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## The Play-within-the-play Parody in Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*

Khaled Saad Sayed Sirwah \*

Faculty of Arts - Kafreshikh University

### Abstract:

Drawing on a descriptive-analytic approach, the paper tackles Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968) as a play-within-the-play parody of the English whodunnit in general and of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* (1952) in particular. *The Mousetrap*, which has broken records by becoming the longest running play in the history of London's West End since its debut in 1952, established Christie (the novelist, short story writer, and poet) as a playwright in the public eye. Stoppard's *Hound*, an absurdist two-act farce drawing upon the play-within-the-play conventions familiar to audiences of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, shows how Stoppard's work is exaggerating the style and content, and playing especially on the original. The paper has reached two findings. First, Stoppard parodies the predictability and hackneyed mechanism of the English whodunnit represented by Christie's *The Mousetrap*, as one of the most celebrated whodunnits in English literature, by means of his exceptional technique of the play-within-the-play parody. Second, by implication, the same author parodies theatre critics' jealousies, subjective judgments, and pompous pronouncements by means of the text-to-critic parody through the same technique of the play-within-the-play.

**Keywords:** absurd, Agatha Christie, text-to-critic parody, *The Mousetrap*, parody, the play-within-the-play, *The Real Inspector Hound*, Tom Stoppard, whodunnit

### Introduction

Tom Stoppard (1937- ) may be regarded as one of the most intellectual dramatists of the contemporary British theatre. Like Harold Pinter and Alan Ayckbourn, Stoppard never went to university. His lack of formal education has professionally served him in the long run. Interviewed by John Tusa, he says:

I gained of course as well by not going to University, or rather by entering journalism, because I had the experience of sitting in Law Courts and Coroner's Courts and County Councils and City Councils, and going to amateur drama and flower shows and the whole stratum of life as it's actually lived outside Universities....  
(Tusa *para* 44)

He started his career by joining the *Western Daily Press* as a reporter, feature writer, humorous columnist, and reviewer of plays and films. In fact, acting as a reviewer, Stoppard forged an educational background in theatre that he would not have otherwise gained. It may also have contributed to his literate well-read authorial manner. Thus, this university wit could, by the common knowledge he has, begin writing plays in 1960. His works (stage plays, teleplays, radio plays, screenplays, fiction, and short stories) are replete with cultural allusions. Despite his lack of formal education, Stoppard's plays engage with weighty intellectual issues of language, literature, theatre, philosophy, art, and mathematics. His stature as a "serious" playwright does not refrain his writings from overflowing with fun: parodies, puns, repartees, and verbal byplay. His start as an absurdist playwright recycling classics has enabled him to fulfill his philosophical and theatrical targets. Among the numerous plays written by Stoppard, his *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967), *Enter a Free Man* (1968), *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974), *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977), *Night and Day* (1978), *The Real Thing* (1982), *Hapgood* (1988), *Arcadia* (1993), *Indian Ink* (1995), *The Invention of Love* (1997), *The Coast of Utopia* (a trilogy) (2002), *Rock 'n' Roll* (2006), *The Laws of War* (2010), and *The Hard Problem* (2015) may be mentioned here. His *The Real Inspector Hound*, published in the same year (1968) as *Enter a Free Man*, comprises two acts and draws upon the play-within-the-play conventions familiar to audiences of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. In this play, two critics take their seats for reviewing the play within. Little by little, they become involved in what is happening on stage.

Many studies have been done on Tom Stoppard, whether independently or in comparison with other (absurdist) playwrights, such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and others. In his *The Audience as Actor and Character: The Modern Theatre of Beckett, Brecht, Genet, Ionesco, Pinter, Stoppard, and Williams* (1989), Sidney Homan

focuses on the role of the spectator as a central component and element in any performance a play is given. A study like "Play-Within-a-Play and Audience-Response Theory: A Comparative Analysis of Contagious Dramas by Gatti, Stoppard, and Weiss," a PhD dissertation by Agnes Sophie Bauer (1997), which seems to have touched upon the aspect in question, has not included the present play under discussion. In this work, Bauer examines the phenomenon of theatrical "contagion" as determined by elements in the text of three post-modern European plays: *The Marat/Sade* (1964) by Peter Weiss, *Chant public devant deux chaises electriques* (1966) by Armand Gatti, and *The Real Thing* (1982) by Tom Stoppard, three works which use the well-known technique of the play-within-a-play. Bauer explains the play-within-a-play as a device, links it to other theatrical concepts, discusses its historical functions, and examines the similarities and dissimilarities between the post-modern plays. Among the studies devoted entirely to Stoppard's theatre is Khaled Sirwah's "Irreconcilable Opposites: A Study of Tom Stoppard's Theatre" (2005), a PhD dissertation defended at Cairo University in 2005 and published later in 2010 under the same title. It included Stoppard's plays from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) to his trilogy *The Coast of Utopia* (2002) shying away from his *Hound* (except a passing reference to it only in the introductory chapter). The study has concluded that Stoppard develops the various contradictions he tackles into different oppositions—between the individual and the Establishment, between two opposite views on journalism: the idealistic view (which believes in the freedom of the press) and the realistic one (which believes in the right-thinking press and the closed shop), between the moral absolutes and the relativist morals, between the totalitarian regime and its dissidents, between fate and free will—that are not, and will never be, reconciled. In doing so, the study has shown Stoppard's dexterity in dealing with theories like quantum mechanics, Catastrophe Theory, and Chaos Theory. A recent MA thesis, "Cloth Ears at Work: Aural Elements in the Theatre Plays of Tom Stoppard" (2015) by Cameron Sharp, investigates Stoppard's inclusion of music and other aural effects in his stage plays from 1976 to 2015 with particular focus on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *Travesties*, *Arcadia*, and *Rock 'n' Roll* and concludes that such aural elements highlight themes. To cut it short, Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* might have been the least critiqued play. This fact may be apparently substantiated by its own author's argument that it has been intended as "an entertainment" and hence a critic like Anthony Jenkins regards it as "the least satisfactory of all Stoppard's plays" (Jenkins 51). Thus, not investigated in any previous study, *Hound's* conflicts or apparently oppositions could have been seen as paving the way for something, for parody, the perspective of the current paper.

It is important, however, to mention what is meant by parody here. Generally referred to as the satiric imitation of a literary work, parody is

defined by C. Hugh Holman and W. Harmon as "an imitation intended to ridicule or criticize, that to be understood requires familiarity with the original object, and to be effective has to 'sound true,' that is, faithful to the original" (1). Gary Saul Morson maintains the same view when he argues that "parody is often described as a comic literary work that imitates another literary work by means of exaggeration" (Morson & Emerson 69). Parody is not confined to the arts; it can be found in the different contexts of everyday life, under such names as mimicry, mockery, and spoofing. It is not a mere purposeless imitation; *per contra*, it is an approximation to the original source being parodied. According to Bakhtin, "the parodied utterance 'becomes the arena of conflict' between two voices ... the voices here are not only detached and distanced, they are hostilely counterposed" (Morson and Emerson 67). Morson summarizes what is meant by parody in his argument: "One man's forgery may be another man's parody" (66). To Linda Hutcheon, parody, "as a way of textually incorporating the history of art, is the formal analogue to the dialogue of past and present" (25). It is "the ironic mode of intertextuality that enables such revisitations of the past" (225). To sum up, parody can be concisely argued as a literary work imitating another literary work; more clearly, a work in which the characteristic style and themes of a particular author (in our case Agatha Christie) or genre (the whodunnit here) are satirized by being applied to inappropriate subjects or exaggerated for a comic effect.

The play-within-a-play is a dramatic technique/device in which an additional play (whether a recycling of an older play or a new invented one) is performed during the performance of the main one. Bauer defines it as

a structure that can be visualized geometrically as concentric circle(s) or field(s) within field(s), thus underlining the break in the dramatic continuum of all the plays involved. Simply said, a play must be embedded in another play, thus creating two different levels of fictionality. These two planes must be autonomous yet the real spectator should never be allowed to forget that there are two levels of fictionality. This duplicity is marked by the duplication of the aesthetic gaze: the real spectators watch a play in which fictional or 'supposed' spectators watch a play.

(32-34)

As a "specific dramaturgical phenomenon" (Giovanzana 13), "the play within the play is defined as a manifestation of *theatrum mundi* (during the baroque period) and as a tool for self-reflexivity (nowadays)" (136). This device "has proven very effective as it has been successfully employed in many plays. Its use, although frequently dictated by technical considerations, may actually be considered to be related to a familiar psychological mechanism seen in dream work, namely, a dream within a

dream" (Grinstein 147). The play-within-the-play is utilised by many playwrights for different purposes. It can be employed for verifying a crime/criminal and hence supporting the theme of the main play as in both Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; in the former where Hieronimo and Belimperia get their victim and in the latter where Hamlet "catch[es] the conscience of the King" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* II. ii. 601). It can be embedded as an entertainment for a wedding as in Shakespeare's **A Midsummer Night's Dream**. It can be employed for narrowing or closing the gap between reality and fiction as in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by the Italian Luigi Pirandello who "uses the theatrical event to point out the theatricality of everyday life [and] uses theatre to show the 'reality' of fiction" (Giovanzana 35). In other words, he utilises the play within for making theatre a tool to understand reality. It can be further employed by the playwright to satirize the immigration history of some nations as in Richard Bean's *England People Very Nice* (2009). Here in Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*, the play-within-the-play is utilised for a different purpose.

Since parody requires familiarity with the original object, it is relevant to allude to *The Mousetrap* as one of the most celebrated whodunnits and the focus of Stoppard's parody here. Running continuously and successfully (since its debut in 1952), *The Mousetrap* has established Christie (the novelist, short story writer, and poet) as a playwright in the public eye since it has become the longest running play in the history of London's west End. Concisely, the scene is set when a group of people (the neurotic young Christopher Wren, the unpleasant Mrs Boyle, the middle-aged Major Metcalf, Miss Casewell, and the unexpected guest Mr Paravicini, in addition to the young couple Mollie and Giles Ralston), gathered in a guesthouse cut off by the snow, discover, to their horror, that there is a murderer among them. The police detective, Sergeant Trotter, assembles everyone for questioning. Soon, everyone becomes suspicious of everyone else. Who can it be? One by one, the suspicious characters reveal their sordid pasts until the identity and the motive are finally revealed.

The paper seeks to answer one question: In what way(s) is parody employed in Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*?

### Analysis

*The Real Inspector Hound* begins with two reviewers, the second-string Moon, and the first-string Birdboot, taking their seats in a West End theatre. As the stage directions read, "*They acknowledge each other with constrained waves. MOON looks straight ahead. BIRDBOOT comes down to join him*" (9). From the start, the two theatre critics are preoccupied with their own personal problems, and the play they are watching is only on the margin of their attention. Moon, on the one hand, is particularly angry because no one cares for his opinion; everyone wants to hear from his newspaper's real critic, Higgs, the first-stringer in his paper. Moon is

obsessed with Higgs and hates him as he feels that he is standing in his way and preventing him from gaining access to the glory and power a first-stringer enjoys. He dreams of a revolution in which all kinds of second-stringers and stand-ins turn against their superiors and either destroy or replace them: "I dream of a revolution, a bloody *coup d'état* by the second rank..." (11). He contemplates killing Higgs: "I think I must be waiting for Higgs to die" (17), "Sometimes I dream that I've killed him" (26), and becoming the first-stringer. Wishing Higgs were dead and dreaming of having killed him, Moon wonders if Puckeridge, a third-stringer, is not contemplating the same fate for him! In this, Moon is experiencing an identity crisis (one of the prominent concerns of the Theatre of the Absurd); his own existence is so threatened by Higgs that the presence of the latter confirms the absence of the former and *vice versa*. This may be the reason why Stoppard once states that his play is "about the dangers of wish-fulfillment" (Hudson 64). As for Birdboot, on the other hand, women are his main concern. He is a ladies' man as he uses his job and influence to obtain special favours from the beautiful actresses to whom he promises glowing reviews if they yield to his desires. Thus, Stoppard shows us how critics, instead of pronouncing judgements on the plays they watch and therefore are entitled to review, are obsessed with their own pursuits.

Stoppard, who insists in the preface to his play that *Hound* is not "about anything grander than itself" (viii) and later declares: "It's an entertainment...an enjoyment" (Goreau 257), states: "The one thing that *The Real Inspector Hound* isn't about, as far as I'm concerned, is theatre critics" (Hudson 59). But like any work of art that should not be confined to one certain argument, *Hound* is open to different interpretations. Kevin Drzakowski argues that the play "means more than its author intended" (4). In the light of this fact, the play can be well read as a parody of drama critics. In other words, since each of the two critics is after a dream to achieve and enjoy and since "writers are not the best judges of their own writing," as Normand Berlin argues (270), "the play," to quote Felicia Londre, "might just as easily be about the delights of wish fulfillment as about its dangers" (119). This fact is taken by Katherine Kelly to identify Moon with Stoppard: Moon is "based in part on Stoppard's younger self as an ambitious drama reviewer in provincial Bristol... The ponderously serious Moon, obsessed with his own ambitions, sounds familiarly Stoppardian in his private reveries" (381). This argument leads Kelly, who is aware of Stoppard's purpose in his play, to say: "*Hound* is ... Stoppard's good-natured laugh at a profession he abandoned five years earlier" (381).

The play-within-the-play the two critics watch for reviewing begins with a dead body on the floor. It does not start with the traditional entrance of one or two characters but with a pause—an obvious remark that Stoppard

is parodying the exaggerated uses of pauses encountered in the plays of absurdist writers like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and himself. As Drzakowski argues, *Hound* contains “a parody of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* itself” (10). Moreover, the first character coming on stage in the play within, following the pause, is Mrs Grudge, the maid, who, as soon as she comes in, switches on the radio which immediately announces that there is a search for an escaped madman on the run in the marches around Muldoon Manor (13). The radio gives some description of the madman and the clothes he is wearing. The description fits a young man, Simon Gascoyne, who is already at the manor. Just as in *The Mousetrap*, the radio gives the description of the clothes the young suspect is supposed to be wearing, a description that fits the clothes Giles Ralston is wearing when he comes on stage. Of course, Stoppard here too—through the play-within-the-play—is parodying one of the techniques of the whodunnit of throwing suspicion in the wrong direction so that the denouement, if there will be any, comes as a shocking surprise.

Thus, the setting of *The Real Inspector Hound* is that of Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap*, though Peter Davison regards it to be that of “Christie’s *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) or *Peril at the End House* (dramatized 1949 and 1940 respectively)” (102). If Feredrick Burwick argues that “Stoppard’s play contains a spoof of Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap*” (279), Marvin Carlson assures: “Doubtless Stoppard selected *The Mousetrap* as the central target of his parody in some measure because it was the most familiar and popular example of the genre” (“Is There,” 433). However, *Hound* can be taken as not only a spoof of Christie’s plays, but also a send-up of various styles of literary criticism. Furthermore, it is not restricted to a certain time; it conforms to the genre of the whodunnit and the theatre critics at any time. Stoppard explains to Angeline Goreau: “*Hound* is timeless in the truly pejorative sense...incapable of change” (257).

In this double-track spoof, Stoppard mocks both the conventions of the antiquated drawing-room whodunnits—especially those of British drawing-room mysteries—and the critical styles of drama critics. Brian Crossley comments:

Stoppard repeatedly sets up the standard classical thriller situations with the deliberate intention of knocking them down.... Thus, the well-made thriller is nominally and theatrically ‘Hounded’ to death, while the kind of fatuous critiques of *The Real Inspector Hound*, especially those of the critic Birdboot, are shown to be a dead letter. (78-79)

Stoppard spoofs the formulaic aspects of this style, such as traditional setting, speech, characters, motives, and the unraveling of the storyline. He accomplishes this through the use of a play-within-the-play and employs satirical techniques including parody, exaggeration, uses of clichés, *double*

*entendres*, implausible coincidence, and juxtaposition. The play inverses aspects of the genre and undermines the controlled/mechanical world which is traditional to the classic crime fiction style. He also makes fun of the institutions of theatre-criticism and its tendency to take itself seriously as the arbiter of taste and the sharper of reputation.

Little by little, the two critics become involved in what is happening on stage. Whereas Neil Sammells sees that "the play establishes a series of oppositions which cancel each other: the opposition between Moon and Birdboot, between Moon's public and private voices, between the two critics and the play they are reviewing" (59), Carlson argues that "*Hound* plays throughout with the tension between the 'real' world of the critics and the 'fictive' world they are reviewing" (*Deathtraps*, 127). Such a tension with its two sides paves the way for the real message of the play. In other words, the 'real' world of the critics and the 'fictive' one they are reviewing are both parodied and spoofed by the *real* play, *The Real Inspector Hound*. In this way, Stoppard does parody both worlds by means of the play-within-the-play.

Although Mrs Drudge is dusting and cleaning the room and is hovering close to the dead body (of Higgs), she never sees it. Stoppard may imply that it is not yet the right time for the body to be discovered and he is thus mocking the whodunnit (represented by the play within) which follows stereotypes in every bit forgetting all about the element of spontaneity. Carlson comments on this fact in this way: "The operation of this machinery is also parodied by Stoppard, who, having foregrounded the convention of the body in the drawing room, proceeds in equally extreme fashion to flout the expected consequences of this" (*Deathtraps*, 88). Mrs Drudge acts as if she is expecting the telephone to ring—it eventually does so and she answers it. The first line uttered by her, "Hello, the drawing-room of Lady Muldoon's country residence one morning in early spring?" (15), manages to give information regarding characters, time, season, and location in one sentence. This kind of telephone conversation is recurrent throughout the play. The next few lines reveal the complex and twisted history of the Muldoon family at the cost of realistic conversation. Stoppard exaggerates the information presented through the telephone to an extent which makes the scene setting humorous for the audience who are aware of how he is distorting the conversational dialogue and, in turn, burlesquing the awkward means adopted by authors in order to provide information about the action, characters, and setting of the stories. As Carlson comments, "Here extremely predictable rules of construction and expectations of setting, of characters, of character relationships, of dialogue, and so on are so strong as almost to amount to generic rules. The distinctly popular, not literary, background to the genre is by means a disadvantage either" ("Is There," 432).



It is mainly through the information provided by Mrs Grudge that we are made aware that Lord Muldoon had left the house ten years before and his body was never found. His wife Cynthia has never married. Magnus, the wheelchair-ridden half brother of Albert (Lord Muldoon) has “turned up out of the blues from Canada just the other day” (17). Felicity, on the other hand, walks in and is pleased to see Simon. It is obvious she has had an affair with him. Simon tells her that he loves another woman and he has not made her promises. She walks out furiously after threatening to kill him: “I’ll kill you for this, Simon Gascoyne!” (21). Mrs Drudge enters in time to overhear Felicity’s threat.

Watching these events on stage, just as we are reading them on the page, Moon notices that Felicity is the girl he saw with Birdboot the night before, a fact not only indicating that critics know much about each others’ secrets and weaknesses but also to which Birdboot, taking offence, arrogantly splutters indignation at Moon:

Are you suggesting that a man of my scrupulous integrity would trade his pen for a mess of potage?! Simply because in the course of my profession I happen to have struck up an acquaintance—to have, that is, a warm regard, if you like, for a fellow toiler on the vineyard of greasepaint—I find it simply intolerable to be pillified and villoried— (21-22)

Moreover, Birdboot’s asking Moon to write a few words in praise of one of the actresses whom Moon assumes to be Felicity sheds much light on Stoppard’s satire and parody of critics whose preoccupations are women and satisfying their desires. Thus, it is through the play-within-the-play that "a lothario with an appetite for young actresses and chocolate, Birdboot is positioned clearly as a foil to Moon" (Drzakowski 2) and, hence, both are parodied.

Cynthia who falls into Simon’s arms proves to be the new woman in his life. Simon becomes passionate in his love declaration and threatens to kill anyone coming between him and her. Again, Mrs Grudge enters in time to overhear his threat. In the meantime, the two critics react in their usual characteristic fashion. On the one hand, Moon indulges in his nonsensical psychological analysis of the situation: “The son she never had, now projected in this handsome stranger and transformed into lover—youth, vigour, the animal, the athlete as aesthete—breaking down the barriers at the deepest level of desire” (23). Birdboot, on the other hand, is struck by Cynthia’s fascinating beauty. He falls in love with her, forgetting all about Felicity. Birdboot is depicted as a man who is always after his desires: whenever he finds a beautiful woman, he arranges a rendezvous; when he is accused of philandering, he soon puts an end to it. Thus, instead of influencing the actors he watches and judges as a critic, Birdboot is affected by them and their roles. Carlson elaborates on this fact by saying:

Birdboot is drawn into the action of the internal play through his infatuation first with the young Felicity and then with the more mature Cynthia. In this shifting interest, he exactly replicates the amorous interest of the internal play's Simon.... Oscar Wilde has written 'We become lovers when we see *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet* makes us students. The blood of Duncan is upon our hands.' This precisely is what happens to Birdboot. (434)

As critics, Moon and Birdboot must have a critical voice (as Stoppard satirically says in his stage direction) which they switch on to make formal pronouncements on the play they are reviewing while hiding their private thoughts. On the contrary, their comments on the play are inept. They, like the characters of the play within, fail to escape the clichéd vocabulary that renders them into stereotypes. They indulge in hackneyed and mechanically mouthed phrases and expressions. Moon, for example, comments on the play he is watching by lines like:

Already in the opening stages we note the classic impact of the outsider—Simon—plunging through to the center of an ordered world and setting up, the disruptions...which...will strip these comfortable people—these crustaceans in the rock pool of society strip them of their shells and leave them exposed as the trembling raw meat which, at heart, is all of us.

(19-20)

There are moments...when the lay...aligns itself uncompromisingly on the side of life. *Je suis*, it seems to be saying, *ergo sum*. It is my belief that here we are concerned with...the nature of identity. I think we are entitled to ask—and here one is irresistibly reminded of Voltaire's cry, 'Voilà'—I think we are entitled to ask—*Where is God?* (27)

If we examine this more closely, and I think close examination is the least tribute that this play deserves, I think we will find that within the austere framework of what is seen to be on one level a country-house week-end, and what a useful symbol that is, the author has given us—yes, I will go so far—he has given us the human condition— (35)

Drzakowski sees that "Moon's criticism is peppered with malapropisms and absurdly mixed critical clichés" (11). He further argues:

Stoppard is undoubtedly making fun of those critics who expect more from *The Real Inspector Hound* than a simple farce. It would be fair to say that Stoppard is looking ahead and mocking the authors of papers like this very article. Still, Tom Stoppard is also lightly mocking himself by making Moon into a parody of a critic,

and, what is more, he earnestly figures the guilt he believes to be shared by playwrights, critics, and anyone else who dares to make a living in the world of art. If an artwork is meaningless in its own right, then an artist—or a critic for that matter—must put a mask on this truth in order to ensure that art is seen as vital. (11)

It must be noted that the vacuous clichés and tautological expressions Moon has uttered in commenting on the play-within-the-play above backfire on him. In other words, he is parodied by his very pronouncements in what one may call a text-to-critic parody.

Moon's pronouncements, however, have provoked comments from different critics. Weldon Durham argues that these "critical pronouncements have about them a resentful, sometimes sneering, quality" (96). To Gabrielle Robinson, Moon is searching for metaphysical explanations but can come up with only a muddle" (134). Sammells insists: "Moon's susceptibility to the high-sounding cliché denies the very self-sufficiency for which he yearns" (58). Moon represents that class of critics who insist on seeing symbolism and allegory even in the superficial and obvious. His pronouncements are therefore fatuously pompous and ludicrously funny. He is more concerned to show off his stylistic cleverness and sophisticated taste than in describing what is really there. Stoppard may be using Moon to, furthermore, make fun of those critics who claimed the former to have traced the influence of numerous writers on his works. This can be clearly shown in making Moon say: "Faced as we are with such ubiquitous obliquity, it is hard, it is hard indeed, and therefore I will not attempt, to refrain from invoking the names of Kafka, Sartre, Shakespeare, St. Paul, Beckett, Pinero, Pirandello, Dante and Dorothy L. Sayers" (35). Crossley takes these very words of Moon to judge both Birdboot and Moon as "a travesty of the kind of critic that William Empson types as 'barking dogs'" (79). Terry Hodgson elaborates on this by commenting:

*Hound* parodies reviewing as well as Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* and mocks the critic's game of identifying sources by having one of the reviewers cite nine of them, including Shakespeare, Pirandello, and farce and existential writers with whom Stoppard has been identified, such as Pinero, Beckett, Kafka and Sartre. St. Paul is thrown in for good measure with Dorothy L. Sayers (but not Agatha Christie) and the name Birkett, which goes nicely with Beckett, is an invitation to zealous scholars to chase his name in dictionaries of the theatre where he will not be found.

(52)

As for Birdboot, he is concerned with writing reviews in favour of the actress who submits to his desires. His criticism is never devoid of clichés nor of a hyperbolic description of the actress's, Cynthia's, talents:

It is at this point that the play, for me, comes alive. The groundwork has been well and truly laid, and the author has taken

the trouble to learn from the masters of the genre. He has created a real situation, and few will doubt his ability to resolve it with a startling denouement. Certainly that is what it is so far lack, but it has a beginning, a middle and I have no doubt it will prove to have an end. For let us give thanks, and double thanks for a good clean show without a trace of smut. But perhaps even all this would be for nothing were it not for a performance which I consider to be one of the summits in the range of contemporary theatre. In what is possibly the finest Cynthia since the war— (35)

The common plot and the absurd dialogue of the play within emphasize that Moon's symbolical-metaphysical interpretations, and Birdboot's Aristotelian comment and his lavish praise of the talent of one of the actresses are meant by Stoppard to highlight the inanities not only of the play-within-the-play (that lacks any of the qualities they claim to find in it), which implies a satire of the whodunnit as a genre, but also of the critics who always miss the mark. In this way, Stoppard's satire becomes double-edged. Sammells comments on the two critics' inept remarks thus:

These remarks are calculated to double-effect. First, the parodied critical observations complete the distinctive Stoppardian mirror-effect: the reflections *of* it, mechanical and habitual. Second, they ensure a constant rhythm of assertion and refutation as the inanities of Birdboot are juxtaposed with the insistent sententiousness of Moon. (56)

As the events of the play within show us, Magnus regards Simon as his rival for Cynthia's love. Felicity also comes and suspects that Cynthia is the woman in Simon's life. At this stage, and during their card game, they indulge in one of the most salient characteristics Stoppard satirizes in the whodunnit, *i.e.*, *double entendre*:

Cynthia (*as Magnus rhubarbs*): Simon just happened to drop by for a game of cards.

Felicity (*plays, then as Cynthia plays*): He's a bit of a cheat you know—aren't you, Simon?

Simon (*plays*): Call me what you like, but I hold the cards.

Cynthia: Well done, Simon!

(*Cards are thrown down and Magnus pays Simon. Cynthia deals.*)

Felicity: I hear there's a dangerous madman on the loose. Personally I think he's been hiding out in the deserted cottage on the cliffs.

Cynthia: Your opening, Simon.

Felicity (*as Simon and Cynthia play*): I couldn't sleep last night and happening to glance out of the window I saw a strange

light shining from that direction. What's the matter Simon, you seem nervous.

(Magnus *plays*—Simon, Cynthia, Felicity, Magnus *again and Simon again, who wins.*)

Cynthia: No!—Simon your luck's in tonight!

(Magnus *pays him again.*)

Felicity (*getting up and stalking out*): We shall see—the night is  
not over yet, Simon Gascoyne!  
(24-25)

*Double entendre* is a characteristic feature not only of the theatre of the Absurd but also of the murder mysteries (whodunnits) which draw on such ambiguous references to beguile the reader/audience. Thus, Magnus asks Cynthia to go with him “for a spin round the rose garden,” but she tells him she has to talk to Simon. Magnus then makes a strange statement which is ambiguously threatening: “Well, I think I’ll go and oil my gun” (25). This statement conveys a clue to his actions and intentions but is not heeded by other characters nor by us readers. Alone with him, Cynthia threatens to kill Simon if he betrays her love. Again, the always-on-the-spot Mrs Drudge overhears her remark. The play-within-the-play (designed in the form of a whodunnit) thus becomes a way of parodying the hackneyed mechanism of the whodunnit as a genre. In this way, Stoppard has really succeeded in parodying the whodunnit by incorporating and challenging it.

With such threatening note and the body still lying on the ground undiscovered, the first act of the play within ends. Instead of showing any reaction or comment when the curtain falls, the two critics are so absorbed as usual that Moon is still harping on Higgs and Birdboot is thinking of sacrificing everything including his career, wife, and reputation. In this way, the play-within-the-play highlights both critics' self-indulgence and again accentuates what is previously referred to as a text-to-critic parody. However, surprised on being told that the actress Birdboot wants him to give a favourable write-up is Cynthia and not Felicity, Moon accuses him of fickleness (26). Commenting on Birdboot as the opposite of Moon, Victor L. Cahn argues:

'Moon' implies a touch of madness but also the image of one body in space floating around another, more significant body. And that is just what Moon is, a second-stringer floating about a world that regards him as minor appendage.... Birdboot, whose name suggests the ultimate triviality, is quite properly the opposite of Moon. He is decidedly content with life, a sensualist in the tradition of Jane of *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*. ... He also frequently indulges in affairs with actresses. (95-6)

Like its first act, the second act of the play-within-the-play begins with Mrs Drudge's serving tea and biscuits, which takes her a long time to do. So, Birdboot is quick to remark in his notebook: “the second act,

however, fails to fulfil the promise....” (28). As usual in *Hound*, Stoppard's parody is double-edged. On the one hand, he parodies the long-drawn absurd conversations the characters of the whodunnit are made to occupy themselves with till the next murder takes place. On the other hand, he satirizes the critics' promptness in seizing any opportunity in order to find fault with the writer's work and issue a condemning judgment on it. Again, as Crossley emphasizes, “the critical language they use throughout merely echoes the hackneyed dialogue of the play they review” (79). Thus, it is mainly through the play-within-the-play that Stoppard can parody both the whodunnit represented by it and theatre critics reviewing it, a fact addressing the question posed earlier in the paper.

Inspector Hound repeats the description of the madman, and although it is so general that it fits more than one person, Felicity claims to have recognized Simon as the madman. Here too, Stoppard satirizes the element of clothes as an indispensable (and also misguiding) ingredient for the whodunnit. Inspector Hound, furthermore, tells them that one of the guests may be the real McCoy whom the madman intends to kill. Thus, he tells a far-fetched tale that is obviously a burlesque of the plot of Christie's *The Mousetrap*:

William Herbert McCoy who as a young man, meeting the madman in the street and being solicited for sixpence for a cup of tea, replied, ‘Why don't you do a decent day's work, you shifty old bag of horse manure,’ in Canada all those many years ago and went on to make his fortune. ...The madman was a mere boy at the time but he never forgot that moment, and thenceforth carried in his heart the promise of revenge! (32)

The above-quoted lines stress two motifs existent in *The Mousetrap*, and in the whodunnit in general, that are burlesqued here by Stoppard: madness and revenge. Seeing the corpse finally, Inspector Hound insists that it belongs to Cynthia's husband, Lord Muldoon. However, the following exchange between Hound and Cynthia stresses the banality of the dialogue of the play-within-the-play (or whodunnit) Stoppard parodies:

Cynthia: But who's that? (*The Corpse.*)

Hound: Your husband.

Cynthia: No, it's not.

Hound: Yes, it is.

Cynthia: I tell you it's not.

Hound: Are you sure?

Cynthia: For goodness sake!

Hound: Then who is it?

Cynthia: I don't know.

Hound: Anybody? (33)

As in *The Mousetrap* and many other whodunnits, the telephone lines are cut so that the Muldoon Manor is cut off from the outside world and the madman/ murderer can have a free hand. Inspector Hound asks them to search the house. Simon walks in, sees the body, turns it over, and is shot. They all hear the shot and rush into the room. Hound wonders if Simon is the escaped madman, and, if so, who has murdered him. With this note of suspense the second act of the play within comes to an end. The two critics then indulge in evaluating the play they have been watching, but each is looking at it from his own personal angle that is far from objectivity. Expressing his satisfaction that Simon has been killed due to his fickleness, Birdboot forgets that in real life he has proved as fickle as Simon. He further plans for an amorous liaison with Cynthia. Moon thinks of killing Higgs, and then remembers Puckeridge and wonders if the latter is not having the same thoughts about him: "...and if I could, so could he" (34). Thus, both Birdboot and Moon invoke Stoppard's parody of the critics who, instead of making objective judgments about the play they have been watching, are so negatively influenced by it and its characters that they plan for making amorous liaisons with its actresses (as is the case with Birdboot) and follow in the crime line of its hero (as with Moon). Hence, "in searching for what is true within the play, they reveal what is false about themselves" (Crossley 80). Richard Andretta elucidates this fact further:

Stoppard seems to imply that what is wrong with most critics, and not only with Moon and Birdboot, is that instead of being objective they tend to view the plays in the light of certain prejudices, predilection, or personal interests. Critics also strive after effect: they try to give an impression of their own astuteness and fastidiousness at the expense of the play they are reviewing. (100)

Thus, the play-within-the-play exposes not only Moon and Birdboot but also other critics who, like them, "strive after effect."

When the telephone on stage rings and keeps ringing, Moon, irritated by it, walks on to the stage to answer it. The call is from Myrtle, Birdboot's wife. Birdboot has, then, to go on stage to talk to his wife and in this way he becomes involved in the action of the play-within-the-play, a fact which shows how critics go beyond their limits. It may be argued that Stoppard's involving Birdboot in the action of the play within is an indication of his reconciling the "real" with the "fictive" or, at least, closing the gap between them. This can be taken differently for attacking critics who, instead of isolating themselves from the work they are reviewing, they damage their position as critics by involving in it.

Felicity walks in and the same conversation that had occurred between her and Simon takes place between her and Birdboot. Birdboot, like Simon before, tells her that he loves another woman and that the brief affair they have had is over. Felicity who is rejected by her lovers goes out furiously threatening Birdboot (whom she calls Simon) that she will kill him. Mrs

Drudge overhears this threat too. Cynthia comes in and the conversation which ensues between her and Birdboot proceeds along lines very similar to those of the conversation witnessed before between her and Simon. However, Magnus comes down and suspects Birdboot of being Cynthia's lover just as he has suspected Simon before, while Birdboot suspects that he has seen Magnus before but cannot remember where or when. When alone with Birdboot, Cynthia threatens to kill him if he betrays her just as she threatened Simon. As usual, Mrs Drudge overhears the threat. This exact duplication of the events (which had occurred prior to Simon's murder), however, leads us to expect that Birdboot will also be murdered and hence parodies the structure of the whodunnit. Again, this fact parodies the predictability and hackneyed mechanism of the whodunnit.

Birdboot discovers that the body lying on the floor is Higgs's and tells Moon so. Moon, thinking that Birdboot is accusing him of having murdered his hated superior, denies being the murderer. Birdboot seems to have unraveled the mystery, but he is shot before he could tell Moon who the real murderer is. Cynthia comes in and addresses Moon as Inspector. Moon rushes back to his seat to avoid getting involved in the action of the play within, but finds both his and Birdboot's seats occupied by Hound and Simon as critics. Simon and Hound launch into the most vehement diatribes against the play using words very similar to those used before by Moon and Birdboot in their comments on it. As critics, Hound and Simon are as bad critics as Moon and Birdboot. They are also biased and wrong-headed. This stresses Stoppard's parody and satire of critics in general:

He did, however, show special insight into the feelings of theater people with his clever switching of roles—putting the critics on stage to be judged by actors in the critics' seats.... It is an actualization of the desire to say to critics, 'If you think you know so much about theater, let's see what you can do.'

(Londre 118)

Moreover, when Moon joins the world of the play within and becomes involved in its action, he tries to play the part of Inspector Hound by making use of the suggestions and judgments made by the other Inspector Hound and the revelations of Mrs Drudge about the various threats she has overheard, but his theories are obviously unconvincing—a fact that may refer to the difficulty actors encounter in playing a part convincingly. In addition to this, throughout his investigation of the murders, following the same technique as in *The Mousetrap* and other whodunnits, Moon denies knowing either Simon or Birdboot, which is an explicit betrayal of his fellow-critic. Stoppard stresses this fact through the stage directions which read: "(Moon *turns to run*. Magnus *fires*. Moon *drops to his knees*). He has paid his debt to society" (47).



In the denouement, Magnus reveals that he is the real Inspector Hound who, like Metcalf in *The Mousetrap*, is a policeman in disguise. Furthermore, when Magnus removes his moustaches, Moon recognizes him as Puckeridge, the third-stringer, and understands that it is the latter in disguise who has got rid of Higgs, the first-string critic. Thus, Magnus-Hound-Puckeridge reveals that he is also Albert Muldoon, Cynthia's long absent husband who had lost his memory and joined the police force, rising to the rank of inspector—a conclusion the audience could never have reached. This is how Stoppard underlines the technique of the whodunnit, by making one character assume two or three suspicious roles and hence ridiculing a common ability in Christie's detectives, who can piece together elaborate and correct conclusions from a tiny amount of evidence. Thus, Stoppard, in Jeffrey Mason's words, "mocks the figure of the detective by juxtaposing him with the figure of the actor" (111). In this way, Stoppard not only shows that the whodunnit is more absurd than real life but also demonstrates, through his characters, the knotty nature of identity by playing multiple roles and wearing several masks.

Moreover, the denouement scene of a murder mystery is expected to both resolve the conflict and end in the restoration of the moral order. But *The Real Inspector Hound*, subverting the audience expectations, makes the final scene more perplexing than any other, and, like *The Mousetrap*, it has some weaknesses: who was the first Inspector Hound who wound up as a critic in the play within? If Higgs was killed by Puckeridge due to the rivalry between them in real life, then what was he doing in the play-within-the-play and why was he killed in it? Such and other weaknesses are intentionally meant and exaggerated by Stoppard to emphasize that the whodunnit is, as has been always, implausible and unconvincing and, hence, support his satire, parody, and burlesque of the genre in general. Such weaknesses constitute the confusions emphasized by Sammells as "carefully engineered to a demonstrable end: to defamiliarise not just the hackneyed mechanism of the whodunnit but also those habitual categories by means of which we, as critics, might be tempted to recognize it" (60).

### Conclusion

Stoppard has framed his *The Real Inspector Hound*, an absurdist metatheatrical two-act play, around Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*; it is one of the most celebrated whodunnits in English literature which has broken records by becoming the longest running play in the history of London's West End since its debut in 1952. Although *The Real Inspector Hound* was published in 1968, it has not received proper investigation. The paper, tackling *Hound* and drawing on a descriptive-analytic approach, has reached two findings.

First, Stoppard has parodied the English whodunnit in general and Christie's *The Mousetrap* in particular by means of the dramatic technique of the play-within-the-play parody. He parodies the whodunnit by

underlining its banalities and exaggerating its shortcomings such as predictability and hackneyed mechanism. In the whodunnit in general, as in *The Mousetrap*, the audience always expect the denouement to both resolve the conflict and end in the restoration of the moral order. This happens mechanically in murder mysteries, where one character, assuming two or three suspicious roles, can piece together elaborate and correct conclusions from a tiny amount of evidence. But, in *Hound*, Stoppard has skillfully subverted the audience expectations by making the final scene more confusing than any other. He exaggerates Christie's denouement by making a character (Magnus) play the Magnus-Hound-Puckeridge roles (in addition to that of Albert Muldoon, Cynthia's long absent husband) arguing that it is not always resolving conflicts but it, on the contrary, has weaknesses: who was the first Inspector Hound who wound up as a critic in the play within? If Higgs was killed by Puckeridge due to the rivalry between them in real life, then what was he doing in the play-within-the-play and why was he killed in it? Such questions/weaknesses stress the whodunnit as being implausible and unconvincing. In this way, Stoppard has, with matchless dexterity, utilised theatre (the play-within-the-play) to parody or attack theatre (the whodunnit represented by Christie's *The Mousetrap*).

Second, as a dramatist of brilliant original comic genius, Stoppard parodies reviewers/critics through the same technique of the play-within-the-play. He parodies critics for their jealousies: Moon, a second-string theatre critic, hates Higgs, the first string critic in his paper, and dreams of killing him because the latter is standing in the former's way preventing him from expressing his opinion. Moreover, the playwright spoofs theatre critics for their self-indulgence and hence subjective judgments. In other words, critics who are after women and satisfying their desires are not expected to have any objective judgment about the plays they review. Such critics are represented in *Hound* by Birdboot who is struck by Cynthia's fascinating beauty. Furthermore, such self-indulgent critics are parodied for their pompous and ludicrous pronouncements. This has been represented by Moon whose comments on the play-within-the-play are replete with vacuous clichés and tautological expressions that backfire on him and hence render him into a stereotype (see the analysis section). In this way, Stoppard has skillfully spoofed the critics through what may be called a text-to-critic parody. Such parodies coming out from Stoppard, a former reviewer of plays and films, can be well seen as objective and convincing.

It has become clear now that Stoppard has employed parody in *The Real Inspector Hound* through the technique of the play-within-the-play, which he has successfully framed around Christie's *The Mousetrap*. It is through this technique that he has not only parodied the whodunnit as a genre but also spoofed theatre critics via what is called a text-to-critic parody.

For future research, other scholarly attempts at Stoppard's absurdist drama may reveal untapped potential for theatrical parody techniques other

than the play-within-the-play. This should offer a broader scope of analyzing the dramatic oeuvre of Stoppard, and thus fathom out some new depths in the realm of theatrical absurdism in general. One more aspect of future research on Stoppard's dramatic parody is the utility of some approaches different to the one adopted in the present study. Whereas the descriptive-analytic approach employed in this study has proved substantially interpretive, the operationalization of other comparable approaches (e.g., psychoanalytic, postcolonial, poststructuralist, or postmodern) may well bring in equally interesting findings and new implications.

### الملخص

السخرية باستخدام أسلوب المسرحية داخل المسرحية  
في ماهية المفتش لـ "توم ستوبارد"  
خالد سعد سيد أحمد سرواح

معتمداً على المنهج التحليلي الوصفي وباستخدامه المسرحية داخل المسرحية كأسلوب ساخر، يتناول البحث مسرحية توم ستوبارد ماهية المفتش ك محاكاة للمسرحية البوليسية الإنجليزية بشكل عام ومسرحية مصيدة الفران لأجاثا كريستي بشكل خاص. فالأخيرة، والتي كسرت الأرقام القياسية بكونها أطول مسرحية شهدت عروضاً في تاريخ "الجانب الغربي للندن" منذ نشرها في ١٩٥٢، قد سطرت اسم كريستي (الروائية وكاتبة القصة القصيرة والشاعرة) ككاتبة مسرحية معروفة. ومسرحية ستوبارد الهزلية ذات الفصلين—والتي تعتمد في بنائها على ما اعتمدت عليه سابقاً موت روزنكرانتس وجيلدنسترن المعروفة للجماهير—توضح كيف يباليغ ستوبارد ويتلاعب بأسلوب ومحتوى النسخة الأصلية. وقد توصل البحث إلى نتيجتين رئيسيتين. أولاً: تسخر مسرحية ستوبارد من الآلية المبتدلة في التنبؤ بالنتائج للمسرحية البوليسية ممثلة في مسرحية مصيدة الفران لـ كريستي، بوصفها واحدة من أشهر المسرحيات البوليسية في الأدب الإنجليزي، وذلك باستخدام المسرحية داخل المسرحية كأسلوب ساخر. ثانياً: يسخر ستوبارد من النقاد المسرحيين لغيرتهم فيما بينهم وأحكامهم غير الموضوعية وكذلك تصريحاتهم الرنانة من خلال ما يُعرف ضمناً بالسخرية الموجهة من النص إلى الناقد، وذلك أيضاً باستخدام المسرحية داخل المسرحية.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** عبثي، أجاثا كريستي، السخرية الموجهة من النص إلى الناقد، مصيدة الفران، السخرية، المسرحية داخل المسرحية، ماهية المفتش، توم ستوبارد، المسرحية البوليسية

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