

TRAVESTIES

A PLAY BY TOM STOPPARD



Critical response to the play

Specific learning outcomes

Students will:

- respond to and make critical judgments about the ATC production of *Travesties*.

[These learning outcomes relate to the Communication and Interpreting in Drama (CI) strand in *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum*.]

Don't let the wit wash over you

By Jim Tully

Source: *Sunday Star Times*, 20 June 1999

In Henry Carr, He of the muddled memory and dazzling dialogue, Tom Stoppard created a role many a character actor would die for.

The role of Carr, recalling his days in the British consul in Zurich in 1917 almost 60 years later, is pivotal to the success of this remarkable play which demands much of cast and audience. As both befuddled narrator and central character he sustains – or otherwise – the production which glides between 1917 and 1974.

David McPhail has responded admirably to this challenge with an empathetic portrayal of Carr that exploits the comic potential of imagined encounters with Lenin, James Joyce and Dadaist Tristan Tzara, who were all in Zurich circa 1917. (Joyce actually sued Carr unsuccessfully for slander but took his revenge in *Ulysses* in which Carr appears as a drunken soldier.) Mc Phail is generally assured and achieves the right measures of pathos.

David Aston, with a deft cameo as Bennett the Butler and Eilish Moran, quietly impressive as Cecily the librarian, lead a consistently effective supporting cast who must deliver an enormous range from song and dance to intense political and artistic debate.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its communist regime has rendered less relevant some aspects of *travesties*. Cecily's monologue on the rise of Lenin is heavy going but the debate over art and the role of the artist remains topical and lively.

The production, with yet another superb set by Tony Geddes, is fluent but more measured where it counts, unlike the Court's previous breathless production of *Macbeth*.

The longish Lenin sequences after the interval, with its sombre, polemic tone at odds with the rest of the play, interrupts the flow and risks losing those in the audience who find it anachronistic post-communism.

Twenty-five years on, *Travesties* still has much to offer anyone wanting an intellectually satisfying evening of theatre but it pays to be clearer of mind than Henry Carr. It is not a production to sit back and let the wit wash over you.

Travesties

By Francis Till

Source: *New Zealand Herald*, 22 July 2002

Complex as any strand of DNA and just as fertile, Tom Stoppard's classic *Travesties* is a heady, hilarious romp that has been knocking audiences out for nearly 30 years.

As fresh in this Auckland Theatre Company as if it were brand new, the stylish, inspired direction of Raymond Hawthorne gives the work a polished, almost delirious pace and tone certain to please even the most demanding of Stoppard devotees, while providing a rare treat for everyone else.

Lenin (Paul Gittins), James Joyce (Michael Hurst), and Dada progenitor Tristan Tzara (Ross Girven), three of the last century's most seminal figures, have little in common but genius and a coincidence of war that brought them all briefly to Zurich, circa 1917.

Stoppard starts there and goes on to explore the relationship collision, actually between the leaden demands of politics and two of the most important theories of 20th century art, by fabricating co-location sites – a library and a drawing room - in which the protagonists and their dazzling women dance, fight, postulate, foment, proclaim, win, lose and play to farcically electric effect in a cauldron of language and ideas that owes as much to the limerick as to Hegelian dialectics.

All this is laid on through the senile recollections of Henry Carr, a real, albeit excruciatingly incidental figure in history, immortalised as a drunken soldier in Joyce's *Ulysses*, who alternates between being an ubernarrator fond of digression and an active foil obsessed with clothing.

Carr's memory and life are pivotal, and Michael Edward carries the complex role with a terrific, over the top, rapid-fire flair.

Stoppard often uses the work of others as underpinning. Here, the structural latticework comes both directly and obliquely from the protagonist themselves, but also, delightfully, from Oscar Wilde.

Among the many enriching Wildean flourishes are an insouciant Gwendolen (Sophia Hawthorne) and a wickedly witty, pulchritudinous Cecily (Anna Meech), as well as Bennett (Ross Duncan), the revolutionary, laconic butler.

As a play of ideas, *Travesties* is enormously accessible but dense enough to merit several viewings.

Travesties a fine night out

By Gilbert Wong

Source: *Sunday Star Times*, 21 July 2002

THE Playwright Tom Stoppard is as famously perverse as any character he has created.

A Thatcherite and an Amnesty supporter, he voted Tory while openly decrying the Iron Lady's philistinism. His plays are the same. There is no clear steer to what we should think, only the vigorous clash of ideas expressed in scintillating language.

That said, *Travesties'* vintage shows. Penned in 1973, the collision between the philosophies of communism and art lack the cut and thrust it must have had.

Travesties takes a trivial historical coincidence, the presence of James Joyce, Lenin and the Dada artist Tristan Tzara in 1917 Zurich, and imagines a meeting of competing minds, egos and philosophies.

Our guide is Henry Carr, a hapless British consular official, who also happens to be a minor character from Joyce's *Ulysses*. The novelist asks Carr to play Algernon in a production of *The Importance of Being Ernest* he is managing for the local theatre.

There is a lawsuit over the fee paid. While the material about Joyce and Carr did occur, the rest is make believe.

There are well known names in this cast, seasoned actors at their peak. As Joyce, Michael Hurst is wry and comic, Paul Gittins as Lenin is all historic stature, while Ross Girven makes an hilarious absurdist Tzara.

However, newcomer Michael Edward is a standout as the twittish Carr, along with Sophia Hawthorne as Carr's sister Gwendolen and Nancy Schroder as Lenin's associate Nadya – perhaps because they bring much needed comic relief in the headlong torrent of ideas.

This is a top flight cast and they need to be to carry Stoppard's lightning fast and intensely cerebral wordplay. A fine night out, but make sure you're alert before you take your seat.

***CurtainUp* – Travesties**

The Internet Theatre Magazine of Reviews, Features, Annotated Listings

<http://www.curtainup.com>

Critical response: classroom activities

Classroom activities have been developed specifically for:



Working on with a class prior to viewing the play



Working with a class after viewing the play



Associated activities using resource material generated by the play



Reading the reviews (activity)

Read the reviews of other productions of *Travesties* on the preceding pages

In your portfolio under the headings 'The text' and 'The production', list the aspects of the production that reviewers did like and those they didn't like.



Forming questions (worksheet)

You may be given the opportunity to ask questions of the actors and technical team after the performance.

Write three questions that you would like to ask, as a result of the work that you have done in class before seeing the play.



Class discussion (activity)

As a class, discuss the following questions:

The play

- Which scene did you enjoy the most? Why?
- Which scene did you enjoy the least? Why?
- Describe a dramatic convention that you saw.
- What did the play make you think about?

The acting

- Who stood out for you as an actor?
- What made that person effective?
- Describe an effective use of voice.
- Describe an effective use of gesture.
- Describe an effective use of movement.

The production

- Describe a scene in which the lighting seemed just right. How was the lighting used? Why was it effective?
- Describe the costume for one character. What was it about the costume that gave you information about the character?



Write a letter (activity)

Use your class discussion as the basis for a letter to the Auckland Theatre Company about the production. You may choose to write to a member of the technical team, the director, or one or more of the actors.

Describe what you enjoyed about the production and why, and what you expected to be different. Remember to give concrete examples to support your ideas.

Your letter should be addressed to:

Sarah Peters
Education Unit
Auckland Theatre Company
PO Box 6513
Wellesley Street
Auckland



Personal response

After viewing the performance, write your own response to the production, using the following format:

Section 1 – Personal Feelings

- What part of the play was the most entertaining? Why?
- In what way did the play challenge your ideas about yourself and the world?
- What did you find most interesting about the play?
- What feelings were evoked by the performance?

Section 2 - Content

- Describe the plot.
- Describe the setting for the play.
- What was the overall message of the play?

Section 3 – Characters

- Which characters did you identify with and why?
- Which characters remained believable for the duration of the performance?
- Describe the relationships between the characters.
- Select one character and describe his or her motivations for particular actions.

Section 4 – Tension

- List the examples of conflict presented in the performance.
- List any examples of inner conflict presented by the characters.
- Describe the ways in which objects were used as symbols in the play.
- Describe examples of sound, light or movement becoming symbols within the play.

Section 5 – Technical

- Describe the style of the performance.
- How was the theatre space used? Was it proscenium arch, thrust staging? What effect did this have on the audience?
- Were the props, costumes and stage settings appropriate to the style of the play? Why?
- Discuss the ways in which lighting was used to emphasis mood.

Section 6 – Other Comments

- What other comments would you like to make about the performance?