value of art for its own sake, or of art as a social and political value. In response, Stoppard has advanced the position that the sole virtue of art lies in its aesthetic qualities.

The Real Thing, dedicated to his wife Miriam, represents one of Stoppard's most introspective and personally reflective works. In this thought-provoking comedy, Stoppard examines the relationship between the concepts of truth, time, and love. He employs a variety of structural techniques, including the meta-structure of a play-within-a-play, which contributes to the overall theatricality of the play.

The Real Thing was initially staged at the Strand Theatre in London in 1982 under the direction of Peter Wood. The Broadway version represents a significant reworking of the original London production. The play delves into the intricacies of love and marriage, illusion and deception within the context of theatrical performance from the perspective of a playwright. Stoppard's perspective is that the truth is found in the nuances of language, which leads him to view the mundane as more significant than the transcendent.

The Real Thing presents a dichotomy between the fantastical realm of Henry Boot, a semi-autobiographical playwright who ostensibly speaks on behalf of the author, and the exasperating reality of his desolate marriage. The play also examines the impact of Henry's secret affair with Annie on those closest to him.

Max discovers that his wife Charlotte has been unfaithful to him. However, the scene that he witnesses is not an actual occurrence, but rather a scene from Henry's latest play, entitled *House of Cards*. Annie, Max's actual spouse, is an actress with a specific set of beliefs and motivations. She is engaged in an extramarital relationship with Henry, a prolific author in his forties who is married to Charlotte. Subsequently, Henry terminates his marriage and establishes a cohabiting relationship with his mistress. Annie demands that Henry divulge the truth about their clandestine relationship. However, it is she who discloses this information to Max, the understudy for the role of the playwright, who is, somewhat incongruously, a relatively unimportant character offstage.

In the intervals between rehearsals of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* and, subsequently, John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Annie endeavors to secure the release of Brodie, a twenty-five-year-old Scottish soldier who has been wrongfully incarcerated. She requests that Henry compose the autobiographical political television play of the anarchist activist. However, Henry's disinclination towards his own style is evident. Similarly, Henry is a wordsmith who values linguistic beauty and precision. For him, the concept of witlessness is an absolute non-negotiable:

HENRY: Maybe Brodie got a raw deal, maybe he didn't. I don't know. It doesn't count. He's a lout with language. I can't help someone who thinks, or thinks he thinks, that editing a newspaper is censorship, or that throwing bricks is a demonstration while building tower blocks is a social violence, or that unpalatable statement is provocation while disrupting the speaker is the exercise of free speech...¹

¹ Tom Stoppard, *The Real Thing*, London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1983. All subsequent references are to this edition, Act II, Scene 5, p. 54.

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Subsequent to the lovers' departure from their partners and subsequent settlement, Henry ascertains that Annie has been engaging in flirtatious behavior with a young actor named Billy while starring in *Tis Pity She's a Whore*. Annie discloses the emotional rather than the physical nature of such an attachment and her aspiration to maintain moral rectitude with both Henry and Billy, a goal with which Henry concurs.

Following Brodie's release from prison, Annie's romantic relationship with Henry entered a period of decline. Annie's friendship with Brodie appears to be burdened by a sense of guilt, functioning as a kind of symbolic debt, given that his arson was committed with the intention of impressing her. Furthermore, her emotional attachment to Billy dissipates. Stoppard illustrates the complexity of human relationships, demonstrating that they encompass a vast range of nuances that cannot be simplistically classified as either sexual or non-sexual.

DEBBIE: Most people think *not* having it off is *fidelity*. They think all relationships hinge in the middle. Sex or no sex.

What a fantastic range of possibilities. Like an on/off switch. Did she or didn't she.²

The characters grapple with the fundamental question of the meaning of life, as they become enmeshed in the complex dynamics of romantic relationships. The artist's work reflects a progression from "free love"³ to "carnal knowledge"⁴ to "the last romantic."⁵

By examining the enduring themes of friendship, admiration, love, lust, passion, and adultery, Stoppard illuminates the multifaceted nature of human attachment styles. He effectively poses the question of whether love is compatible with marriage, a concern that is shared by the audience. The intricate structure of Stoppard's narratives bears resemblance to those of Woody Allen.

The play *The Real Thing* was translated into French as *La Vérité des choses* by René Gingras, who is a playwright, screenwriter, and certified translator. Guillermo de Andrea assumed the role of director in 1986. The entire stage setting is artificial and propped up. The audience accepts the staged opening scene, which portrays Max and Charlotte as a deteriorating couple, as an authentic representation of their relationship. In point of fact, the initial scene constitutes a rehearsal of a play-within-a-play.

Stoppard encourages Henry and the audience to differentiate between illusion and reality, and to identify the genuine from the inauthentic. He celebrates the ambiguity inherent in the play's theatricality. In his analysis of *The Real Thing*, Toby Zinman, a critic of Stoppard's work, emphasizes the play's layered dimension:

[The] opening 'faux' scene [is] taken by the audience to be true; a doubled, trebled, or quadrupled structure; and a set design that functions as part of the play. Each of these structural features involves the audience in first assessing and then reassessing its reading of the action as it progresses.⁶

One of the primary objectives of literary studies is to gain an understanding of the complexities of human relationships. Henry displays a similar degree of intellectual acuity to that observed in Tom Stoppard, exhibiting a shared aversion to grammatical errors and a comparable command of language. He is depicted as a somewhat pedantic playwright who is adept at composing television scripts but experiences difficulty in writing a play for his beloved Annie. Henry's tendency to speak in a manner that is reminiscent of acting leaves him with a sense of emotional numbness.

In this realistic drama, Stoppard presents a series of ethical, existential, and philosophical questions. He attempts to comprehend the multifaceted nature of love, encompassing its various forms, whether conventional or illicit, and to convey these profound sentiments in his artistic endeavors. The protagonist, Henry, finds that language itself becomes an inhibitor of his desire. He confides his difficulty in articulating love properly, noting that every time he has tried, he has failed:

HENRY: I don't know how to write love. I try to write it properly, and it just comes out embarrassing. It's either childish or it's rude. And the rude bits are absolutely juvenile. I can't use any of it. My credibility is already hanging by a thread after *Desert Island Discs*. Anyway, I'm too prudish. Perhaps I should write it completely artificial. Blank verse. Poetic imagery. Not so much of the 'Will you still love me when my tits are droopy?' 'Of course I will, darling, it's your bum I'm mad for', and more of the 'By my troth, thy beauty makest the moon hide her radiance', do you think?

ANNIE: Not really, no.⁷

The Real Thing is an intellectual drama that explores the psychological aspects of Henry's journey to invent and create authentic love scenes that transcend the limitations of conventional romantic tropes and clichés. Ultimately, the protagonist was able to accept his vulnerability and express his emotions sincerely:

² Tom Stoppard, *The Real Thing*, Act II, Scene 7, p. 62.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

⁶ Katherine E. Kelly, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 16.

⁷ Tom Stoppard, *The Real Thing*, Act I, Scene 4, p. 40.

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HENRY: I love love. I love having a lover and being one. The insularity of passion. I love it. I love the way it blurs the distinction between everyone who isn't one's lover. Only two kinds of presence in the world. There's you and there's them. I love you so.⁸

The Real Thing has reached a point of fulfillment after Henry has identified the appropriate language to celebrate love as the unifying force between two individuals, regardless of their differences. The expression of love in the play is linguistic, but more importantly, gestural. This is evidenced by the physical exchange of communication between Henry and Annie, which is often described in the stage directions with the repeated use of the word "nod." Henry is a dynamic character who undergoes significant and profound changes throughout the course of the play. In the course of his investigation, Stoppard dismantles the character's essentialist view of love as a transient infatuation:

HENRY: [...] Loving 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. I mean, I *talk* better than this.

ANNIE: You'll have to learn to do sub-text. My Strindberg is steaming with lust, but there is nothing rude on the page. We just talk round it.⁹

Stoppard establishes a connection between the artistic and the real by juxtaposing performances of Henry's plays with scenes from literary classics. The poetics of intertextuality permits the fiction of the play to intertwine with the artistic creations of actual authors. The work incorporates excerpts from an imaginary playwright, interwoven with passages from renowned playwrights such as John Ford, August Strindberg, Noël Coward, Oscar Wilde, and Samuel Beckett.

Another of Stoppard's strategies is to play with the contrast between perception and reality: "There's nothing really *there*—it's just the way you see it. Your perception."¹⁰ The playwright establishes certain impressions and then proceeds to negate them, effectively disorienting the viewer or reader. He instills doubt in the audience's mind by utilizing textual clues to challenge the veracity of perceptions and assumptions. As a result, skepticism represents a preliminary stage in the formation of accurate judgments.

The House of Cards excerpt may indicate that Henry and Charlotte's marriage is experiencing difficulties, while the Strindberg excerpt suggests that Annie's infidelity is as much a form of deceit as Miss Julie's in a society that remains preoccupied with honor and maintaining a pristine public image. The characters evaluate the world from disparate perspectives, with some perceiving reality through a fixed moral framework and others through a more nuanced philosophical lens. In response to Annie's relationship with Billie, Henry states:

HENRY: Dignified cuckoldry is a difficult trick, but it can be done. Think of it as modern marriage. We have got beyond hypocrisy, you and I. Exclusive rights isn't love, it's colonization.

ANNIE: Stop it—Please stop it.

(Pause)¹¹

"Exclusivity isn't love, it's colonization," a sentiment previously expressed by Henry and Charlotte's daughter Debbie, is echoed here by Henry. This illustrates the reciprocal impact that the characters exert upon one another.

In the context of stage dialogue, Henry engages in a fantasy wherein he imagines his wife as a betrayer. However, just as he was unable to accept this in reality, the television series *House of Cards* reveals that the imagined infidelity never occurred. In contrast, when Annie discloses her duplicity to Max in a subsequent scene, the actor's response differs from Henry's anticipated reaction. Interestingly, Max's emotional state appears to be similarly fragile and susceptible to external influences. The distinction between the stage and the home is a fundamental one, yet the two are not entirely separate entities. In this instance, Stoppard is alluding to the dialectical relationship between art and reality. It can be argued that art reflects reality, and that life can imitate art.

Stoically, Henry describes the play as the initiatory journey of a man who has attained "self-knowledge through pain."¹² He is driven to write *The Real Thing* and, through the process of writing, gains the self-knowledge that enables him to do so. This occurs subsequent to Annie's infliction of emotional distress upon him, as she did with Max. In the end, Henry comes to the conclusion that there is no distinction between art and life. In essence, Stoppard's play can be interpreted as a work about the sincerity of love, its embodiment, theoretical analysis, and its aesthetic representation through the act of writing. This is achieved through an openness of heart and mind to the subject matter.

Our analysis thus far corroborates the assertion that *The Real Thing* is a cathartic play, with a primary focus on the experience of living love rather than on the act of writing it. In an interview with Mel Gussow, Stoppard referred to his play as "the love play" and commented that it took twenty-five years of "shedding inhibitions about self-revelation"¹³ to write it down. Stoppard

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, Act II, Scene 6, p. 58.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, Act II, Scene 11, pp. 76-77.

¹² *Ibidem*, Act II, Scene 7, p. 62.

¹³ Ira Nadel, *Tom Stoppard: A Life*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002, p. 324.

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contemplates the essence of authentic love, questioning whether it resides in genuine human sentiment or solely within the realm of theatrical fiction.

Henry matures emotionally by learning to integrate his unfiltered emotional responses with a logical, structured, and rational approach to problem-solving. This quality is also exemplified by the playwright himself. From a didactic perspective, the play offers Stoppard a means of articulating his conception of love. Stoppard employs this subject matter as both a source of inspiration and a medium for experimentation, utilizing the written page and the theatrical stage as a means of reorganizing his chaotic sensibility and transforming writing into a form of rehearsal. He places a high degree of trust in the power of words, which he believes possess a sacredness that writers do not have:

HENRY: Words don't deserve that kind of malarkey. 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. But when they get their corners knocked off, they're no good any more, and Brodie knocks their corners off. I don't think writers are sacred, but words are. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones in the right order, you can nudge the world a little or make a poem which children will speak for you when you're dead.¹⁴

Ultimately, Henry and Annie decide to remain together, while Henry commences work on Brodie's play. The couple reestablishes a close relationship. Annie's marital infidelity serves a dramatic function in the play, functioning as the plot device by which Stoppard reconciles his highbrow hero with his heart. The numerous allusions to literary infidelity in *The Real Thing* substantiate the utility of fiction in elucidating genuine human experience.

The play concludes with a telephone call from Max, in which he informs Henry of his recent engagement. Stoppard underscores the precarious nature of marriages and human relationships, which may be akin to fragile structures, as the play-within-a-play suggests. Such edifices, ostensibly robust, are susceptible to collapse at any given moment. The bonds of love can be formed and broken; there may be periods of growth and decline, but the essence of love remains constant.

At the core of Henry's pursuit and that of the audience lies the inquiry into the distinction between authentic and inauthentic manifestations of love. The play unites the concepts of love, art, and politics under a single analytical lens, prompting the audience to contemplate the veracity of these three domains. Furthermore, Stoppard introduces additional layers of complexity by incorporating linguistic and perceptual elements, as well as the concepts of appearance and reality, into the narrative. Ultimately, the play challenges the notion of a singular, definitive reality, as evidenced by its portrayal of duality and versatility. The nature of light is dualistic, exhibiting properties that can be described as both a wave and a particle. In essence, the defining characteristic of this phenomenon is instability.

It is noteworthy that the entirety of the play is comprised of illusions. The stylized nature of theater and meta-theater tends to favor artificiality, and the distorted perceptions of the characters serve to reinforce this construct. As William W. Demastes observed:

Objectivity is impossible given that everything must be filtered through the never-resting viewpoint of individual consciousnesses. We all develop 'private derangements'.¹⁵

Commenting Stoppard's play, he writes:

He opens the play with a scene... sleight of hand, but this theatricality does so much more, presenting as it does a scene of love and betrayal that is intentionally 'theatrical'. The dialogue is too clean and witty—not quite *the real thing*. Later we get a much sloppier... kind of confrontation between a 'real' couple in the play, but it too fails to satisfy, given that it feels like the stylized inarticulation of a method-acted kitchen sink play.¹⁶

He goes on to say that toward the end of the play, there is another confrontational scene:

[It] is muted but devastating, and it fails fully to offer 'real' closure, providing neither tidy clichés of urbane wit nor the drivelling gutterings of an inarticulately devastated lover. This is not at all to say that... Stoppard's third option is the 'real' thing because... nothing in the play is actually 'The Real Thing', given that the play itself is a mediated (re)presentation of whatever it is that betrayal 'really' looks like.¹⁷

Stoppard is a specialist in the metatheatrical device of the matryoshka doll, which he also used in his one-act play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear* (1964). The playwright eventually expanded this short work into a three-act play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which premiered at the 1966 Edinburgh Festival Fringe and spawned the Hamlet-inspired 1990 film of the same name. In his play-within-a-play, Stoppard blends modernity and classicism to capture the essence of Elizabethan theater.

¹⁴ Tom Stoppard, *The Real Thing*, Act II, Scene 5, p. 54.

¹⁵ William W. Demastes, "Portrait of an Artist as Proto-Chaotician. Tom Stoppard Working his Way to Arcadia," *Narrative*, Vol.19, No 2 (May 2011): 229-240, p. 235

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

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In the screenplay for the 1998 Anglo-American film *Shakespeare in Love*¹⁸, co-written by Tom Stoppard and Marc Norman, directed by John Madden, and produced by Harvey Weinstein, Stoppard skillfully combines elements of comedy and drama to create a compelling romantic drama. *Shakespeare in Love* revolves around the writing and production of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which it uses as a subplot. Stoppard has a deep fascination with Renaissance drama and its icon, Shakespeare. His adaptation echoes the original play, including the two lovers born under the wrong star.

The idea of having an author as the protagonist of a dramatic work is intriguing. Like *The Real Thing*, *Shakespeare in Love* dramatizes the act of writing in the context of love. Screenwriters Tom Stoppard and Marc Norman present the poet as the victim of a writing crisis caused by a sexual problem. Consider the following passage in which Dr. Moth, an alchemical astrologer, comes to the artist's aid:

DR. MOTH: I am here to help you. Tell me in your own words.

WILL: I have lost my gift
(not finding this easy)

It's as if my quill is broken. As if the organ of the imagination has dried up. As if the proud tower of my genius has collapsed.

DR. MOTH: Interesting.

WILL: Nothing comes.

DR. MOTH: Most interesting.¹⁹

With the return of love, the poet's blank page syndrome disappears. From then on, Will begins to write more intensely. The screenplay does not make a direct connection between the man and his work. But the movie is more or less biographical.

The movie depicts a fictional romance between playwright William Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes) and Viola de Lesseps (Gwyneth Paltrow) at the time Shakespeare was writing *Romeo and Juliet*. It sheds light on the poet's creativity, fueled by love and transformed into breathtaking verse, and on the lover and playwright at work as one. Fiennes plays Shakespeare, who is by turns character (Romeo), director and actor.

Shakespeare's character, overwhelmed by passion, pursues his courtship of Viola. He rushes from her room to his office and sends her sonnets in which she appears as a summer day. Love drives art, with Viola as the muse, and Shakespeare and Viola as the living epithet of *Romeo and Juliet*. Like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *Shakespeare in Love* is both Stoppardian and Shakespearean.

Finally, Tom Stoppard draws a strong connection between personal relationships and the realm of theater. The protagonist of *The Real Thing* is more comfortable with words than with feelings. Writing about love and infidelity requires the exorcism of real, vital emotions onto paper. In this, Henry and Stoppard have something in common. In sum, *Shakespeare in Love* is about the craft of writing and staging. It fictionalizes the young Shakespeare's struggle with writer's block and his search for literary inspiration.

The Real Thing and *Shakespeare in Love* experiment with the author-as-character technique in different ways. While both explore themes of art, love, and authenticity, *The Real Thing* does not make explicit use of the biographical underpinnings. Instead, it subtly draws parallels between Stoppard and his protagonist, Henry. But the film version does, to a certain extent. In both productions, the experiences and interactions of the characters influence the creative process of the play-within-a-play's playwrights.

The playwright's surrogate dramatic technique uses a fictional character who slightly or closely resembles the playwright, with the same name or a pseudonym. *The Real Thing* uses Henry as the playwright's avatar, and this is where the character writer technique comes into play in the play. Henry's thoughts and experiences about the nature of art and writing mirror those of Stoppard. This gives the actual playwright more freedom to express his views on the complexities of the human quest for meaning.

The character-writer technique is employed with greater frequency in *Shakespeare in Love*, wherein the protagonist's artistic endeavors are seamlessly integrated into the narrative and dialogue. Through the character of Will, Stoppard examines the relationship between art and life, the pursuit of openness in the creative process, and the complexity of human relationships as they evolve and adapt.

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¹⁸ Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, *Shakespeare in Love: A Screenplay*, 1st Edition, New York: Miramax Books, 1998.

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