

The Metaphor of the Classroom in Two Contemporary British Plays

Well, it's all trivial anyway
—Valentine, *Arcadia*, II: 5

Within a span of twenty years Tom Stoppard (*Arcadia*, 1993) and Trevor Griffiths (*Comedians*, 1975) took their audiences back to school for an exercise of reflection that success fully mixed laughter, varying degrees of emotion and a genuine sense of entertainment. We are referring to the plays mentioned between parentheses which have it in common that both made of the classroom their setting, thus turning some or all of the characters into pupils and/or teachers.

That the classroom offers dramatic potentialities is fairly obvious as is the fact that such a choice for a setting raises not a few questions related to its capacity for sense-making in our own time, a time when the school as we have known it is on the verge of extinction. For example, in the case of Stoppard's play, why has he used the metaphor of the classroom when his main concern seems to be rather the garden image with all its components: the gazebo, the lawn, the lake, the trees, Hannah's research, the "serpent" architect, the apple (leaf), the changing of muddy shoes, "Hodge" the hermit, the garden party, the tent, etc; in which way can Stoppard's and Griffiths's fundamentally different classrooms illuminate each other? And, at the bottom of it all, what meaning is produced through this metaphor? Which are its implications and how do they work in these plays?

It seems convenient to start by the last questions. The figure of the classroom immediately brings to mind a definite type of relationship, marked by hierarchy whereby one

part takes the place/role of authority and the other submits to it (or not). In *Arcadia* we see some such relationship but we fail to perceive where authority exactly lays, if there is actually any behind the traditional roles of tutor-pupil. Septimus, the tutor, offers in II:7 a description of his role to Augustus, his pupil's brother, an Etonian, who has questions him on the subject,

I do not rule here, my lord. I inspire by reverence
for learning & the exaltation of knowledge
Whereby man may approach God.

after which he adds, in typical Stoppardian manner, "There will be a shilling for the best cone...pyramid...drawn in silence" undermining thus the respect he was beginning to create with his words. His lack of authority is further corroborated by the lack of any visual/gestual indication of it in the setting or in the proxemics. He and Lady Thomasina, his 14-year-old pupil, are sitting at a large table, perhaps at either end (no specific direction) on high-backed chairs which are signs of period and status (early nineteenth century in a stately home of a noble family) rather than index of roles.

In *Comedians* instead, the situation revolves around half a dozen students; the classroom shows the traditional arrangement for teacher's dominance in the form of a dais where he is expected to stand and where Eddie Waters in fact does stand, a position that will go almost unchallenged until nearly the end of the play. His authority seems legitimated by his ability to control his group, his expertise on the subject he teaches, and his experience, acknowledged even by his rival, suggestively named Challenor, the showbiz agent. What seems rather at odds with the banality of this contemporary, Manchester-based working-

class evening school for adults is the subject of study: *comedy*. As if it could be taught!

While Eddie Waters appears to be a very competent teacher in every way, Septimus Hodge, the tutor of *Arcadia*, strikes us as a very doubtful one. He seems to be a scientist through his Cambridge background but whereas we have for Waters other people's references ("Challenor reckons you could have been great...you just stopped wanting it," says student Gethin Price in the third act of the play), for Septimus there is only a "letter of self-recommendation" (Hannah, I:2). We never really hear him expounding his theories as we do with the character of Waters in the first act, who lectures on jokes. We do not either see him leading Thomasina expertly into any serious, systematic work, i.e. an equivalent to Eddie Waters' drills and exercises. And when he thinks he is checking her mistakes it inevitably turns out he had not in fact understood her equation! (See the "rabbit" equation in II:7.) In *Comedians*, the teacher unerringly makes his point when he rebukes his "pet" student on the subject of the "limerick" that was offensive to women. Yet Septimus does hold some sort of intellectual sway over Thomasina as when he fences her questions on the subject of the "carnal embrace" by contrasting its meaning with Fermat's theorem! A dishonest stratagem really that Thomasina will tackle with her characteristic directness, thereby raising the vital question,

If *you* do not teach me the true meanings of things,
who will?

The same question pops up rather unexpectedly in the first act of *Comedians*, prompted by the teacher by means of a tongue-twister, "The traitor distrusts truth," which students are supposed to practise with and which only his best student, Gethin Price, can produce "effortlessly and at speed" according to directions—because he does not care for meaning? Because he believes in what he says?

Does?—then, to dispel doubts, "very levelly, measuredly at Waters"...the *confrontation* has begun, the challenge to authority. The teacher has been sensing it all along. He replies by a long tirade made up of all the stereotypes that prejudice creates to mock truth and love which are the stock-in-trade of stand-up comedy: Irish, Jews, women, blacks, etc ending up in the same the tongue-twister, now slightly altered, "the traitor *destroys* the truth." Nobody except Price seems to understand the outburst. Griffiths himself comments on this part,

they think that Eddie Waters is a racist and he's coming clean just like everybody else. What's interesting is that another sector of the audience will take issue with the first sector's reception and quite frequently, in struggling to become an audience, the audience will show itself as a number of audiences...¹

That human relationship should be based on truth is a commonplace and also an ideal but that the teacher-pupil relationship be based on truth is a *conditio sine qua non* of its very existence. Hence Thomasina's violence when she discovers Septimus has deceived her on the subject of the Cleopatra "translation." She calls him "cheat" and flees from the classroom with an ominous "I hope you die" in "tears of rage" according to directions (I:3). Of course she has not yet attained that degree of maturity or of indifference which can make allowances for ironic or weary tutors...

Yet it would altogether unfair to pin all the responsibility of the truth upon the teacher. When Thomasina asks, "Am I the first person to have thought of this?," echoed by Chlöe's "Valentine, do you think I'm the first person to think of this?" in II:7, the feeling is that of childish arrogance or pride, and the question has little of the passion for knowledge expected in a good pupil. Indeed Chlöe can be forgiven on account of her not being a student at all,

¹ Martin Cinnamon talks to Trevor Griffiths, Lyrics Hammersmith Playbill, July 1993.

not so Bernard, the Oxford don, who acts exactly as if he were the first to have “thought of that” namely, the discovery of Chater, the poet already “studied” and dismissed the century before, and his shady connections with Lord Byron over an adulterous love affair.

A classroom is, or should be, basically a testing-ground, a place to make mistakes in, and to enjoy the rare pleasure of starting anew every time. At the end of *Comedians* one of the students who failed, Ged Murray, wants to take the course all over again. Thomasina, after the angry outburst with Septimus, is seen working again with the same zest and sweetness as before. In a classroom nothing begins or ends forever. Friendships, hates, hopes, plans, failures, successes all are temporary states and both plays provide plenty of examples that this is so. The “schoolroom” of *Arcadia* itself has become in time a mere place of passage in a very physical sense, “the way to the nearest toilet” to quote Bernard (I: 2).

Another way for the classroom to be is the place where questions are asked and answered. The manner in which these answers are found make all the difference. In the *Comedians*’ classroom, Eddie Waters the teacher seems to have these answers all ready. And to be willing and anxious to pass them on. But not all of his students identify with them. Either because they hurt their hearts (Price) or their pockets (Samuels). Septimus, if he has any answer, is always reluctant to share it or is too busy to care: he is constantly receiving & answering letters, reading other stuff or fending off trouble, mainly related to his inordinate sexual life or satirical disposition.

A classroom is also a place for revelation: for discovery and self-discovery which does not necessarily relate to a specific field of knowledge, although it may *start* there. In a realistic approach, such as that of Trevor Griffiths, the examples abound, especially in the third act, in the fiery confrontation between

Price and his teacher, but also in the Murray brothers’ bitter split, in Price & Samuels’ rivalry. In *Arcadia*, revelations are not always of such crucial importance, and the classroom teems with the gossip of Septimus’s escapades with Mrs Chater or Lord Byron’s indiscretions at breakfast time to name but a few. It also echoes with Bernard’s rehearsal of the lecture he will deliver in London on his “sensational” discovery—which is no discovery at all.

Thomasina literally “lives” in her classroom, from age 13 to 17, through her concern with the Fermat’s theorem and her first sex inquiry on through her piano lessons, her Latin translations, her philosophical speculations, gallantly onwards to her “graduation,” the waltz-dancing with her tutor. She has “iterated” her life as she did the apple leaf: to the limit of her possibilities (Cf “I have no room to extend it” II:7, p. 78). Yet, within those bounds, are contained *all* the possibilities that Valentine will, almost two centuries after, display on the computer to the wonder of Hannah, in the same room. Thomasina had, in fact, gone beyond the questioning when she, in front of Lady Croom her mother, had taunted Septimus with,

There’s another geometry which I am engaged in discovering by trial & error, am I not, Septimus?²

Septimus seems to understand or to admit this when he not only dances with her but lights her candle, the one that is going to burn her to death. It’s a melancholy note that Stoppard strikes when, by letting us know of her early tragical death some sequences before its actual occurrence, he puts in Septimus’s mouth the warning lines “Be careful with the flame” as a goodnight gesture, with all the ambiguity that “flame” is capable of evoking in us, all the possibilities of meaning the word has been collecting through the ages.

²Tom Stoppard. *Arcadia* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), II:7, p. 84.

In *Comedians* the classroom is central from beginning to end, just as the teacher remains a dominant figure: the students gather there, get ready, depart from & come back to again. The Bingo Club where they perform is only an “examination” room. Physically, this classroom is a cluttered space in a 1947 two-storeyed house with its suggestion of wartime drabness and poverty. *Arcadia*’s, on the contrary, is an almost bare room: “what elegance there is, is architectural and nothing is impressive but the scale.” The windows are open to a “bright but sunless morning.” By contrast, they seem to acquire a *symbolical* meaning. Indeed *Arcadia*’s “schoolroom” is an out-of-the-way affair; even in Septimus’s & Thomasina’s times the centre is elsewhere, in the park where the unseen Lord Croom goes shooting, in the gazebo where there is “carnal embrace” galore; in the Music room where Lady Croom & the Polish Count Zelinsky play together the piano, with long pauses...in London, where Bernard delivers the lecture that will in his expectations make him famous, or outdoors, in the new garden designed by Noakes where a great charity ball under a tent is going on and from which Hannah flees towards “the room” in search of shelter. And yet, this margin has become the *centre*, as we shall see later on.

Indeed, as we have said, classroom relationships are governed by the traditional notion of authority. While in *Comedians* this is clearly shown, in *Arcadia* the notion has become somewhat blurred. The *Comedians* teacher still stakes claims for a kind of truth which for him is compassion but this is challenged by some of the students. The *Arcadia* teacher instead is all the time concealing the truth, avoiding it, or delaying it until cornered by Thomasina into acceptance. Within the framework of the metaphor, this has to do with learning or language. Gethin Price complains to his teacher, “well, then why don’t you listen to what I’m saying, Eddie?”, “shouting,” according to

directions, in the third act. In *Arcadia*, to Bernard’s exasperated “You can’t stick Byron’s head into your laptop! Genius isn’t like your average grouse,” Valentine replies “casually” that “Well, it’s all trivial, anyway,” in an utterance where “trivial” serves to exemplify just how far language has gone, from meaning so many things, into square meaninglessness for Bernard is made furious by the uptake (first meaning of the word) while Valentine was referring to the specialized, mathematical sense of “having zero value for all the variables of the solutions of a set of homogeneous equation” as his next reply demonstrates,

The questions you’re asking don’t matter... what matters is the calculus. Scientific Progress. Knowledge.³

So when Stoppard insists in his directions “nothing much need be... seen of the exterior beyond,” the stress is heavily laid on the text, on what “we come to learn” through the characters’ discourse. His play is a feat of language, and language has been the traditional manner of communicating learning. Trevor Griffiths, a teacher himself, also relies heavily on language for the unfolding of his ideologically-marked drama, firmly inscribed in the modernistic tradition of thought, its systems of ideas and beliefs which have characterized most of the twentieth century. When Eddie, the humanist teacher, calls his students “gentlemen” or *Mr Price*, *Mr Murray*, he is prompting them to respect & to self-respect, to the fundamental seriousness underpinning the joke-cracking business. But he can also be fatherly encouraging and friendly, persuasive too, by calling them by their first names or nicknames occasionally. Stoppard’s use of language, on the other hand, is anything but realistic: it tends to de-personalise his characters as in Hannah’s reply to Valentine “I

³ *Ibid.*, II:5, pp. 60–61.

don't know when I've received a more unusual proposal," little time after Lady Croom's "I do not know when I have received a more unusual compliment, Mr Hodge," making it therefore impossible for us to identify characters through their language as we would with Shakespeare sometimes. Let us remember that this is the author of *Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* who thus proceeds. His treatment of language in *Arcadia* helps explain the curious flatness of the play's characters, a fact that makes them interchangeable. Also, this makes for the cancellation of the historical perspective, visually expressed by the accumulation of objects on the table, or by the Regency clothes sported by the contemporary Crooms at the end of the play for the mask ball. As when the silent Gus who, according to directions, "takes [the audience] a moment to realise that he is not Lord Augustus" comes to Hannah with Thomasina's final drawing of Septimus, the hermit, and hands it to her, a drawing which had actually been given to Augustus before. The décor, the furniture, are invested with a double meaning: in the scenes taking place early nineteenth century they can be considered "modern" or fashionable, and as such an indication to the audience of the time when the action takes place, with all its connotations. In the contemporary ones, they become "period" pieces, valuable not only intrinsically through the material and art employed in their making, but also as "antiques," and therefore now become an indication of wealth, refinement, and status. And yet, when contemporary Gus appears dressed as Lord Augustus of the 1800s, you are baffled. And when you see on the table Lady Thomasina's object next to those of his descendant Valentine, you do not know where you are anymore, from the perspective of Time! And yet, you sense you are evaluating actually that very dimension, and what it makes to the concept of "meaning" and "knowledge," in fact you become to

question the very possibilities of such a thing to exist. Because Bernard, the Oxford don, is presenting as results of his research on Byron to Byron London Society a carefully argued report which we, the audience, *know*, in our role as witnesses, to be fundamentally *wrong*. Or, on a minor key, sweeter too, when Valentine feeds the turtle on the table which he calls Speed, we are tempted to think, on the basis of the cliché that turtles live long, whether it is not really Plautus, the turtle of Septimus, from *two* centuries before!!

The classroom relationship in *Arcadia* is further stylized into a dance first, into an amorous embrace then. That Thomasina loved her tutor there is little doubt; Septimus instead is a character far more difficult to assess. He had sex with "the Chater woman," he appeared to be hopelessly in love with Thomasina's mother, a matter Thomasina herself would willingly discuss with him if only she were allowed to. Yet, there are hints that point into that direction, i.e. allow us to study his love for Lady Croom as a probable displacement of his real interest. He knew better than fell for his teen lady charge. But he seems to be going towards her through time & space all along the development of the play with "the Chater woman" and Lady Croom as steps towards her and beyond her, into nonsense, an incalculable idea.

Some think the end of the play to be sentimental. Hannah says in I:2 p. 28, "I don't like sentimentality." Elsewhere she says she does not like dancing. Yet there she is, dancing and being sentimental, against all the Newtonian Laws of possibility—gestures that transcend language, language that transcends learning.

The metaphor of the classroom receives thus from Stoppard a postmodernistic handling in that it is taken up only to be discarded, left on the table as yet another token of the old times, of forgotten rhetorics, a quaint reminder of other codes, like that of courtesy, dropped

since. As when he contrasts for instance the elegant witty repartees (of Shavian flavour) in the lady Thomasina's period with the gross vulgar exchanges among Hannah, Bernard, Valentine in our own; in Griffiths, although challenged, the metaphor of the classroom was still functioning, as when he benevolently receives the application of the "Paqui" student for the following term at the end of the play, a metaphor still very much alive as the irreplaceable tool/place for things otherwise left unsaid or unsayable.

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Videography

- Author's home recording of the TV (shortened) version of *Comedians*, BBC, 1980
- National Theatre's recording of their 1993 performance (available at the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden, by appointment only)