

Playwright Biography: Tom Stoppard | By Dan Rubin

It is a mistake to assume that plays are the end products of ideas (which would be limiting): the ideas are the end products of the plays.

TOM STOPPARD was born Tomáš Straüssler in Zlin, Czechoslovakia, in 1937. In 1939 his family immigrated to Singapore, which Tom evacuated with his mother and brother in 1942 before the World War II Japanese invasion. His father, who remained behind, was killed. Stoppard's mother became a manager of a shoe shop in Darjeeling, India, where Tom met the English language at Mount Hermon (a school run by American Methodists) and his mother met Kenneth Stoppard, a major in the British Army. In 1946, Kenneth brought his new family home with him to Derbyshire, England, and gave Tom the name he still uses today.

I write plays because dialogue is the most respectable way of contradicting myself.

—Tom Stoppard in *The New Yorker* (1977)

Arcadia depicts the 13-year-old Thomasina as a ravenous student, consuming all the information her tutor can put on her plate; Stoppard, on the other hand, found school distasteful. “The chief influence of my education on me was negative. I left school thoroughly bored by the idea of anything intellectual.” He left school at 17 and got a job as a reporter on the *Western Daily Press* in Bristol, where his family had moved. He aspired to become a great journalist, but as a second-string critic he was slowly seduced by the theater. In 1958, he saw Peter O’Toole as Hamlet— “[It] had a tremendous effect on me. It was everything it was supposed to be. It was exciting and mysterious and eloquent”—and by 1960, Stoppard had decided to switch careers. He went down to writing just two columns a week to cover expenses and began his first play, *A Walk on the Water* (later revised and called *Enter a Free Man*). With it, he introduced himself to Kenneth Ewing, who has been his agent ever since.

It was Ewing who had the idea that “there was a play to be written about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern after they got to England.” In 1964, on a five-month Ford Foundation grant that paid for him and 19 other young European playwrights to live and write as part of a cultural exchange in a Berlin mansion, Stoppard wrote *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*, the one-act first draft of



Tom Stoppard.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. After the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal Court rejected it, Ewing reluctantly allowed university students to perform the play in the Edinburgh Festival Fringe on “a stage the size of a ping pong table.” *Observer* theater critic Ronald Bryden hailed it as “the most brilliant debut by a young playwright since John Arden’s.”

Kenneth Tynan, literary manager of London’s National Theatre, requested the script. After conferring with his artistic director, Sir Laurence Olivier, Tynan told Stoppard they wanted it. The National Theatre produced *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* at the Old Vic in April 1967, making the 27-year-old Stoppard the youngest playwright the theater had ever produced. In October, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* was the first National Theatre production to transfer to Broadway.

On opening night in New York, Stoppard awaited the reviews at a pub near the theater; as they started to come in, and it was clear they were positive, a bartender winked at the young playwright and said, “Ah, you’re in, kid!” The play won the Tony Award for Best Play. Back home, the arrival of the “boy genius” was likened to the Second Coming of Harold Pinter.

THE ORIGINS OF *ARCADIA*

Stoppard has said about his 1946 arrival to the United Kingdom, “As soon as we all landed up in England, I knew I had found a home. I embraced the language and the landscape.” (His family lived near the elegant gardens of Chatsworth, which showcased four periods of garden design.) His love of the English language and landscape are apparent in his masterwork, *Arcadia*. In 1989, after a 20-year career writing hits and misses in theater, television, and radio, Stoppard read James Gleick’s *Chaos*, and despite the lukewarm reception of *Hapgood* (Stoppard’s 1988 experiment with quantum mechanics), the

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playwright “gambled that those who disliked physics might nevertheless be seduced by chaos,” writes Ira Nadel in *Tom Stoppard: A Life*.

Stoppard has explained that he always begins his plays with an intellectual idea, and chaos theory—specifically the notion of geometric convergence and periodic doubling—was to be *Arcadia*’s kernel (as was the notion of entropy, or the dissipation of energy). But he found it too abstract a concept on its own. In 1990, he visited the home of his friend Paul Johnson (a British historian, political writer, and former editor of the *New Statesman*) to look through his library for inspiration. Stoppard explained in 1994:

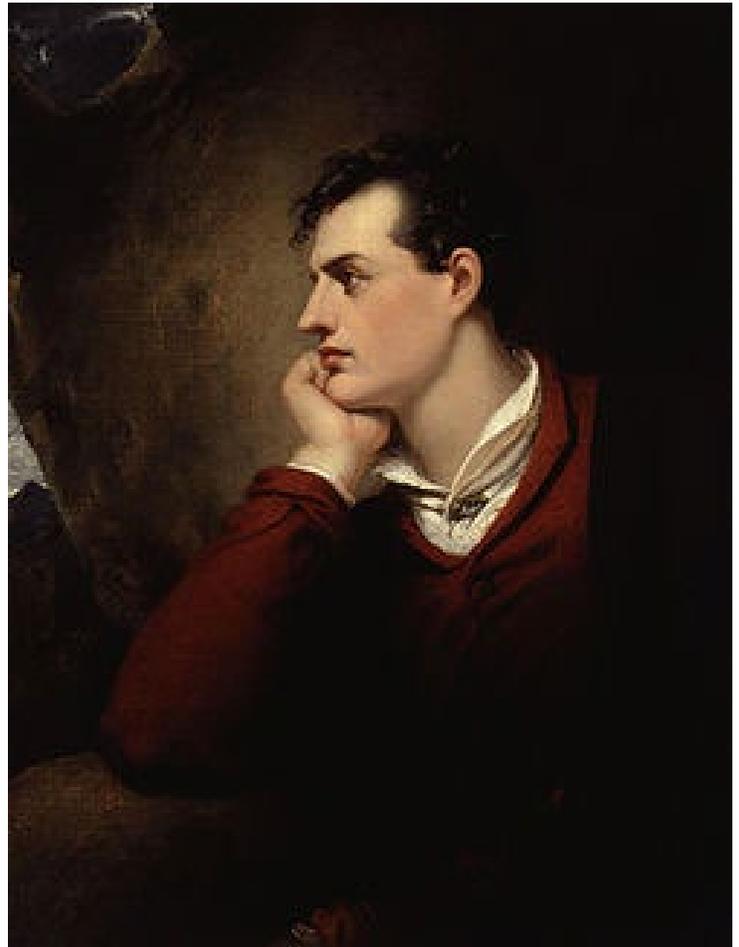
He has a lot of books. And looking at them I said: “I’m sure there’s a play about the difference between Romantic and Classical attitudes and eras.” He had some books on Byron on that shelf. I even think I borrowed one or two. I acquire knowledge little by little.

Back home, Stoppard already had books on landscape architecture, mathematics, and hermits in his own collection.

The character of Lord Byron first interested Stoppard when he read a Peter Quennell book about the poet in the 1980s; as he started to envision *Arcadia*, Lord Byron lent himself as an offstage presence. Providing his scientific expertise to the project, Oxford professor of mathematical biology Robert May drew Stoppard’s attention to Lord Byron’s daughter, the mathematical genius Ada. The playwright has denied basing *Arcadia*’s Thomasina on Ada Byron, but the parallels are notable even if—perhaps especially if—they are coincidental.

Originally, Stoppard thought to call his play by the full Latin phrase “Et in *Arcadia* ego,” which appears in two famous seventeenth century Poussin paintings, both of which depict three Arcadian shepherds and a woman gathered around a sarcophagus with this inscription chiseled into it. The literal translation is “Even in *Arcadia* here I [Death] am,” suggesting that death exists even in paradise. Nadel writes, “Stoppard wanted the presence of death in the title, but brevity and box-office sense prevailed: ‘death is now in the title only by imaginative extension,’ he confessed.”

In April 1993, Stoppard opened *Arcadia*— which he called “a thriller and a romantic tragedy with jokes”—at the National Theatre, which had committed to the play before a word had been written. Trevor Nunn directed and Professor May tutored Samuel West (who played Valentine), Emma Fielding (who played Thomasina), and the rest of the cast in chaos theory and mathematical modeling. May’s graduate student Alun Lloyd even developed the “Coverly



Westall, Richard. *Lord Byron*. 1813. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Set” for the show: a simple formula that creates the complex leaf shape Thomasina discovers in the play.

Arcadia was a popular and critical success. The production won both the Evening Standard and Olivier awards for best play of the year; it ran for two seasons (431 performances). The script, available for purchase at the National Theatre’s bookshop, outsold all other plays in print, including Shakespeare: 6,000 copies were sold in the first three weeks of the run. “*Arcadia* marked a watershed,” writes Nadel. “It reaffirmed Stoppard’s importance in the theater, not just in Britain but beyond.” ♦

This article by Dan Rubin first appeared in American Conservatory Theater’s performance guide series, *Words on Plays*, in 2013. For more information about *Words on Plays*, visit www.act-sf.org/wordsonplays.