

Six Characters in Search of a Novel

Mark Sarvas

Lord Malquist & Mr. Moon
by Tom Stoppard.
Grove Press, 2006,
\$14.00 paper.

IN 1972, Tom Stoppard told *The Sunday Times*, "I believed my reputation would be made by the novel. I believed the play would be of little consequence." The novel in question—Stoppard's first and only—was *Lord Malquist & Mr. Moon*, while the play was *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the pair debuting within a week of each other in August 1966.

It's tempting to imagine an alternative, Bizarro Stoppard canon, in which *Hapgood* is rendered as a Le Carré thriller by way of Evelyn Waugh; *The Real Thing* as the kind of elegant comedy of manners done so well by Muriel Spark; culminating in the thousand-page, sprawling Russian epic that would become *The Coast of Utopia*. However, an appraisal of *Lord Malquist & Mr. Moon* (now available, with a new introduction by the author, in a timely reissue from Grove Press) suggests that Stoppard was, at least in 1966, a poor judge of his own gifts, and we can be grateful that his prediction did not come to pass. We're much better off with a dramatist of the first rank than the minor novelist on display in his debut.

Lord Malquist & Mr. Moon is a spirited if tedious proto-Pynchon pastiche of high modernism, ostentatiously displaying its debts to Beckett, Joyce, Pirandello, and Eliot (Moon, like many of Stoppard's subsequent protagonists, is Prutrock adjusted for inflation to 1965, beset with a debilitating sense of his own cosmic insignificance). Set in 1960s London, the narrative defies easy summarization but hinges on the largely random comings and goings, during the state funeral for Winston Churchill, of an absurd cast which includes two feuding cowboys, a man on a donkey referring to himself as The Risen Christ, a dead French maid, and the titular characters—Malquist, a dandified, bankrupt earl, and Moon, his feckless, bomb-carrying Boswell-for-hire. Rounding out the cast are their respective wives, Lady Malquist and Jane, whose primary dramatic purpose appears to be sexual. There's also a pet lion, a dead flamingo, a black Irish Jew, a collection of Keystone-flavored cops, unexpected entrances and exits, blood, sex, pork and beans, and several murders. It's as exhausting as it sounds.

Lord Malquist & Mr. Moon is perhaps most interesting (and rewarding) as a bellwether of Stoppard's subsequent and ongoing creative concerns, his two great themes already present here at the beginning of his career. First, there's the search for order amid seeming chaos and the arguments for and against undertaking the search, a

question which informs plays from *Jumpers* to *Hapgood*, and finds its fullest expression in his masterpiece *Arcadia*.

Second, and deeply intertwined, is Stoppard's fascination with the helpless individual battered by cosmic forces beyond his control (already on display in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and destined to reappear in the form of *Jumpers*' George Moore and *Brazil*'s Sam Lowry), and its corollary,

Curtle, random deaths, cuckolds, and bad puns ("They put me in temperance prison. Without bars.") are all on early display. There's even a line that shows up in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: "I clutch at straws but what good's a brick to a drowning man?" As one would expect from Stoppard, the results are frequently hilarious, but on its own terms the novel must be judged a failure, whatever its forensic interest.

Stoppard himself admits in the new introduction that when the novel was commissioned in 1965, "I had no novel to write but I definitely wanted to be a published novelist..." Having just completed *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Stoppard set to work on his novel, but he seems to have been unable to leave the grease-paint behind. The largest chunks of action are set within two houses—you can almost see the proscenium framing the door-slamming farce. Stoppard



Untitled (Mouse on Juanita's Head), 1953

the Stoppardian Dialectic, if you will: "But if it's all random, then what's the point?" Moon asks.

"What's the point if it's all inevitable?" Lady Jane replies. (Stoppard is fond of saying that "I write plays because dialogue is the most respectable way of contradicting myself," as he told Kenneth Tynan in his *New Yorker* profile.)

Lord Malquist & Mr. Moon also treats the reader to a grab-bag of familiar Stoppard tropes—the recurring names like Moon and Birdboot and

name of style—and, indeed, "style" is Lord Malquist's great motivation ("Since we cannot hope for order, let us withdraw with style from the chaos"), but it's a motivation only because Stoppard tells us so. And therein lies the great defect of the novel: his characters are all surface sheen, dazzling to behold but without depth.

It's a common (and legitimate) criticism of Stoppard's plays that his characters all tend to sound the same—and, to be fair to Stoppard, it's not because he can't differentiate them, but because he's simply more interested in ideas than in people. ("We're actors—we're the opposite of people!" says the Player in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.) Stoppard continues to use variations of his arguing-with-onself soundbite to this day to deflect this criticism, and it's true that the exchange of ideas among improbably articulate actors like Jeremy Irons, Roger Rees, and Jennifer Ehle can make for an absorbing evening of theater. In the case of plays like *Arcadia* and *The Invention of Love*, they can transcend absorbing and reach the sublime. But in a novel, without the benefit of a memorable performance, his stick figures are merely glittering gyroscopes of dialogue and ideas, however witty they might be. It's noteworthy that the Tynan quote specifies "plays"—as though Stoppard himself realized the arguing with oneself mode was ill-suited to the novel.

Perhaps where the novel form most betrays Stoppard is in its inability to contain his ambitions, his formidable intellectual curiosity, and his irrepressible energy. Compared to plays, novels offer considerably more breathing room, and one is left feeling Stoppard may have hyperventilated on his freedom. By contrast, the narrative restrictions that *Hamlet* imposed on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* seem to have forced all of that creativity to an effective pinpoint.

It's probably ultimately unfair to judge so harshly the debut effort of a young man not yet turned thirty. And one is further inclined to forgiveness when surveying the remarkable theatrical bounty Stoppard has bestowed on us since then. The imperturbable stylist Malquist gives way to *Arcadia*'s Bernard Nightingale, whose exercise in style over substance has real consequences Malquist never feels. And Moon's disconnected fretting—"It occurred to him that the labyrinthine riddle of London's streets might be subjected to a single mathematical formula, one of such sophistication that it would relate the whole hopeless mess into a coherent logic"—is gloriously reimagined in Thomasina Coverly's precocious invocation of iterated algorithms: "If you could stop every atom in its position and direction, and if your mind could comprehend all the actions thus suspended, then if you were really, really good at algebra you could write the formula for all the future; and although nobody can be so clever as to do it, the formula must exist just as if one could." Unlike Moon's obliteration by a random bomb, which has the air of cartoon inevitability, Thomasina's death at the end of *Arcadia*, though it occurs outside the play's action, leaves viewers devastated. Simply put, she breathes, and the reputation of the playwright is secured. □