

Music, Song and Englishness in Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*

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Tom Stoppard is probably not the first playwright who springs to mind when musical theatre is mentioned, yet music of one kind or another has frequently figured in his stage work. Before the most obvious example, *Rock 'n' Roll* (2006) we might also mention *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, performed at the Festival Hall with André Previn conducting in July 1977. Popular song and music-hall routines also figure in *Jumpers* (1972) and *Travesties* (1974).

The recent revival of *The Real Thing* (first performed in 1982) at the Old Vic in spring 2010 is a particularly interesting example of how Stoppard uses music to good effect. Critics and reviewers, however, have been relatively blind, or should I say deaf, to the music question. Interest was, and still is, focused on Tom Stoppard's portrayal of love which came as something of a surprise to those more used to Stoppard's intellectual pyrotechnics. As Charles Spencer puts it in his *Daily Telegraph* review: "Until he wrote this play, Stoppard was famed for his intellect and his wit, but hardly for his romanticism." The few references in the reviews to the musical elements refer either to the unsophisticated tastes of the main character Henry or to the music jokes (more of which in a moment). While it is quite clear why critics have been dazzled by the way Stoppard plays verbal and visual tricks on the characters and audience, it could be argued that music in general, and pop music in particular, also contributes to the undermining of certainties in the play and constitutes another layer of intertextuality. I intend therefore to look at the different uses of pop music especially, and attempt to account for its presence in the play.

The first point we could make is to stress how the main character Henry, a fortyish playwright, is given two main distinguishing features from the beginning: a way with words and a passion for pop music,

betraying a certain nostalgia for the 1960s of his youth. Indeed, none of the songs mentioned were recorded after 1967. Much of Act one is taken up with Henry's attempt to reconcile these two somewhat contradictory features. Henry is a successful dramatist with a line in witty comedy; "infidelity among the architect class" is how his daughter Debbie describes it (74). He has been asked to appear on Desert Island Discs, the long-running BBC Radio 4 weekly programme created in 1942 in which celebrities from different fields are invited to talk about themselves and comment on particular moments of their lives or careers through 8 different choices of music. From this invitation Henry derives both pleasure from the satisfaction of knowing that he is recognised as a successful writer and anxiety since, as his wife Charlotte puts it: "He likes pop music. The problem is he's a snob without being an inverted snob. He's *ashamed* of liking pop music" (22). Henry's musical choices clash inevitably with his selection of a book, *Finnmegan's Wake* and with the account he wants to give of his career as a would-be intellectual dramatist:

I'm going to look a total prick, aren't I, announcing that while I was telling the French existentialists where they had got it wrong, I was spending the whole time listening to the Crystals singing 'Da Doo Ron Ron.'(13)

The Desert Island Discs programme is talked about, listened to and commented on throughout Act 1 reinforcing both the continuity of dramatic time and the coherence of the dramatic action. The songs themselves, however, can also be used to create both contrast and continuity and remain closely linked to the action throughout the *whole* play. The radio and record-player are repeatedly in use.

We can notice, for instance, that when Henry leaves his first actress wife, Charlotte, and marries Annie, another actress, in scene 4, the change is made both visible and audible to the audience. "A radio plays pop music quietly while Henry works" (41) is the stage direction at the beginning of scene 4. After the arrival of Annie and a brief exchange of dialogue, Henry switches the radio off. At the end of the scene Henry goes off stage leaving Annie alone. "She turns on the radio and turns it from pop to Bach" (50). Part of the relationship between the two is thus made clear through this musical opposition. More obviously, at the beginning of the next scene, scene 5 which starts Act II, their new life together is suggested by the fact that Henry is listening to a Verdi opera

on the record player. Annie, like Charlotte before her, has a low opinion of Henry's musical tastes and seems to have embarked on his musical education. By the end of the scene this attempt seems to have backfired. After quarrelling with Henry over the latter's scathing remarks on Private Brodie's attempt to write a play, Annie seems to be losing patience and declares: "Let's have some literacy. Something decent." (64). It is as though we are invited to notice the gap between Henry's literary sophistication and his taste in music. The stage directions then indicate: "Annie stabs her finger on to the small radio on Henry's desk. Quietly it starts playing pop" (64). This failure to make any impact on Henry's musical taste does not augur well for the future.

There are several examples of music being used to signal change and reversal, most notably in scenes 5 and 11 to which we will return in a moment. It should be noted that music serves not only to communicate the ups and downs in Henry's new life but also to force the audience into more general reappraisals. How are we to react to the play's constant shifts of perspective? We may wish to consider that music (again especially pop music) constitutes another form of intertextuality. This takes on several different forms. The play includes explicit references to other plays (for example Chekhov's *Three Sisters*) and even extracts in some cases (*Tis Pity She's a Whore*, by John Ford and *Miss Julie* by Strindberg). There are also extracts from the writings of the hero Henry. The opening scene, for example, is revealed to be a scene from his play, *House of Cards*, which itself echoes Noel Coward's *Private Lives* from 1930. This is followed by a short reading from his screenplay for a science fiction movie, *Zadok* and several versions of the opening scene of the untitled Brodie play, re-written by Henry. Whenever we think we are on firm ground, the rug is pulled from under us and we set off again on the search for the elusive "real thing" whether this is on the subject of love, or plays or music.

There are songs the characters listen to and comment on and others that seem to be there just for the audience. Stoppard does not always specify which piece of music is to be used at specific moments (see the end of scene 1 or the beginning of scene 4), although he frequently does. The opening stage directions do not indicate music. The Old Vic production used a 1970's hit by Steve Harley and Cockney

Rebel “Make Me Smile” to get the play started. This may be seen as an invitation to the audience not to take this scene seriously, although it is not at all certain that it gives them enough warning of what is about to happen. The opening scene sets off a pattern in which the audience is repeatedly required to rethink. They laugh long and hard at this highly conventional, but entertaining comedy only to find that this is not the play itself, but an extract from a performance of one of Henry’s plays (*House of Cards*). Having laughed at the nameless characters’ witty repartee, in scene 1, they are then treated to a series of remarks by the play’s actors and the playwright’s daughter, all suggesting that the play is rather second-rate. One brief quotation will suffice to illustrate the point. Commenting on the plot, Charlotte, who plays the leading role and who is, of course, Henry’s wife protests: “If he’d given her a lover instead of a temporary passport we’d be in a play. But he could no more do that than architect a hotel” (18). The use of music follows a similar pattern, forcing the spectators to question their original assumptions. We may be inclined to think that Henry’s “poor taste” in music is simply there for comic effect. The other characters all make fun of him on this subject and it does allow Stoppard to make a few jokes. Henry to Annie: “Actually I’ve got a better ear than you—you can’t tell the difference between the Everly Brothers and the Andrews Sisters.” To which Annie retorts: “There isn’t any difference” (52). We may then decide that this unsophisticated taste is a way of bringing the insufferably supercilious Henry down a peg or two. In his long attack on the misuse of language, he solemnly declares:

I don’t think writers are sacred, but words are. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones in the right order, you can nudge the world a little or make a poem which children will read when you are dead. (63)

How are we to reconcile this with the texts of two songs he says he likes: “Um Um Um Um Um Um” a hit for the Manchester group Wayne Fontana and the Mindbenders in 1964 and “Oh Carol” by Neil Sedaka (1959). In a review of the original 1982 production, the *Observer* critic Robert Cushman points out the contradiction in relation to Henry’s condemnation of Brodie’s play: “It occurred to me that if he applied his professional standards to his favourite Neal (*viz*) Sedaka song, he would be in trouble”. Surely this contradiction is part of the fun. Henry, like

Stoppard's favourite Oscar Wilde, seems to positively relish contradiction as we can see in the following brief exchange with another actor character Max:

Henry I like Herman's Hermits, and the Hollies, and the Everly Brothers, and Brenda Lee, and the Supremes... I don't mean everything they did. I don't like *artists*. I like singles.

Max This is sheer pretension. (23)

Having referred to two songs with particularly uninspiring lyrics, a few words about Herman's Hermits. Few music critics would have much to say for this 1960s English group who had many hit records in the 1960s and yet Stoppard chooses one of their songs, "I'm Into Something Good", as a transition from scene 2 to scene 3. The choice of this cheerful upbeat number seems appropriate to indicate Henry's state of mind at this point in scene 2. He is in love with Annie and there seems to be not a cloud on the horizon. When the same song continues into the next scene which features the break-up of Annie's marriage to Max, we have to reconsider since, if the song spells happiness for Henry and Annie it spells despair for Max.

It is with two other songs that the effects of shifting perspective and change of point of view are particularly interesting. The first one is the 1964 recording by the Righteous Brothers of the song written by Barry Mann, Phil Spector and Cynthia Weil, "You've Lost that Lovin' Feelin'" considered by Henry as far superior to a Covent Garden opera performance he was once taken to (23). Henry's attitude here seems all the more perverse when we are treated to Max's rendition of the song on page 24. "The Brothers" as Max facetiously calls them, have their revenge however. Stoppard arranges it so that we hear the same song in a number of different contexts, just as he does with extracts of *T's Pity She's a Whore* (69 and the whole of scene 8) or with Brodie's play (55, 61, 64 and the whole of scene 10) leading the audience to question the nature of the various versions and how they link up and fit into the play. In scene 3 when we hear the song performed by the Righteous Brothers, Henry's opinion seems to be vindicated. It is the Righteous Brothers' recording of the song, selected by Henry for his radio programme that accompanies Max's cries of despair when Annie tells him she is leaving. Though he kicks the radio savagely, since he cannot kick Henry, it is to no avail and

the volume gets turned up. Song and emotion are firmly linked both for the characters and the audience. The effect of the song is reinforced by how and when it is heard in the play. The effect of the dialogue between Annie and Max is reinforced by the song and the way it seems to represent the absent Henry. The superiority of the Righteous Brothers' version of the song over Max's pathetic performance further reinforces Henry's victory over Max in love. What this example also suggests is that, in a typically Wildean fashion, life imitates or is modelled by art.

Henry's victory (both musical and amorous) is short-lived as we can see in the second example from scene 11, Procul Harum's "A Whiter Shade of Pale" (1967) which Stoppard has kept up his sleeve, so to speak. This record is not mentioned in the selection of songs for the Desert Island Discs programme since it fits into the category of pop music which "it's all right to like", according to Henry and which shows "a refreshing breadth of taste or at least a refreshing candour" (23). This piece of music is certainly different from some of the earlier songs mentioned. This song has often been considered as epitomising the best of 1960s music as a recent article by David Robson in *The Daily Express* suggests: "It charmed and transfixed the hippie summer of 1967, charms and transfixes still. The tune [...] is a favourite 40 years on." The lyrics of the song include numerous examples of intertextuality from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Stoppard is therefore not making fun of his character's choice of song here, but Henry's enthusiasm does finally backfire on him. It can be shown that the use of song in scene 11 is similar to that played by music in scene 5 but this time it is at Henry's expense. To go back to scene 5, it starts off with Henry listening to Verdi on the record player as we already mentioned. Has Henry mended his ways? Annie is pleased to find him making an effort but the result is rather disappointing. There are a series of misunderstandings culminating in a question "which". Annie means which opera but Henry concludes that she is asking which Verdi and after seeing her aggrieved reaction to his "Guiseppe" offers "Monty" instead (52). However, in the end, Henry seems to score a victory, albeit a minor one, since the scene ends with the return of Henry's pop music on the radio. Scene 11 then looks all set to follow a similar pattern of alternation between classical and pop music. At first we see Henry alone

listening to Bach on the radio. Annie is “pleased” with him and “congratulates” him on recognising it is Bach (90) yet this apparent agreement between the two is deceptive. Henry already knows that Annie has been unfaithful to him so his conversion to Bach is at best too little or too late if we see shared musical tastes having some link with marital harmony as the play appears to invite us to. However, Henry is quick to contest the superiority of Bach. It is, of course, well known that the song shows the direct influence of Bach’s Air on a G string, but Henry pretends to claim that it was Bach who did the borrowing (90). We should not be surprised at such reverse logic which is typical of much of the play. Henry’s spirited celebration of the contemporary pop song is to be seen in the context of his despair as he tries to assume a posture of “dignified cuckoldry” (91). It constitutes a victory of sorts. At the end of the scene when he is left alone to listen to the music of his choice, he first smiles: “He stands listening to it, smiling at its Bach until the vocals start. Then the smile gets overtaken” (94). The suggestion is that the Procul Harum song corresponds to Henry’s emotional state at this point, just as the Righteous Brothers’ song reflected Max’s defeat and despair earlier. Music therefore contributes to the many examples of parallel scenes in the play. It also serves as a relay when language breaks down. As Leslie Thompson puts it in his article on the subtext of *The Real Thing* in *Modern Drama*: “When Henry’s mask finally slips, only the audience is there to see and to hear the monosyllabic cry of pain” (547). It is through music that this communion is made possible.

The use of musical extracts seems to offer an emotional outlet to Henry whose language is a perfect vehicle for intellectual argument but inadequate when it comes to expressing emotion. He admits as much himself: “I don’t know how to write love. I try to write it properly, and it just comes out embarrassing” (44). It is significant that in this very same scene Henry finds himself using a phrase pronounced by his daughter which he had originally dismissed as “*ersatz*” (76): “Exclusive rights isn’t love, it’s colonization” (91). Even language seems to be failing him.

In the final scene in which the unfortunate Brodie gets his comeuppance, there is another shift in focus. Poor old Brodie with his Glaswegian accent, imitated or mocked in the earlier rehearsal scene (88) or in the television broadcast scene (94), and heavy-handed prose “half

as long as *Das Kapital* and only twice as funny” (58) is no match for the combined rhetorical forces of Henry and Annie. Are we to conclude that the bowl of dip smashed into Brodie’s face constitutes a victory for the English language, the Eng. Lit. brigade (57) and Englishness in general? This would seem to be suggested by the analogy between using language and constructing a cricket bat. This point is made by Toby Zinman:

[...]There is a quality of high Englishness about his work, his characters are almost inevitably well-educated, ironical and quick-witted, and when they are not, like the loutish Brodie in *The Real Thing*, they are despicable. (120)

It is one of the paradoxes of Stoppard’s work and of Stoppard himself that they (and some of his characters, like Henry) have come to represent Englishness although in fact he was born in Czechoslovakia and only moved to England after the war. Are we to see the play as striking a victory for the stage against such inferior upstarts as the TV or cinema? We cannot really be sure, notably because of the way Stoppard concludes his play. Just when we think that Procul Harum has struck the decisive blow for English pop music of a superior kind, Henry switches the radio on again. “Absently he clicks on the little radio, which starts playing, softly “I’m a Believer” by the Monkees. He is immediately beguiled” (100). First, let us notice the group. The Monkees was put together for an American TV series (an English lead singer and three Americans) as part of an explicitly commercial endeavour to rival The Beatles in the mid-sixties. Only two of the four were actually musicians and the songs on the TV show were played by “real” musicians. As for the words of the song (written by Neil Diamond), they suggest that love has little to do with reality and everything to do with believing. This seems quite an apt description of the theatre as well and, as such, constitutes a fitting way to end the play. We might then want to expand on Michael Billington’s comment in *Stoppard the Playwright*. He writes: “Stoppard’s major contribution to modern British drama thus far was to help demolish the barriers between serious and fun theatre” (132). As we have seen, *The Real Thing* does more than this. It contests the barriers between serious music and commercial music, between American and home-grown music and implicitly between the stage and other media. Not only is it impossible to separate the highbrow from the low-brow, they seem to be interdependent. On one of the rare occasions when we

see Henry at home not listening to music, he is described as “alone, sitting in a chair doing nothing” (81). It is as though there was a link between Henry’s activity as a writer and his listening to music. When one stops, the other stops, too.

To return to the idea of the play’s intertextuality, two points could be raised. Stoppard chooses songs of diverse origin and this mirrors the diversity of his textual borrowings, which range from a real 17th century tragedy to Stoppard’s imaginary 20th century science-fiction screenplay. These texts associate the universe of the play with a series of equally fictitious universes. The songs, however, cannot be firmly contained in a fictional world. Certain of these songs will be known and recognised by the spectators (the Procul Harum and Righteous Brothers songs certainly, the Monkees probably and perhaps even Herman’s Hermits at the time of the original performance). The act of listening to a particular recording blocks the theatrical process at one level and takes the spectators out of Henry’s universe. We respond with our own experience, memories and associations since we know the songs from another context. Yet, because we listen *with* Henry, we find the music encouraging us to focus on his reactions to it, thereby drawing us back into the fiction.

Although critics have often commented on the parallels between *The Real Thing* and Stoppard’s private life at the time of writing, Stoppard himself claimed the play was actually a kind of structural game of reversals and inversions (Zinman 130). While not ruling out the autobiographical dimension, I would suggest that the inclusion of pop songs makes a significant contribution to the game of hide-and-seek Stoppard is playing on and with the audience in the search for the elusive Real Thing.

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