

*Stoppard's Archives**Eric Colleary*

Tom Stoppard once said, 'I'm a writer who gets sparked very often by something that I read somewhere'.<sup>1</sup> Sometime around the early part of 1973, he was sparked by Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce* biography. Stoppard learned from the book that there was a brief period in 1917 when Joyce, Vladimir Lenin, and the Dadaist Tristan Tzara lived in Zurich at the same moment in time. Fascinated by the dramatic possibilities of such a moment – 'I thought, well, that's the kind of situation I like' – Stoppard focused his attention on a young man named Henry Carr, an office worker from a consulate whom Joyce recommended for the lead in the local English-language amateur theatre production of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Carr barely figures in Ellmann's narrative, but for Stoppard, Carr was the ideal protagonist. 'It was beyond my capacity to write a truthful play about Lenin, Tzara and Joyce', he recalled, 'so essentially, the story is told through an elderly Henry Carr. And for my own convenience . . . Henry Carr is a kind of amnesiac fantastist. In other words, I was free to write absolutely anything'.<sup>2</sup> Carr's faulty memory propels Stoppard's play *Travesties*, giving the playwright the dramatic license to imagine beyond the histories left in archives.

The word 'archive' may conjure images of endless rows of shelves filled with boxes. It stands in as a physical manifestation of history itself; the archive, Foucault argues, is both an *institution* that houses and orders select statements that become the basis of knowledge, and the *law* or *limitation* of what can be said.<sup>3</sup> Yet for Stoppard, the archive is anything but a limitation, and if it is a law then joy can be found in breaking it. The Stoppardian archive is a starting point, a limitless source of creative inspiration that often provokes more questions than it attempts to answer.

Implicitly or explicitly, the archive is a driving force in many of Stoppard's plays. He has literally gone to the archive sourcing texts to create several translations and adaptations of others' works including *Dalliance* and *Undiscovered Country* (from Arthur Schnitzler's *Liebelie*

and *Das Weite Land*, respectively), *On the Razzle* (from Johann Nestroy's *Einen Jux will er sich machen*), *Rough Crossing* (from Ferenc Molnár's *Play at the Castle*), *The House of Bernarda Alba* (from Federico García Lorca), *Largo Desolato* (from Václav Havel), *The Seagull* (from Anton Chekhov), and *Tango* (from Sławomir Mrożek). *The Invention of Love* and *The Coast of Utopia* trilogy are dramatic stories rooted in historical events. *Arcadia*'s plot is driven by the hunt for archival documents, and *Indian Ink*'s narrative structure hinges on a contemporary academic who misinterprets the archive to the delight of the audience who gets to witness the 'truth' through a series of flashbacks. *The Real Thing* blurs the lines between a playwright's written drama and the drama of his lived existence. Stoppard mined his own family archive for *Leopoldstadt* after learning, quite late in life, of his family's Jewish heritage.

Stoppard seems to relish archival contradictions, even in his own life. He once told a reporter that he wants his biography 'to be as inaccurate as possible' and when he reads something inaccurately written about himself, 'I never demand corrections. I quite like it really. If enough things that are untrue are said about you, no one will know what really is true.'<sup>4</sup> It came as a surprise for many when Stoppard announced in 2013 that an authorised biography would be undertaken by Dame Hermione Lee, which was published in 2020 in the United Kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

Many seeking answers to questions about Stoppard's life and work consult his papers held by the Harry Ransom Center at The University of Texas at Austin, but contradictions and questions can be found there too. The Ransom Center's then-director, Thomas F. Staley, was introduced to Stoppard by the bookseller and publisher Margie Cohn. After some years of discussion, Stoppard sold his archive to the Ransom Center in 1993, the same year *Arcadia* premiered in London. In subsequent years, Stoppard made gifts and sales of a number of additions of new papers and older material that had been uncovered during various moves. As it stands in early 2020, the archive fills over 200 boxes. The extensive collection includes manuscript and typescript drafts, research material, outlines and revision notes, production and publicity materials, contracts, correspondence, galley proofs, legal and financial records, appointment books, travel statements, sound and film recordings, and much more.

Stoppard's papers are supplemented by other archives at the Ransom Center that offer glimpses into his life, career, and process. The papers of *New York Times* cultural critic Mel Gussow include nearly a dozen transcripts, interviews, and recordings with Stoppard between 1972 and 2001. Recordings from the collection of literary agent Gordon Dickerson

preserve dozens of rare radio and television interviews and televised productions of his stage plays. In 2019, the noted scientist Robert May donated papers related to his conversations with Stoppard on chaos theory, which influenced the writing of *Arcadia*. Researchers will also be able to find letters and other materials from Stoppard in the archives of A. C. H. Smith, John Osborne, Alfred Knopf, Gregory Vlastos, Paul Schrader, David Hare, Jim Crace, John Russell Brown, Norman Mailer, Ian McEwan, Frith Banbury, David Mamet, Robert De Niro, and Arnold Wesker, among others.

Stoppard's decision to place his archive at the Ransom Center came during a period when other major British literary and theatrical archives were being sent to Texas. Significant collections of Joan Littlewood and Donald Albery material arrived in the 1980s. David Hare placed his archive there in 1993. John Osborne did the same in 1995. Large collections of J. B. Priestley, George Bernard Shaw, and Samuel Beckett had been at The University of Texas at Austin since the Ransom Center's inception in the 1950s. Irish playwright Brian Friel's *Give Me Your Answers, Do!* addresses the question of selling archives abroad, putting one writer's decision to sell to a university in Texas against another who decides to keep it despite the need for money. The conflict, as Friel writes it, was a moral one. When Arnold Wesker sold his archive to the Ransom Center in 2000, he explained his rationale in *The Sunday Times*. Frustrated by what he saw as lacklustre interest from his own country, Wesker's associates counselled him to 'forget this country, there wasn't either the money or the interest. Texas had superb facilities – let them have it. Which I did'. Looking back on the experience of placing his archive, Wesker reflected, 'I don't know what to think about what I've done. Emotions are mixed – relief, regret, loss. I feel secure, bereft, demeaned, flattered'.<sup>6</sup> In 2005, a group of literary figures led by British poet laureate Andrew Motion and former culture secretary Lord Smith launched a campaign to encourage tax breaks and lottery funds to support the collecting practices of institutions in the United Kingdom – citing, among a number of authors, the loss of Tom Stoppard's archives to the United States.<sup>7</sup> Will Pavia, writing in *The Times* of London in 2015, suggested that 'a British visitor to the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, feels much like a Greek tourist in the British Museum, staring at the Elgin Marbles and wondering, a little peevishly, what they are doing so far from home'.<sup>8</sup> In response to that criticism, Ransom Center director Stephen Enniss argued, 'What's most important is that materials end up where they can be properly appreciated and cared for and that is a very expensive undertaking'.<sup>9</sup>

For his part, Stoppard has publicly expressed his enthusiasm for sending his papers to Texas. He has described how his early visits to the Ransom Center and the breadth of the collections that he found there assure him that his papers found a good home. Yet even as an admirer of libraries and research, he has expressed incredulity that there could be any interest in the contents of his own archive. In the early 1990s when Staley first visited Stoppard at his home, he was shocked to find papers haphazardly scattered across different rooms. Stoppard reportedly told him 'what you want is mostly stuff I would throw away: notes on this and that' – in other words, the stuff researchers and artists are most eager to see.<sup>10</sup>

The archive does reveal some of Stoppard's habits and consistent work practices. First drafts are almost always handwritten, for example. He has resisted using computers for decades, and handwritten drafts are sent to his long-time assistant to be typed. Subsequent revisions and changes are made on the typed versions, or lengthier additions are handwritten and then sent back to his assistant to be updated. That being said, those handwritten first drafts are rare in the archive. Stoppard has been known to give these manuscripts to close friends and loved ones, showing that for Stoppard, the sentimental value of the manuscripts is of greater interest than establishing a complete record of his creative process. Occasionally, drafts have also been held back and donated to the London Library to raise funds – a small collection of early drafts of *Arcadia*, for example, were sold in 2004 by the London Library to the British Library for their collections.

There are thousands of letters in the collection. Stoppard's avoidance of the computer means that emails are often printed for him to read, with his handwritten response also included on the page – meaning, more often than not, researchers get to see both sides of a correspondence. Some letters detail the complex professional relationships that shape a playscript in production. Some are impassioned (and articulate, as one would expect) rebuffs of negative criticism or cancelled projects. Some are offers of advice and story ideas from complete strangers, and there are a great many letters from audience members who have been deeply moved by Stoppard's writings. Even more letters reveal Stoppard's nearly inexhaustible creativity in declining the abundant offers and invitations he regularly receives.

The archive can contradict memory. For example, in a 2017 interview for *The Guardian*, Stoppard noted that the original one-act sketch of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear* was lost, 'not intentionally, but I'm quite thankful, really'.<sup>11</sup> Fortunately for posterity (though possibly not for Stoppard) the script is not lost. It can be found in Box 23 of his papers at the Ransom Center.

Given Stoppard's proclivity towards embracing archival contradiction, what can the papers tell us about the man himself? A report card from Mount Hermon School in Darjeeling, India notes that seven-year-old Thomas Stráussler received excellent marks in Literature when he was a student there in 1944.<sup>12</sup> In the 1980s, he quietly advocated on behalf of Czech refugees in Britain through the Anglo-Czechoslovak Welfare Association in London.<sup>13</sup> There are eight boxes of drafts for an animated film adaptation of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Cats* in 1994 – Stoppard was drawn by the opportunity to collaborate once again with Trevor Nunn, who was originally slated to direct, and to return the narrative more directly back to T. S. Eliot's original collection of poems.<sup>14</sup> In 1996, two self-described 'over-confident A-level Theatre Studies students' wrote to Stoppard explaining why they wanted to produce a scene in their class where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were played by women, and asking what his opinion would be. Writing back, Stoppard noted 'R&G were always intended to be played by women. It has been a continual frustration to me that theatres persist in casting men'.<sup>15</sup> In *Travesties*, Stoppard largely invented the central character of Henry Carr. 'I conjured up an elderly gentleman still living in Zurich, married to a girl he met in the Library during the Lenin years, and recollecting, perhaps not with entire accuracy, his encounters with Joyce and the Dadaist Tzara'.<sup>16</sup> After the play opened in London, Stoppard was excited and alarmed to receive a letter from Mrs Noël Carr, the second wife of the real Henry Carr, who was delighted to learn that her late husband figured so prominently in the play. Stoppard had sincerely forgotten that Henry Carr had, in fact, been a real person. Stoppard and Mrs Carr carried on a lengthy correspondence, with Carr providing extensive biographical information, and Stoppard providing a copy of Ellmann's biography. These letters, too, can be found in Stoppard's archive.<sup>17</sup>

All of these tantalising archival treasures, however, must be approached with caution. In his 1995 play *Indian Ink*, Stoppard seemingly created the character of Eldon Pike almost as a warning to future scholars who might sift through the archive he established only two years earlier. Pike is a contemporary academic with a zealous affinity for footnotes. He makes frequent direct statements to the audience about Crewe's past based on his research only to be proven wrong through a series of flashbacks. Stoppard seems to be suggesting that the archive can be easily misinterpreted and is a poor substitute for a life well-lived. The archive is the starting point, not the end; a place where fragments of memories persist but never reveal the entirety of any given moment. Readers, then, should proceed with caution.

The hundreds of boxes of papers contain innumerable facts and anecdotes that cumulatively help us to understand Stoppard and his work, but papers are no substitute for what Stoppard might call *the real thing*.

### Notes

- 1 Quotes from a film recording 'Advisory Council visits Tom Stoppard to discuss *Travesties*', recorded 4 April 2018. Harry Ransom Center Archives Film Collection (University of Texas).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 10.
- 4 Quoted in Ira Nadel, *Tom Stoppard: A Life* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), xi, xiii.
- 5 'Dramatic Change of Heart as Stoppard Welcomes Biography', *The Times* [London], 10 December 2013. See also Dame Hermione Lee, *Tom Stoppard: A Life* (London: Faber & Faber, 2020).
- 6 Arnold Wesker, 'There's a Price on My Head', *Sunday Times* [London], 5 November 2000.
- 7 Ben Dowell, 'Writers Unite to Fight Flight of Literary Papers to US', *Sunday Times* [London], 23 October 2005, 7.
- 8 Will Pavia, 'Gone to Texas: How Britain's Literary History Was Sold Page by Page', *The Times* [London], 9 March 2015, 8–9.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Mel Gussow, 'Arts in America: How to Lure Writers to an Afterlife in Texas', *New York Times*, 20 January 2000, E1.
- 11 Andrew Dickson, 'Tom Stoppard: Brexit Is Too Big for the Stage', *The Guardian*, 10 February 2017.
- 12 Harry Ransom Center, Tom Stoppard Papers, Box 39, Folder 8.
- 13 Tom Stoppard Papers, Box 134.
- 14 Tom Stoppard Papers, Boxes 56–59, 74–77.
- 15 Tom Stoppard Papers, Box 109, Folder 9.
- 16 From an article by Stoppard, 'Lenin, Joyce, Tzara and Henry Carr', Tom Stoppard Papers, Box 31, Folder 6.
- 17 Tom Stoppard Papers, Box 31, Folder 6.