

Literature, Sex, and the Invisible World: Shaffer & Stoppard Confront the Cultural “Other”

Ed Block

Emeritus Professor
English Department
Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI USA

The 1960s, when playwrights Peter Shaffer and Tom Stoppard came to prominence, were a time of dramatic and theatrical foment. The French Absurdist, productions of Bertolt Brecht, plays like Peter Weiss’s *Marat/Sade* (which sought to embody some of the theatrical ideas of Antonin Artaud), and Samuel Beckett’s various dramas were a volatile presence and offered a challenge to prevailing realism. In the face of continued realistic drama and along with other reactions to “stage realism” and the “hegemonic naturalism” of Ibsen and Strindberg, playwrights like Peter Shaffer and Tom Stoppard chose to employ their own theatrical aesthetic as they sought to re-create the experience of drama in their own ways. Shaffer’s mythic, even chthonic appropriations of the historical and the everyday and Tom Stoppard’s rewritings of Shakespeare, and send-ups of scientific and detective genres, became alternative ways to imagine and experience theater. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, this background may help explain some of the tensions and innovations that make Shaffer’s *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and Stoppard’s *Indian Ink* comparable.

The Royal Hunt of the Sun (1964),¹ and *Indian Ink*² (1995) represent two fascinating dramatizations of the confrontation between non-Western cultures and the “cultural Other” [one before and the other after the 1978 publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*]. In doing so, they recall earlier modernist cultural appropriations such as, for instance, those envisioned in the work of Artaud. *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* created a stir at each of its British and American openings. Following its award-winning production as the radio drama, *In the Native State* (1991) and its appearance as a play in 1995, *Indian Ink* also had a successful revival in 2014.³ Both plays warrant re-consideration for what they say about the state of drama and theatrical practice in the latter part of the twentieth and, by implication, the early twenty-first centuries.

I propose to how Shaffer and Stoppard dramatize non-Western cultures, using theatrical techniques, tropes, and devices that bear resemblance to, or achieve some of the effects of a sensorially dynamic, affective stage spectacle that Artaud had imagined. Artaud’s manifestoes and experiments offer an earlier, contrastive approach to such appropriations. Due, in part, to the fact that both plays focus on character, thus creating a tension between historic setting, structure, and thematic concerns, the experience of Shaffer’s and Stoppard’s plays provides an even greater sense of the “invisible world”⁴ valorized by Artaud and realized dramatically by such director/critics as Peter Brook.

Shaffer’s own theatrical aesthetic shows some resemblance to Artaud’s. In the “Introduction” to *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* he says:

Why did I write *The Royal Hunt*? To make colour? To make spectacle? Yes.
To make magic? Yes – if the word isn’t too debased to convey the kind of
excitement I believed could still be created out of ‘total’ theatre.’⁵

A paragraph later he elaborates on what he means in a way that further suggests similarities with Artaud.

The ‘totality’ of it was in my head for ages: not just the words, but jungle cries and ululations; metals and masks; the fantastic apparition of the pre-Columbian world . . . I did deeply want to create, by means both austere and rich – means always disciplined by a central aesthetic – an experience that was *entirely and only theatrical*.⁶

Though critics have argued that Shaffer’s play employs aspects of Artaud’s scenario, *The Conquest of Mexico*,⁷ they give insufficient emphasis to the significance of Shaffer’s characters and to the complex dialectic of belief and skepticism that Shaffer dramatizes. Nor do they analyze sufficiently the nuanced opposition of the European and Incan cultures.

Rather than Artaud, critics of Stoppard’s play,⁸ for their part, are more likely to see the mark of the Absurdist and Beckett on Stoppard’s highly literary play with love, sex, and death; with time and silence; and with the conflicted interaction of India and the British Empire on the eve of the fight for independence. Still, the author of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *Arcadia*, and *The Invention of Love* has not completely forgotten the lessons of the 1960s. Employing dramatic “tropes” and “devices” that unsettle many dramatic conventions, *Indian Ink* juxtaposes 1930s India and 1980s England, focusing on the last months in the life of tubercular English poet Flora Crewe and her relationship with an Indian artist, Nirad Das.

Despite claims of its “lack of intellectual stimulation,”⁹ Stoppard, too, I would argue – using Shaffer’s words -- creates a play “by means both austere and rich – means always disciplined by a central aesthetic.” Even with its possible literary echoes and satiric allusions to literary critics,¹⁰ it can be argued that *Indian Ink* provides an experience that, while not “*entirely and only theatrical*,” is certainly “theatrical” in the best sense. And though less violent and chthonic than Shaffer’s play, Stoppard’s highly literary and occasionally stylized enactment of character in everyday colonial India, in tension with an historic background, bears comparison with Shaffer’s play as it creates in its own, more subtle way, a dynamic, affective stage spectacle.

The Place of Artaud

Antonin Artaud was only one of several theatrical and dramatic theorists and innovators in the early twentieth century,¹¹ but he is perhaps most remembered because of his radical – seemingly outlandish – claims. For this reason, and because he represents an early twentieth-century attempt to rethink drama in a cross-cultural context, it is instructive to examine some of his ideas as they might bear comparison to the two plays in question. Dissatisfied with the staleness of turn of the century European drama and the last throes of the well-made play, he was reacting to that “hegemonic naturalism”¹² referred to earlier.¹³ He was also reacting to his repressive, arguably Jansenist Catholic upbringing.¹⁴ Like a number of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists (Pizarro, Matisse, Gauguin, Braques, and Picasso), he was also fascinated by the exotic; specifically by Balinese drama, Mexican and South American folk drama. As if seeking an Archimedean position from which to lever western assumptions about drama, Artaud uses these hints and inspirations from other cultures to fashion a vision that combines in new ways a number of theater’s traditional features: space, gesture, music, the relation of words and sound to things, and to what he – somewhat vaguely – called “life.” To these he added a sensitivity to ritual and silence, and an awareness of anarchic forces that he believed were being held in check by repressive, early twentieth-century values and customs. It was, after all, the era of Sigmund Freud, the Dadaists, and the Surrealists, all preaching the liberation of the repressed and the subconscious.

One of Artaud’s principal aims was breaking down the distinction between the stage and “life,” between the actors and the audience. This is one source of the distancing techniques and “meta-theatrical” devices that he had learned something of from Pirandello (and which Brecht, too, was beginning to use at about the same time). Though critics suggest that Artaud didn’t really like drama, it is clear that he took drama seriously. Perhaps too seriously. Subsequent theorists see him as championing a new seriousness in drama and the theater.¹⁵ Yes, drama in the theater can be much more than entertainment, but perhaps not so much more as Artaud himself claimed.¹⁶ But Artaud’s “Theater of Cruelty” as a remaking of society, religion, culture, metaphysics, and even one’s poor, puny, polluted bodily self is an absolutist – even authoritarian -- dream.¹⁷

For Artaud, drama and theater had the potential for radical transformation. Peter Brook and others got from Artaud a renewed faith in the possibility of making theater “magic” once again. Not lies and slavish “representation,” but truth and action and -- along with that -- genuine mystery;¹⁸ what Brook calls “the invisible world,” in which we all exist but to which we scarcely, or seldom pay attention. According to Martin Esslin, Artaud’s purpose was: “To reestablish contact with the true metaphysical basis of human existence.” For this, he says, “the body must be reawakened and reactivated. In other words, to reach the metaphysical sphere we have to become more physical.”¹⁹ Perhaps the explicit emphasis on sex in other 60s dramas was another result.

Artaud and Otherness

Artaud’s fascination with Balinese drama and Mexican folk drama can be seen as what Edward Said has called “orientalism,” but also as a fascination with otherness, particularly cultural otherness.²⁰ Artaud’s talk of myth, the Other World, magic, and conventions “hundreds of years old” suggest a “radical” desire. Artaud’s desire to confront, even affront the audience,²¹ is just the most radical way of achieving a kind of “direct address”²² to the audience. Like Wallace Stevens and other Modernists, Artaud,²³ wants theater to renew “the sense of life.”²⁴ Shaffer and Stoppard locate this desire for otherness in the characters themselves. That is what Shaffer’s protagonists desire, starting with Pizarro. They want to transcend dualism; they want passion and unity of life.²⁵ Stoppard’s chief characters, too, seek to get from life and art what they will call (using the Indian term) *rasa*, or “juice.” But the plays in which these characters enact their *agons* are full of doubles, rivals, and situations that make such unity of life almost impossible. One of the ironies of both plays is that, while emphasizing plot and the confrontation of cultures, they are also plays that create strong characters. Critic John Fleming devotes an entire chapter of *Stoppard’s Theatre* to a discussion of *Indian Ink*.²⁶ In that chapter he quotes Stoppard as saying he was “more wrapped up in [my] characters than in previous plays.”²⁷ Shaffer, too, acknowledges his attraction to the protagonist in his play. “For Pizarro, the savour of the salt [of life] has been lost – lost through a lifetime of . . . rejections. . . . Pizarro recovers the savour a little, a very little. For once, as a man, he holds on . . . to the life-thread of another man. He celebrates in his stubbornness the wonder of a life.”²⁸

A number of issues that Artaud identifies became emphases of later twentieth-century dramatic practice and theorizing and are therefore worth considering in the light of the two plays. Of those, four are particularly helpful in examining the various tropes, devices, and tensions in *Royal Hunt* and *Indian Ink*. I term them, adapting somewhat Artaud’s language: “the double,” “the fascination of the non-verbal,” “the attraction of the Orient,” and “the challenge of physical love.”²⁹

The Double

In the “Preface” to *The Theater and Its Double* Artaud says, “Every real effigy has a shadow which is its double” (12).³⁰ Every art fails, he says, when the artist believes he has liberated the shadow. “[T]he true theater,” he says, “has its shadows too, and, of all languages and all arts, the theater is the only one left whose shadows have shattered their limitations” (12). While theorists like Derrida use this and similar pronouncements as the jumping off place to argue Artaud’s dislike of “representation” and repetition, I want to use this idea of the “double” as a first point of comparison for Shaffer and Stoppard.

Both plays are in some fashion appropriations that imply a “double.” As Podol has pointed out, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* is an adaptation of Artaud’s “scenario” for *The Conquest of Mexico*.³¹ *Indian Ink* is a more complicated affair. Even while Stoppard (and his critics) acknowledge that he was seeking to avoid recreating *A Passage to India* or *The Jewel in the Crown*,³² his play nevertheless implies a relation to those earlier colonial works as it adapts the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century “tubercular bohemian” story found in *Camille*, *Traviata*, *La Bohème*, and *The Magic Mountain*. It also blends in the “trope” of the missing artwork. *Indian Ink*,³³ like many of Stoppard’s later efforts (*Arcadia*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *The Invention of Love*), is also explicitly elegiac.³⁴ *Royal Hunt*, in its way, is also a – somewhat more cynical -- “looking back.”³⁵

By the 1990s, for Stoppard (who is, at that point, well beyond mid-career), the desire for passion or a renewed “sense of life” has been muted, attenuated, refined. In what might almost be called Keatsian fashion, *Indian Ink*, like *Arcadia* after it,³⁶ sees passion as always “about to be enjoyed.”³⁷ If Flora Crewe and Nirad Das experience a passionate relation, it is of the briefest kind. There is something both nostalgic and elegiac about these two plays. Both plays are set at a crucial historical juncture: discovery and conquest of the New World; the imminent loss of India as part of the British Empire.

Awareness of the “double” nature of theater is also a form of acknowledging not only the “illusion” of theater, but of making more “permeable” the division between the theater and life. A first device that suggests a kind of “doubling” is the use of frame narration and dual time periods. In *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, Shaffer employs this distancing technique by introducing old Martin, temporally removed from the time of the action, who makes a “direct address”³⁸ to the audience, recalling his role as a young man in Francisco Pizarro’s conquest of the Incas and the murder of King Atahualpa. *Indian Ink* makes Eleanor Swan a kind of narrator, a temporally removed commentator, who – with the scholar Eldon Pike – provides a 1980s perspective on Flora Crewe and Nirad Das. Stoppard also acknowledges “the illusion” of the stage by the rather transparent and “artificial” way he stages such things as the arrival of the train carrying Flora into Jummapur and the way the setting changes – before our eyes – back and forth between Jummapur in 1930 and Eleanor Swan’s Shepperton garden in the 1980s. Both plays also create paired characters and both end with the death of the chief characters.

The paired characters, another form of “doubling,” also develop tension by employing, at least implicitly, the principle that “opposites attract.”³⁹ Young Martin and Pizarro represent Youth and age; the repressed vs. the uninhibited. Young Martin is constrained by chivalry; Pizarro is “free” of such illusions. In *Indian Ink* it is a contrast of traditional vs. modern. Das is a “traditional” artist; Flora Crewe represents the “avant garde.” Das represents health vs. Flora Crewe’s illness. Although it is something of a cliché – the artist painting the poet as she composes – this was, for Stoppard, part of the inspiration. “I wanted to write a conversation between a poet and a painter. While the poet was having her portrait painted, she would be writing a poem about having her portrait painted.”⁴⁰ In this way Stoppard adds yet another layer of “doubleness.” He also sets the scene in India, where the artist is Indian, and the poet is a former nude model for Amadeo Modigliani, making this artistic “intercourse” almost “hybrid” in its resonances.⁴¹

Martin-Pizarro: Flora-Das

The plays’ treatments of character further complicate of two familiar, even archetypal forms of doubling: the relationship of father and son (in Pizarro and young Martin, but also in Pizarro and Atahualpa), the lover and the beloved (Nirad Das and Flora Crewe). The Martin-Pizarro relationship presents the generational difference and the contrast of idealism and disillusionment. Pizarro sees his younger self in Martin; a “doubling” that brings regret. In the Pizarro-Atahualpa relation, too, there is a “doubling” that brings regret. To Pizarro, Atahualpa is someone who appears to have conquered time; someone of such supreme self-possession and confidence that he can claim to be immortal.

In the Nirad Das - Flora Crewe relationship it is the male who represents an ancient – yet now oppressed and fettered -- culture. Nirad Das is, himself, a conflicted character. An artist, he becomes by the end a political activist. Educated in the British fashion, and seemingly a “modern” and secular intellectual, he speaks authoritatively on and paints at least one picture that reflects the Indian belief in many gods. A widower at a young age (but not before his wife had borne him a son), Das is now almost painfully inhibited around women, at least English women. His behavior might be interpreted as part of Indian “reserve.” Flora Crewe, on the other hand, is the modern secular western woman, out of the mold of early twentieth-century English life (but anticipating the kinds of “liberation” that became common in the 1960s and later). At the end, however, she is transformed into an “icon” of the eternal beloved, and perhaps even more than that: the beloved of a god. Is the “icon,” the watercolor, a “symbol” of their relationship; a “symbol” of some merging of East and West? Because we never actually “see” the watercolor, it is the reports of and responses to it that constitute its power.⁴²

A related form of doubling in *Royal Hunt* is the way Shaffer conceptualizes the protagonist. A twin himself, Shaffer had been creating pairs of conflicted characters since his first play, *Five Finger Exercise*. But in Pizarro, Shaffer creates his first almost Promethean version of this contradictory character, someone Artaud might admire. And Shaffer further heightens that character’s contradictions by surrounding him with the other “doubles,” most notably, his youthful “disciple,” young Martin, and the Incan king, Atahualpa. Pizarro – like Artaud -- identifies himself as against all the trappings of culture, civilization, Europe. Speaking to young Martin, he says, “Your chivalry rules don’t govern me.” “You belong to hope. To faith. To priests and pretenses” (31). Pizarro finds in the primitive, non-western “world” of Peru the primal struggle of life (Eagles, condors, crows). That is where he feels he belongs. Yet, he looks at young Martin, whom he calls, “Little Lord of Hope,” and says, “You own everything I’ve lost. I despise the keeping, and I loathe the losing.”⁴³ An almost antithetical parallelism expresses the inner contradictions. Young Martin, contrasted with his older self as narrator, represents yet another important form of “doubling.”

From being the idealistic young “disciple” of Pizarro, Old Martin, as he tells the story of Pizarro and the Incas, comes to embody the “split” between worship and devotion on the one hand and skepticism or even cynicism on the other.

The Non-Verbal

Artaud’s emphasis on the non-verbal finds expression in Shaffer’s “preface” referencing “total theater.” Speaking of Balinese theater, Artaud says: “this excessively hieratic style, with its rolling alphabet, its shrieks of splitting stones, noises of branches, noises of the cutting and rolling of wood, compose a sort of animated material murmur in the air, in space, a visual as well as audible whispering.⁴⁴ In commenting on “Oriental and Occidental Theater,” Artaud says:

To link the theater to the expressive possibilities of forms, to everything in the domain of gestures, noises, colors, movements, etc., is to restore it to its original direction, to reinstate it in its religious and metaphysical aspect, is to reconcile it with the universe.⁴⁵

Shaffer employs the sounds of birds, screams, and other noises to create the atmosphere of the jungles and the mountains of ancient Peru. The inadequacy of language is further suggested as Pizarro relies on an Indian boy, Felipillo, to translate for him. Then Felipillo mistranslates, further undermining language, causing confusion and mistrust.

Shaffer also includes various forms of gestural symbolism. One of the most powerful comes after Atahuallpa has been captured, and the stage directions indicate that the great, gold medallion that has hung at the back of the stage, be taken apart. It is billed as the rape of the sun and suggests both the pillaging of the empire for its gold, and the capture – and later murder -- of the Inca king himself. Another form of gestural symbolism comes in the various physical “agons” of Pizarro and Atahuallpa. During his captivity, Atahuallpa and Pizarro wrestle. Later, Pizarro ties Atahuallpa with a rope and leads – then roughly drags and swings – him around the stage. The climactic instance of gestural symbolism joins the theme of silence and mis-interpretation when Atahuallpa offers to hear Pizarro’s confession. Atahuallpa does not understand Spanish, yet he listens for “an hour or more” (96) as Pizarro confesses to the king. This almost inarticulate “confession” and ritual absolution are among the most powerful scenes in the play.

Indian Ink acknowledges the power of the non-verbal in much of the – sometimes nonsense -- word-play. Nirad Das and Flora play a word game that mixes British and Indian slang and highlights the untranslatability of certain words.

FLORA: While having tiffin on the verandah of my bungalow I spilled kedgerees on my dungarees and had to go to the gymkhana in my pyjamas looking like a coolie.

DAS: I was buying chutney in the bazaar when a thug escaped from the choky and killed a box-wallah for his loot, creating a hullabaloo and landing himself in the mulligatawny (18-19).

Later, Eldon Pike and Dilip play Hobson Jobson, a similar, even more polyphonic, heteroglossic game. The emphasis on the various works of “art” is also a way of giving greater priority to the non-verbal, specifically the visual.

The Lure of the Orient

The non-western dimension of *Indian Ink* is prominent and also informed by a witty and reflexive postcolonial view. From the very start Flora and her Indian hosts misunderstand each other. Other characters also misconstrue specific words. Flora does not comprehend the Indians, or many of their customs. Despite her sophistication and rebelliousness, she is also the “obtuse” colonial. Sometimes she behaves badly, provoking minor scandals. The Indians stoically take her for what she is: an English “author” with unusual values, attitudes, and ways of behaving and speaking.

The fascination with the non-western in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* is illustrated by the contrast between Incan “communism” and European individualism; between Christianity and the Incan worship of their king. In *Indian Ink* the “allure” of India – foreign colors, sounds, customs – is sometimes subtly suggested.⁴⁶ The “double frame” of Eleanor Swan in England highlights many of these.

Stoppard is careful to “ironize” the nostalgic elements, insuring that the play – if not the characters – avoid a charge of “orientalism.” Though Nandi Bahti agrees that Stoppard’s play can “highlight the contradictions of empire,” in the end “the elision of questions of power . . . transforms the play into a primarily theatrical show.”⁴⁷

The play also includes misinterpretations of silence, suggesting the mystery of cross-cultural relationships. The Indians know that Flora is dangerously ill and has come to India for the climate and her health. But their silence on this score represents a major misunderstanding, and hence a “fissure” in their relationship, and one which nearly destroys Flora’s relationship with Nirad Das. A prominent instance: as Das is painting Flora’s portrait (while she composes a poem), he tries to explain the conventions of ancient Indian “Rajasthani” painting. He tells the story of how Krishna, one of the ten incarnations of Vishnu, “had a great love affair, you see, with a married lady, Radha, who was the most passionate of herdswoomen” (28). He explains how a painting must have *rasa*.

Rasa is juice. Its taste. Its essence. A painting must have its *rasa* . . . which is not *in* the painting exactly. *Rasa* is what you must feel when you see a painting, or hear music; it is the emotion which the artist must arouse in you (29).

He explains that there are “nine *rasa*, each one a different colour” (29). When he asks Flora the *rasa* of her poem, Flora says, “Sex.” “Unhesitatingly,” Das expatiates on “the *rasa* of erotic love,” called Shringara.

Its god is Vishnu, and its colour is *shyama*, which is blue-black. Vishvanata in his book on poetics tells us: Shringara requires, naturally, a lover and his loved one, who may be a courtesan . . . it is aroused by, for example, the moon, the scent of sandalwood, or being in an empty house. Shringara goes harmoniously with all the other *rasa* and their complementary emotions, with the exception of fear, cruelty, disgust and sloth (29).

Perhaps the most significant instance of East vs. West in *Indian Ink* are the two – can we call them “doubled” – portraits of Flora Crewe⁴⁸ that Das paints. The first is a conventional, European “portrait of the artist”: Flora in a cornflower dress, composing a poem while sitting on the porch of her Dak House in Jammapur. The second portrait is the watercolor and gouache “miniature” of Flora; naked, in bed beneath her mosquito net, surrounded by stylized images from Indian religion and legend. The portraits represent the two different styles – Eastern and Western – with which Das struggles to find himself as an artist. But they also represent the unspoken and untranslatable mystery of his relationship with Flora. The first is the admiring artist painting a fellow-artist. The second is the homage of a lover, transforming his beloved through allusion and stylistic blending.

The Challenge of Physical Love

As noted earlier, Artaud’s relation to his body was highly conflicted. Pizarro’s relation to his body and sexuality are similarly conflicted. As a bastard, he has always felt inferior to those with whom he has associated. He scorns the Spanish court, the nobility, and aristocratic values like honor and legitimacy. When young Martin asks Pizarro if he’d ever thought of marrying, the answer harkens back to the issue of illegitimacy. “With my parentage? The only women who would have had me weren’t the sort you married. Spain’s a pile of horsedung” (46).

A bit later, having called his soul “frostbitten,” he reminisces. “I had a girl once, on a rock by the Southern Ocean. I lay with her one afternoon in winter, wrapped up in her against the cold.” But then “Time came back,” and Pizarro’s final view implies a disgust with the human body that is almost Artaudian. “Try and halt a moment in our lives and it becomes maggotty at once. . . . You can’t escape maggots unless you go with Time. And if you go, they wriggle in you anyway” (47).

As was suggested earlier, the relationship of Pizarro and Atahualpa has a powerful, physical dimension. The younger man and the older wrestle. At the end, Atahualpa promises to “swallow death and spit it out of me” (95). He tells Pizarro: “I will put water to your wound old man. Believe” (95). When Atahualpa is executed, by garroting, the stage directions state: “His executioners hand the corpse down to the Soldiers below, who carry it to the Centre of the Stage and drop it at Pizarro’s feet” (97-98). Like Pizarro’s obsession with maggots, this is a startlingly physical scene – reminiscent of Christ’s crucifixion.⁴⁹

The marks of 1960s experimentalism -- including Artaud's ideas -- on Shaffer's play are often harsh, violent, bloody, and indelible. From the perspective of fifty years and more, such marks may appear to have been excessive. But to the extent that they create and highlight the importance of mystery and mysterious forces at work in the meeting of western civilization and an ancient civilization of the New World, they are powerful and instructive. The strain that such a meeting puts on human belief and human relationships is also reflected in Shaffer's later work.⁵⁰

The physical and the sexual are similarly linked in *Indian Ink*. It begins in Paris, with Flora's having posed in the nude for Modigliani. Her then lover, in a fit of jealousy, buys the painting and burns it in a hotel bathtub. Now Flora is in India, suffering from tuberculosis, a disease that attacks the lungs.⁵¹ It is the same disease that took Modigliani's life and prevented Flora from posing for him a second time.⁵² Near the end of the play, after a particularly busy day, Flora is burning up. "I'm soaking," she says to the painter. Then -- somewhat crudely: "I need to be rubbed down like a horse" (39).⁵³ Intending to take a shower, she goes into her room and takes off her clothes. But there is no water, and she comes out naked: to Das's embarrassment. He apologizes. She echoes his apology but says, "I really feel too peculiar to mind at the moment" (40). As Das continues to apologize, Flora asks him to pour a jug of water over her. He does this but then tries to leave. Flora asks for more help. After having wrapped herself in a towel, she then discards that and gets into bed. Embarrassed again, Das holds the mosquito netting while she crawls under the sheet. Once more Das wants to leave -- to get her soda water, he says. She scoffs at his embarrassment at seeing her naked. Her excuse: "Anyway, I'm your model."

This brings her to voice a "delicate question" she had hesitated to ask before: ". . . whether you would prefer to paint me nude" (41). Flora seems about to seduce the painter. But how serious is it? In her usual, dismissive way Flora's sister tells us, "Men were not really important to Flora. If they had been, they would have been fewer. She used them like batteries. When things went flat, she put in a new one" (79).⁵⁴ And, anyway, Flora's feelings for Das seem more than merely erotic, or merely mercenary. About the delicate question she says, "I preferred it." "It had more what-do-you-call it?" Das answers: "*Rasa*." (41). Lucky for Das, Flora's servant arrives, and Das retires to a chair outside Flora's room (he says it's so that he can smoke). The stage directions indicate: "she raises the sheet off her body and flaps it like a sail . . ." Then she asks him ". . . can you see me through the net from over there?" His answer: "Barely" (43), is a kind of Stoppard pun, hence another bit of not-exactly-verbal bi-play. The scene ends without resolution, or consummation.

Does Flora ever really pose for Nirad Das? Or does he paint the watercolor from memory and imagination? Do they have an affair?⁵⁵ These are among the "mysteries" the play does not resolve. Instead, all we have are the two portraits: the one conventional, the other the watercolor nude. And, like the water color, that other work of art we never see. We do learn, however, that it is a "hybrid" form. It is described, several scenes later, as Nirad's son, Anish, explains how he came to find the painting, at the bottom of a chest of his father's effects. The description, told fragmentarily, in two different voices -- Anish and Eleanor -- creates an even greater sense of mystery.

Underneath everything was this painting. A portrait of a woman, nude, but in a composition in the old Rajasthani style. . . . You can't tell if the painter is in the house or outside looking in. . . . She is in a house within a house. The Mughals brought miniature painting from Persia, but Muslim and Hindu art are different. The Muslim artists were realists. But to us Hindus, everything is to be interpreted in the language of symbols.

Eleanor notices "an open book on the bed. That's Flora." Then Anish continues.

Look where this flowering vine sheds its leaves and petals, they are falling to the ground. I think my father knew your sister was dying. . . . She's not posing, you see, but resting. The vine embraces the dark trunk of the tree. . . .

In a somewhat "positivistic" fashion, Eleanor undermines Anish Das's symbolic interpretation:

Now really, Mr. Das, sometimes a vine is only a vine. Whether she posed for him or whether it's a work of the imagination . . . Oh, but the symbolism -- Codswallop! Your 'house within a house', as anyone can see, is a mosquito net. And the book is Emily Eden, it was in her suitcase. Green with a brown spine (58-59).

Nirad Das, it seems, has transformed Flora Crewe into a kind of hybrid image of East and West. Insofar as the reader can infer from the description, the watercolor is of a nude European woman -- doubly sequestered inside a house, beneath a mosquito net. The subject is surrounded by stylized and conventional symbols of Indian erotic art, recalling Radha, Vishnu's beloved herdsman, but Flora herself remains a mystery.

Conclusion

The Royal Hunt of the Sun presents the violent confrontation of Europe and the New World "other," but simultaneously a passionate and physical affirmation of love and loyalty undermined by betrayal. Behind that critics see a longing for "immortality and a sense of meaning for life,"⁵⁶ a form of grounded belief that can respond to skepticism. The play uses a broad range of evocative and sometimes shocking theatrical effects that may owe at least some of their inspiration to Antonin Artaud and the theatrical experimentation of the 1960s. Shaffer's play nevertheless shows a deeper awareness of and sensitivity to the human need for meaning and a reverence for the fragility and mutability of the human body greater than, for instance, Artaud's theories acknowledge.⁵⁷

Years later, in the 1990s, *Indian Ink* explores the confrontation of British (European) and Indian civilization in the characters of Flora Crewe and Nirad Das. While it would minimize Stoppard's genius to see these characters as mere "symbols" of the two civilizations, they do, nevertheless, embody some of the forces in conflict. In a lighter and more elegiac mode than Shaffer -- that is simultaneously clever and serious by turns -- Stoppard presents the mystery of the two characters' relationship within the web of social and political tensions and contradictions that characterize the relationship of England and India in the early twentieth-century. As it employs doubling, non-verbal effects, and cross-cultural contrasts in a nostalgically erotic plot, the play evokes a sense of mystery that allows the reader/spectator to imagine a variety of resolutions for the relationship. Employing techniques that recall the experimentations of his early plays, and may call to mind some of Artaud's critiques of naturalism in the theater, the play is able to "touch life" in a way and to a degree that Artaud and his program never achieved, and which makes *Indian Ink* an innovative contribution to theater and drama.

End Notes

¹ Shaffer, Peter. *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* London: Samuel French, Inc., 1964, rpt. 1992.

² Stoppard, Tom. *Indian Ink* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993). First broadcast in April, 1991 on BBC Three as *In the Native State* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991).

³ *In the Native State* won the Giles Cooper award when first broadcast in 1991.

⁴ See Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, New York: Atheneum, 1982, c1968.

⁵ Peter Shaffer, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. New York (Samuel French, Inc., 1964 rpt. 1992), p. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Podol, Peter. "Dramatizations of the Conquest of Peru: Peter Shaffer's *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and Claude Demarigny's *Cajamarca*," *Hispanic Journal* 6.1 Fall, 1984, 121-129. See also "Contradictions and Dualities in Artaud and Artaudian Theater: The Conquest of Mexico and the Conquest of Peru." *Modern Drama* 26.4 (December, 1983), 518-527.

⁸ See Katherine E. Kelly, "Introduction" to *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard*. Edited by Katherine E. Kelly (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 2001), and Josephine Lee "*In the Native State* and *India Ink*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard*.

⁹ John Fleming. *Stoppard's Theatre: Finding Order Amid Chaos*, Austin, TX, U of Texas P, 2001, p. 212.

¹⁰ Daniel Keith Jernigan argues, on rather thin evidence, that in *Indian Ink* Stoppard is also reacting to biographer-critics like Ira Nadel, whose *Double Act: A Life of Tom Stoppard* would appear in 2002.

¹¹ Besides some whom Peter L. Podol mentions (like Gordon Craig and Samuel Beckett), there were also Maurice Maeterlinck, G. B. Shaw, Paul Claudel, Luigi Pirandello, and Bertolt Brecht.

¹² Henrik Ibsen's role is different, depending upon which contemporary critic one reads.

¹³ He also experienced a sample of what Maeterlinck and Pirandello were doing.

¹⁴ In good Jansenist fashion, Artaud also sought to be dissociated from his own body and its functions.

- ¹⁵ Jan Kott, *The Theater of Essence and Other Essays* (Chicago, IL: Northwestern U P, 1986) is particularly scathing on the actual consequences of some of these experiments.
- ¹⁶ And Derrida, interpreting him. Derrida, Jacques. "The Parole Souflée," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 169-195. "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 232-250. See also Richard Hornby, "The Wooster Group," *Hudson Review* 69.1 (Spring, 2016), pp. 115-120.
- ¹⁷ For one perspective on "The Theatre of Cruelty," see Tom Phillips, "Fifty Years of British Theatre," *Contemporary Review (London), Incorporating International Review and the Fortnightly* (281:1639), August, 2002, pp. 100-106.
- ¹⁸ See Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* New York: Atheneum, 1982, c 1968.
- ¹⁹ Martin Esslin, *Antonin Artaud* Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 88.
- ²⁰ George Steiner, in *Real Presences* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989) addresses the issue of "otherness" at length.
- ²¹ Which Jacques Derrida endorses.
- ²² It is what Gerald Bruns, referencing what Francois Lyotard calls the kind of "disruption" that the early Christian apologist, Augustine, describes and identifies as religious experience. Gerald L. Bruns, "The Senses of Augustine (On Some of Lyotard's Remains)," *Religion and Literature* 33.3 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 1-23. See, especially, p. 9.
- ²³ Sontag calls Artaud a Modernist.
- ²⁴ Which quest was already well underway in turn of the century literature. The German emphasis on *Leben* is well-known in Stefan George, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and others.
- ²⁵ One of the goals in W. B. Yeats's poetry as well.
- ²⁶ In *Tom Stoppard: Bucking the Postmodern*, (Jefferson, SC and London: McFarland & Co., Inc, 2012) Daniel Keith Jernigan also discusses *Indian Ink* in connection with both *Arcadia* and *The Invention of Love*.
- ²⁷ Quoted from Paul Delaney, *Tom Stoppard in Conversation*, 239) Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994.
- ²⁸ Introduction to *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, pp. 5, 6.
- ²⁹ I draw Artaud's ideas chiefly from his one genuine book, actually a collection of essays, titled *The Theatre and Its Double*.
- ³⁰ "Toute vraie effigie a son ombre qui la double" *Oeuvres Complètes Tome IV*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p. 17.
- ³¹ Podol, Peter. "Dramatizations of the Conquest of Peru: Peter Shaffer's *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and Claude Demarigny's *Cajamarca*."
- ³² Stoppard sought to avoid creating characters "who appear to have already appeared in [Paul Scott's] *The Jewel in the Crown* and [E.M. Forster's] *A Passage to India*," quoted in Paul Allen's interview with Stoppard, "The Third Ear," BBC Radio Three, 16 April, 1991.
- ³³ No critic that I have read notes the fact that the play's title refers to one of Flora Crewe's books of poetry (*Indian Ink*, p. 62).
- ³⁴ See Josephine Lee, "*In the Native State and Indian Ink*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard*.
- ³⁵ In *Royal Hunt* both Pizarro and Old Martin evince a nostalgia for the passion and ideals of their youth.
- ³⁶ Discussing the 1991 radio play, *In the Native State*, Fleming notes that "the essence of *Indian Ink* predates *Arcadia*," p. 208.
- ³⁷ Thomasina Coverley desires a night with Septimus Hodge, but it would be difficult to argue that it was ever consummated.
- ³⁸ As noted earlier, this convention had been available since Thornton Wilder brought in the stage director and – later – Tennessee Williams brought the actor as narrator -- on stage.
- ³⁹ I would propose that this a more comprehensive way to see the themes, instead of the narrow India/Britain contrast that cultural criticism might emphasize.
- ⁴⁰ John Fleming, p. 208 quoting Mel Gussow, *Conversations*, p. 120.

⁴¹ As is frequently the case in Stoppard, the erotic dimension surfaces at the very beginning, with Nirad asking “a personal question” and both Nirad and Flora engaging in a number of double entendres, which further enhance the texture of wordplay, innuendo, and sex that characterizes the play.

⁴² Of course, Stoppard’s renowned irony and playfulness might incline one to see in the “Indian” watercolor, which is a nude portrait of Flora, a kind of raunchy joke of the kind Stoppard has also slipped into plays like *Arcadia*.

⁴³ *Royal Hunt*, p. 31.

⁴⁴ *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 67.

⁴⁵ *The Theater and Its Double*, p. 70.

⁴⁶ Edward Said would find this, and the following from Artaud, similar forms of “orientalism.” Here is Artaud: “To our disinterested and inert idea of art an authentic culture opposes a violently egoistic and magical, i.e., *interested* idea. For the Mexicans seek contact with the *Manas*, forces latent in every form, unreleased by contemplation of the forms for themselves, but springing to life by magic identification with these forms” (11).

⁴⁷ Nandi Bahti “Reinventing India Through “A quite witty pastiche”: Reading Tom Stoppard’s *Indian Ink*,” *Modern Drama* 52.2 (Summer, 2009), 222-234.

⁴⁸ And they, too, are in a sense “doubled” by the “lost” portrait by Modigliani.

⁴⁹ And the classic pose of the Virgin in the *Pietà*.

⁵⁰ Shaffer’s 1979 Pushkin-inspired play, *Amadeus*, also carries this forward.

⁵¹ As Artaud had said of the plague: “The only two organs really affected and injured by the plague, the brain and the lungs, are both directly dependent upon the consciousness and the will” (21).

⁵² In *The Plays of Tom Stoppard: for Stage, Radio, TV and Film, A reader’s guide to essential criticism*, Terry Hodgson notes – referring to Captain Durance’s death in WWII -- that “feeling that flesh is grass, present in *Artist Descending a Staircase* and, for that matter, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* grows stronger” (Duxford, Cambridge, Icon Book, 2001), p. 161.

⁵³ Is it a coincidence that one of Shaffer’s most powerful plays, *Equus*, analogizes the power of sexuality with horses?

⁵⁴ There is also another potentially sexual innuendo in her comment.

⁵⁵ As is hinted about Flora and a Maharajah, whom she visits later in her stay.

⁵⁶ Gene A. Plunka, *Peter Shaffer: Roles, Rites, and Rituals in the Theater*, Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson U P, 1988, p. 100.

⁵⁷ Shaffer returns to the theme of belief in *Equus* (1974).