

Playing with the Audience:
Performative Interactions in Tom Stoppard's *The Real
Inspector Hound*

Introduction: Performance Studies and Theatre as Event

The Real Inspector Hound is a one-act comedy Tom Stoppard wrote in 1968, immediately after the stunning success of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The play substantially 'inspects' the role and agency of the audience, the performative nature of role-playing and the complex relationships between illusion and reality. As the focus of this essay is to explain how Stoppard's orchestration of theatrical tools succeeds in illustrating the 'performative' power of theatre as a means for such an 'inspection', some introductory remarks will outline the place, validity and nature of theatre and the role of the audience in the wider framework of Performance Studies, as it is in these terms that the efficacy of Stoppard's comedy will be tested.

In the years in which the playwright was taking his first steps on the British scene a greater focalization on theatrical practice and process, or better, on theatre 'as' practice and process, made for a broadening of theatre studies' former areas of inquiry and a re-theorizing of 'performance' as a concept that has given rise, thanks to the American scholar and theatre director Richard Schechner, to Performance Studies as a distinct discipline. Then, due to a felicitous convergence of linguistic, sociological, anthropological and philosophical investments in the discourses of performance and performativity, "performance has floated free of theatre precincts – as Elin Diamond puts it – to describe an enormous range of cultural activity", from "popular entertainments" to "speech acts, folklore, political demonstrations, conference behavior, rituals, medical and religious healing, and aspects of everyday life".¹

¹ Elin Diamond, "Introduction", in Elin Diamond, ed., *Performance and Cultural Politics* (London-New York: Routledge, 1996), 2.

² Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London-New York: Routledge, 1996), 6-7.

In his critical introduction to performance theory, Marvin Carlson remarks that, given the contemporary world's high degree of self-consciousness, reflexiveness, obsession with simulation and theatricalization in every aspect of social life, it is no surprise if performance has become a dominant interdisciplinary trope: "With performance as a kind of critical wedge, the metaphor of theatricality has moved out of the arts into almost every aspect of modern attempts to understand our condition and activities, into almost every branch of the human sciences".² Paradoxically, however, theatre studies have come to be more and more overlooked. Especially since the revolutionary and irreverent Sixties, theatre has become the favourite target of a number of theorists and practitioners persuaded that it is indissolubly linked with the static idea of drama as a mimetic artefact, with the authority of the dramatic Text and of the Author, and with a concept of the audience as a passive and disciplined observer confined to the 'black box' of the proscenium

performance, with its darkened auditorium and its fourth wall separating the set onstage. In performance, on the contrary, as Diamond stresses, “in opposition to theatre structures and conventions” and “in line with poststructuralist claims of the death of the author”, the focus has shifted “from authority to effect, from text to body, to the spectator’s freedom to make and transform meanings”.³

In response to such claims, especially to the one that takes dramatic performance “merely as a reiteration of texts, a citation that imports literary or textual authority into performance”,⁴ W. B. Worthen laments that, notwithstanding the poststructuralist and postmodern subversion of the idea of Text as an authoritative and enclosed work or object subjected to interpretation into an intertextual (and palimpsestic) field of “play, activity, production, practice”,⁵ the two different conceptions of the text continue to be “blurred” and “compacted in one another”.⁶ So that drama continues to be identified with the ‘work’, and not to be considered itself as a ‘performance’, whose meanings are continually and differently produced and reproduced by the performers (both actors and spectators in the case of theatre) each time the text is ‘enacted’. The stage – Worthen maintains – is not a place where the ‘original’ meanings of the written text are finally disclosed to the public, but a space where a fundamental negotiation takes place and a new text, or any number of new texts are produced (‘textualization’). In the performative environment of theatre the “text is absorbed into the multifarious verbal and non verbal discourses of theatrical production, transformed into an entirely incommensurable thing, an event”, that is to say “a performance”.⁷ Also, according to the semiotician Marco De Marinis, “every theatrical performance (every single theatrical occurrence) constitutes an *unrepeatable, unique event*, an ephemeral production that is different each time in spite of all attempts at standardization ... and recordings”.⁸ But of even greater importance, De Marinis adds, is that since theatrical events, like all events, are governed by a condition of simultaneity between production and reception, it is the reception that “qualifies or disqualifies it as a performance text”.⁹

So, if theatre is, just like any other performance, a “showing doing”,¹⁰ and if beyond sharing “an emphasis on the body and on the verbal, visual, auditive, and gestural signs”, it obviously shares with it the absolute necessity “to be performed in front of an audience, which is a co-creator of meaning”,¹¹ there is no reason why a text-based prejudicial opposition between ‘performance’ and theatre should be retained. On the contrary, in restating the specificity of the latter as a ‘performative’ site, Jill Dolan underlines its ‘uniqueness’¹² among the other performative “geographies of learning”, since theatre “offers, literally, a place to investigate some of the questions posed *only* metaphorically elsewhere”. So, instead of “leaving theatre architecture to study the world as a stage”¹³, it would be profitable, as Janette Reinelt also advocates, to see the “performance as a model for the emergence of novelty and the theatrical as the space of its emergence”.¹⁴

It is in this light that the dynamics of Stoppard’s traditional but markedly performative theatrical piece will be explored. Seeing it as a site of investigation, not least taking the cue from the presence of a ‘real inspector’ in it, clues for the

³ Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics*, 3.

⁴ W. B. Worthen, “Drama, Performativity and Performance”, *PMLA*, 113.5 (October 1998), 1098.

⁵ Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text”, in *Image/Music/Text* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 162.

⁶ W. B. Worthen, “Disciplines of the Text / Sites of Performance”, *TDR*, 39.1 (1995), 15.

⁷ Worthen, “Drama, Performativity and Performance”, 1100.

⁸ Marco De Marinis, *The Semiotics of Performance*, trans. by Aine O’Healy (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 48. The same goes for the individuals’ social performances. As Carlson affirms in *Performance. A Critical Introduction*: “Performance is always performance *for* someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that audience is the self” (6).

¹⁰ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London-New York: Routledge, 2013), 22.

¹¹ Janelle Reinelt, “The Politics of Discourse: Performativity Meets Theatricality”, *SubStance*, 31.2/3, Issue 98/99 (2002), 211.

¹² Jill Dolan, “Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance and the Performatives”, *Theatre Journal*, 45.4 (December 1993), 418.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 431e 429.

¹⁴ Reinelt, “The Politics of Discourse”, 213.

¹⁵ This is, for Victor Turner, the purpose of theatre: “To look at itself a society must cut out a piece of itself for inspection”, in order to scrutinize it and, possibly, “rearrange it”. Cit. in Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London-New York: Routledge, 1997), 105.

¹⁶ Erika Fischer-Liche, “From Theater to Theatricality. How to Construct Reality”, *Theater Research International*, 20.2 (Summer 1995), 104.

¹⁷ See the lecture he gave at McMaster University in 1988, “The Event and the Text”, in Paul Delaney, ed., *Tom Stoppard in Conversation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 199-211.

¹⁸ Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, 18-19.

multiple ways in which we (both performers and audience in our life) can act upon reality and can be acted upon can be detected,¹⁵ together with the awareness that theatre, as Erika Fischer-Lichte argues, unlike everyday life, deliberately provides an experience of the “very process of construction [of reality] and the conditions underlying it. . . . Thus, theater turns out to be a field of experimentation where we can test our capacity for and the possibilities of constructing reality”.¹⁶

‘Investigations’ into Audience Response

The Real Inspector Hound was put on the stage in 1968, a crucial year for the anti-authoritarian mood and actions that were informing the search for more open, democratic and creative alternatives to any kind of institutionalized regime of power and knowledge. An iconoclastic experimentation was taking place in theatre as well in the form of anti-conventional and anti-representational performances, such as Happenings and Performance Art, aimed at demolishing the barrier between illusion and reality, and between the stage and the audience. Yet Stoppard does not seem to have ever shared the restless anxiety for modernity and revolution of these movements. On the contrary, the playwright has often been accused of a slight conservatism, not least concerning the structurally refined edifice of his comedies, if compared with the transgressive (in)formal solutions of the Avant-garde. Nevertheless, his idea of theatre and of text is perfectly in line with the one that has been explored in the introductory section. In conferences, speeches and interviews Stoppard has often stressed that he can only conceive of his theatre as an ‘event’, that is, both something singular and unique – that truly comes into existence, again and again, and always differently, only when it is experienced by the audience in a particular context – and something organic and changeable like fruit, vulnerable to the response of directors and actors in rehearsal. In fact the playwright has often changed his ‘texts’ as if they were always in progress, not only before and during, but even ‘after’ the first production, in part as a result of the audience’s response in performance.¹⁷ This “interactive nature of theatre”, as Susan Bennett explains in her seminal volume on *Theatre Audiences*, is due to the fact that the “playwright invariably shapes a text and the director invariably shapes a production to provoke particular expectations and responses within an audience. . . . Clearly then, the audience affects not only the performance but the dramatic text too”.¹⁸ But of course a transformative or ‘liminoid’ process which, according to the anthropologist Victor Turner, is crucial to a performance, also works the other way round. And Stoppard seems to want to explore precisely the way in which both dimensions, that of the performance/text and that of the audience, seem to interact and to be ‘reciprocally’ affected.

Aimed at this exploration, the play is built upon Stoppard’s beloved device of the play within the play, through which it becomes a sort of open machine with its nuts and bolts in full view. In fact the author has frequently asserted that he considers this work as a “mechanical toy” where all must fit together with a

clockwork precision,¹⁹ or as an entertaining game whose strict rules – paradoxically contemplating the eruption of chaos²⁰ – have to be respected if one wants it to work correctly and affect the audience. Pattern is really important here, and particularly apparent in the interlacing between the performers who act on the stage, inside the play-within-the-play, and the ones who are outside it and meant to act first as audience and then as co-performers. The play shows indeed such a complex and multilayered configuration that it is worth briefly introducing it, especially if we consider that this is not one of Stoppard's best known works.

First of all, inasmuch as the play-within-the-play contained in the comedy is a really badly performed and managed – and thus hilarious – parody of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, the whole work is mostly defined as a farcical parody of the excessively rational and causal genre of the 'whodunit', whose almost ritualistic development never fails to reassure the audience with its case solution. But the parody is comically and uncannily complicated by the presence among the play's audience of two critics whose task is to inspect and review the performance. They are the popular press first-string critic Birdboot, who has the habit of favourably reviewing female actresses in order to gain sexual favours in return, and the quality papers second-string critic Moon, who dreams of murdering his paper's first-string Higgs, while wondering if his stand-in, the third-string critic Puckeridge, has ever dreamed the same about him. When the performance begins, the two critics are caught expressing their critical opinions but also exchanging pleasantries and following their own personal thoughts, while on stage a situation very similar to that of *The Mousetrap* – which in 1968 was in its sixteenth year – takes place, with its classic drawing room setting in an isolated mansion and its characters involved in a mysterious murderous plot. Surprisingly, the first scene opens with the presence of a corpse on stage which strangely passes unnoticed not only by the critics 'in the audience' but also by the characters, who are seen playing cards and engaged in other trivial matters, until a farcical Inspector Hound reaches the house and discovers it. When the second Act of the mock-*Mousetrap* ends, the telephone on stage rings during the intermission. One of the critics, Moon, cannot prevent himself from answering, only to discover that the call is for Birdboot. Moon regains his seat among the audience, but Birdboot gets entrapped in the performance as the actors re-enter the stage and start to interact with him. Soon afterwards, after discovering that the victim is Moon's superior Higgs, Birdboot is killed, and, when also Moon is drawn into the play, he is killed as well. Astonishingly, the murderer of all victims is discovered to be the third-string critic Puckeridge, who has thus succeeded in eliminating both obstacles to his career: first-string Higgs and second-string Moon.

In this context, as stated by the stage directions, the presence and positioning of the two critics is crucial:

The first thing is that the audience appear to be confronted by their own reflection in a huge mirror. Impossible. However, back there in the gloom – not at the footlights – is a bank of plush seats, and pale smudges of faces. One of the seats in the front row is occupied by Moon. Between Moon and the auditorium is an acting area which repre-

¹⁹ See the 1978 interview for the South Bank Show (London Weekend Television), in Delaney, ed., *Tom Stoppard in Conversation*, 119.

²⁰ The majority of Stoppard's comedies – highly formalized structures always implying, and disrupted by, an anti-structural, liminal or carnivalesque movement ('play', farce or parody) – are 'performance' precisely in the sense given by Schechner of a necessary mix of ritual (seriousness, authority) and play (ambiguity, subversion). Cf. Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 89.

sents, in as realistic an idiom as possible, the drawing room of Muldoon Manor... The body of a man lies sprawled face down on the floor in front of a large chaise-longue.²¹

²¹ Tom Stoppard, *The Real Inspector Hound* (London: Samuel French, 1968), 1. Quotations all refer to this edition; references will henceforth be included in the text.

²² See the 1974 interview with the editors of *Theatre Quarterly*, “Ambushes for the Audience: Toward a High Comedy of Ideas”, in Delaney, ed., *Tom Stoppard in Conversation*, 70.

²³ *Ibid.*, 59-60. He also chose to represent critics because he had himself worked as a critic for *Scene* for some time.

²⁴ According to Schechner a performance is the “whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that take place ... from the time the first spectator enters the field of the performance ... to the time the last spectator leaves”. “Drama, Script, Theatre and Performance”, *TDR*, 17.3 (1973), 9.

²⁵ Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, 34.

²⁶ A theatre event requires “an audience to realise the multitude of possibilities... As each spectator, according to his part, enters into a dialogue with the work, the act of interpretation becomes a performance, an intervention”. David Savran, cit. in Helen Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 17-18.

²⁷ These terms are mainly drawn from Reader-response theory. See in particular Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory for Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore-London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

Even though having the critics seated not at the back of the stage but at the front – with their backs slightly angled towards the real audience instead of facing it – has always worked better,²² the idea of a mirror positioned in front of the audience, albeit “impossible”, is focal because it provides the lens through which we are invited to approach the play’s primary concern with audience-response and stage-audience interactivity. Combined or just made to coincide with the presence of two members of the audience who, as Stoppard envisaged, are in the guise of critics only for the purpose of parody,²³ and who are more generally there to represent ‘us’, the mirror image serves to make the (real) audience extremely aware of its own presence, role and agency before, during and at the end of the performance, but also of the other spectators’ presence in the communal situation they find themselves in. The two critics in the fictional frame – which usually, but not here, demarcates the playing space – are seen taking their place, making a noise, browsing their programmes and talking to each other before the play-within-the-play starts, and then, even when the play has started, continuing to make a noise with a box of chocolates or commenting on what they are watching and hearing. Thus the audience in the outer frame – the non fictional one – confronted with this common behaviour, is made to reflect upon it and is also put in the uncanny position of having reasons to critique it. This ‘reflection’, so soon established in the pre-production phase of the play-within-the-play performance,²⁴ provides the comedy with its auto-reflexive attack which, by emphasizing its theatricality, has the effect of critically distancing the audience and preventing the establishment of perfect illusion from the start.

This is an effect that Susan Bennett sees reinforced by the presence of the mysterious dead body visible on the scene before the on-stage performance even begins: it “acts as an irresistible lure for the audience” since the latter is “drawn to speculate as to whether the body is real or not (an actor or a dummy) and to construct elements of plot to explain this opening frame”.²⁵ The body acts as a catalyst for the audience, or as a stimulus for decoding, inasmuch as it triggers its interpretative processes around both the nature of the reality – or the realities – it is being confronted with and the kind of story it is called to construct from the clues afforded. Thus, since the very beginning, the audience is itself made to perform the role of ‘inspector’ dealing with the play’s complexities and oddities;²⁶ a detective role that fits the members of the mirror-audience perfectly well, if not better, given their specificity as critics. Indeed both Moon and Birdboot are led to interpret the play they are watching by filling the ‘gaps’ and ‘negations’ it presents,²⁷ but the down-to-earth Birdboot is the one asking more questions and looking for more solutions according to his horizon of expectations linked to the whodunit genre. Accordingly, he sees the play as one of revenge and jealousy, he is obsessed by his anxiety to discover the murderer and brought to make pragmatic guesses that

will actually prove correct. He must also be used to dealing with more naturalistic plays, in which a classic Aristotelian beginning, climax and dénouement can be easily detected, as he explicitly admits to be in search of such a satisfying structure and is completely at loss in decoding alienating effects, such as the pause with which the play begins: “You can’t start with a pause! If you want my opinion, there’s a total panic back there (*He laughs and subsides*)” (2). But when he insists that his colleague should “look” at the stage and realize that it’s a “sort of thriller”, a “who killed thing” (2), he shares with Moon his inability to see the corpse, showing that, as pointed out by Bennett, members of the audience, in their freedom to select their own processes of interpretation, may also choose to ignore or resist focal points: “[i]nstead of accepting the sign-cluster which represents the centre of the action, concentration may be diverted to signs other than those foregrounded by the performance”.²⁸ However, unlike Birdboot, Moon looks for more hidden and profound meanings and for more transcendent resonances. In response to Birdboot’s question if he can see that it is just a whodunit, he answers: “I suppose so. *Underneath*” (2, my italics), and continues to comment on the performance by highlighting its dealing with catalyst figures capable of disrupting the ontological securities of comfortable people (9), its alignment “on the side of life” or concernment “with the nature of identity” (16), until he finally wonders if one is not entitled to ask, “Where’s God?” (17).

Notwithstanding their different interpretations, both Moon and Birdboot tend to obtusely and deliberately ignore the possibility of a range of potentially complex and diverse audience responses when they both make the mistake that Diamond blames traditional theatre reviewers for making:²⁹ thinking they are culturally entitled to speak for the mass. When they perform their role as critics, assuming their public masks and voice – usually ‘clearing their throat’ beforehand – they often use ‘we’ in asserting their bombastic opinions, and project their own response onto the rest of the audience. But, even though there is and there must be a collective and collaborative response to a performance – which is actually capable of influencing its delivery – subjective responses are to be taken into due account. “[E]ach audience is made up of individuals who bring their own cultural reference points, political beliefs, sexual preferences, personal histories, and immediate preoccupations to their interpretation of a production”,³⁰ observes Freshwater, making a point which is also patently illustrated by Stoppard’s play. Especially when Moon’s and Birdboot’s quite divergent responses are shown to be motivated, through the exposition of their streams of thought and feelings, not so much by the play’s inherent meanings but by their strictly personal life facts and frames of reference.³¹

The last two decades have seen the growth of an entire new aesthetic, together with an expanding branch of studies, which supports the view of a new ‘affective turn’ justified by a willingness to return to questions of readers’ affective responses, that is, to questions concerning the embodied effect or influence of works of art on the reader or viewer.³² In Marguerite La Caze and Henry Martin Lloyd’s opinion, affects arise in the midst of ‘in-between-ness’: “between the thinking mind and the

²⁸ See Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, 150. In its evidence, the corpse proves to be indeed the main missing piece of the puzzle, as the final discovery of its identity will be the key to the performance as a whole. Its invisibility or displacement is, however, also the sign of an impossible coherence and causality of meanings.

²⁹ Elin Diamond, “The Violence of We: Politicizing Identification”, in Janelle Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, eds., *Critical Theory and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 403-12.

³⁰ Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience*, 5-6.

³¹ Stoppard constructs this difference by skilfully interlacing their inconsequential lines, so as to make evident that their thoughts proceed on completely separate tracks.

³² For a recent discussion of Affect Theory, see Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique”, *Critical Inquiry*, 37.3 (Spring 2011), 434-472.

³³ Marguerite La Caze and Henry Martin Lloyd, eds., “Editor’s Introduction: Philosophy and the Affective Turn”, *Parrhesia*, 13 (2011), 3.

³⁴ Jacques Rancière, cit. in Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience*, 17.

³⁵ The expression comes from an essay dedicated to an American novel considered to be an exemplary piece of performative writing. Mark B. N. Hansen, “The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*”, *Contemporary Literature*, 45.4 (Winter 2004), 597-636.

³⁶ Howard D. Pearce, “Stage as Mirror: *Travesties*”, in Harold Bloom, ed., *Tom Stoppard* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 59.

acting body, between the power to affect and the power to be affected, between two bodies, and between bodies and the world”.³³ In *The Real Inspector Hound* Birdboot and Moon affectively respond to what they are watching by semi-consciously linking “what they see with what they have seen and told, done and dreamed”.³⁴ Birdboot is a womanizer, and the deceptive role he sees performed by Simon, a handsome stranger who has apparently succeeded in seducing both the female characters of the play, Felicity and Cynthia, makes him extremely nervous about his own behaviour with actresses and guilty for betraying his wife, without mentioning the fact that he has himself flirted with the actress acting as Felicity and is now becoming infatuated with the one playing the role of Cynthia. Moon, maybe unconsciously affected by the early sight of the corpse on the stage and then more consciously influenced by the murderous plot, cannot avoid daydreaming about killing his superior, the first-string critic Higgs, so as to shine as a ‘full moon’, without the eclipses provided by the cumbersome presence of Higgs, and to become the protagonist in his own social life. Unlike Birdboot, he is more prone to abstract himself from the realistic plot and the concreteness of the performance and to get lost in his preoccupations. However, both critics find themselves in one way or another narcissistically reflected in what they see as if in a mirror, because they both cannot help but see what they are led to see by their reference frame. In fact here the theatrical situation operates as a kind of machine for producing, through ‘fictional effects’, what might be called – borrowing an expression by Mark Hansen – “reality *affects*”,³⁵ with an evident shift in emphasis from the ‘text’ as a referential object to the necessarily real ‘impact’ that it has on the embodied life of its spectators.

A Mousetrap for the Audience: Uneasy Interactions

Given the guilt-feelings of both critics for what they do and/or dream of doing, one cannot help recalling that Agatha Christie’s choice of the title for her *Mousetrap* thriller, which Stoppard is here purposely parodying, derives from the third Act of *Hamlet*, in which the Prince arranges a play to be performed before the eyes of his uncle Claudius; a play that, like a mirror “held up to nature”, would “catch the conscience of the king” and allow him to recognize in his affected reactions his guilt. Likewise, Moon and Birdboot seem to be progressively caught up in the mirror they think the play is holding up to their conscience.

Yet, theatre cannot be seen as a perfect mimesis of reality, otherwise “life and dream, stage and world would flow into one another indistinguishably”.³⁶ As Howard D. Pearce points out, the mirror-image, so frequently used as a metaphor for theatre, posits both sameness and difference, that is, identity and otherness, subject and object in a perpetual relation of coexistence. It gives us relations rather than simple reflections, and must serve as a means of gaining perspective on self and/in reality, that is, on the way we construct our identity always in relation to something other or different. As Ragnhild Tronstad reminds us, theatre itself is a metaphor and, to function as such and be effective as a tool of perspective, it needs

the two planes of fiction and reality, which constitute its vehicle and tenor, to be perceived as separate. Tronstad draws on Josette Féral's notion that:

... theatricality is to be found in the relation between two spaces: the real space and the fictional one. The real space is the actual physical one, while the fictional space is a virtual or imagined space created either by the actor, or by the spectator alone. For theatricality to happen, the spectator must see the 'real' space through a fictional framing, which makes this space occur differently.³⁷

If the spectator is unable, or is given the tempting opportunity not to distinguish between the two spaces and between what is real and what is fictional, then the play of reflections is complicated and, to quote a famous line from *Othello*, "Chaos is come again".³⁸

And chaos is exactly what occurs when at the end of the second intermission, after answering the phone onstage, Birdboot, who is more a kind of 'immersive' spectator, gets entrapped in the plot as if he were blinded by his own reflection. From this point on the necessary interactions between the performance and the critics/audience stop being abstract – just interpretative and affective – and become 'actual', and – as V. L. Cahn observes – "madness rules".³⁹ When Birdboot is pressed into playing Simon, "fending off accusations against the character with defences of his offstage actions",⁴⁰ he is accused by Moon of making it turn "into a complete farce" (29). When he takes part in a card game which replicates the one played in the first Act, the card players start to use a nonsense language including terms from a range of games such as bridge, chess, roulette and bingo, so that it too becomes a mirror of the chaos enveloping the play. When, during the interval, he shockingly discovers the corpse to be Higgs and warns Moon, he is suddenly shot; and when Moon intervenes and gets entrapped in the role of Inspector Hound, he is shot by Major Magnus, who turns out to be Puckeridge.

However, the levels of reality, piled so insanely on top of one another, are ultimately complicated when the actors who previously impersonated Simon and Hound take the place of Moon and Birdboot among the audience. Assuming the role of the critics, they also reuse some of their hyperbolic or sophisticated terms to evaluate the play, but this time negatively, denigrating rather than praising the performance. They express their contempt for what they see as a hysterical and "complete ragbag" (30) and for the fact that "Some of the cast seem to have given up acting altogether, apparently aghast, with every reason, at finding themselves involved in an evening that would, and indeed will, make the angels weep" (31). Hound also affirms that he can't "see any reason for the shower of filth and sexual allusion foisted onto an unsuspecting public in the guise of modernity at all costs" (31), making us 'suspect', actually, that Stoppard is also alluding to the chaotic Performance Art experiments that were being conducted at the time – to be viewed either as "taboo-smashing liberation" or "anything-goes descent into anarchy".⁴¹ That was a period in which the long-lasting prejudice of audience passivity and an acute desire to provoke, shock and unsettle spectators were triggering, especially

³⁷ Josette Féral, cit. in Ragnhild Tronstad, "Could the World Become a Stage? Theatricality and Metaphorical Structures", *SubStance*, 31.2/3, Issue 98/99 (2002), 217.

³⁸ In "The Event and the Text", Stoppard asserts: "This fourth wall, here, which you can't see ... is there all the time, and when something just goes like a needle through that wall the event is just destroyed". Delaney, ed., *Tom Stoppard in Conversation*, 210.

³⁹ V. L. Cahn, *Beyond Absurdity: The Plays of Tom Stoppard* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1979), 100.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Michael Billington, *Stoppard the Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1987), 68. Stoppard has frequently taken a stand against the extroversion and anarchy of experimental art. See Delaney, ed., *Tom Stoppard in Conversation*, for multiple occurrences.

in the Avant-garde, the production of ‘interactive’ performances (no more representations, but ‘presentations’ of pseudo-real situations) in which spectators were made the primary focus of interest and were directly involved in the action of the play in the guise of “spect-actors”.⁴² As Helen Freshwater recounts, in the Sixties, and even more in the Seventies, this almost explosive preoccupation with the ‘active’ audience also took on a notably aggressive, even manically desperate and coercive form, to the point of producing not necessarily empowerment, but disturbing effects.⁴³

⁴² The term refers to the well known model of audience participation Augusto Boal formulated for his Forum Theatre. See his *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto, 1979).

⁴³ Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience*, 50.

⁴⁴ Stoppard himself has said that the name ‘Moon’ indicates “a person to whom things happen”. Cit. in R. A. Andretta, *Tom Stoppard: An Analytical Study of his Plays* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publication in association with Vikas Publishing House, 1992), 98.

⁴⁵ Michael Billington, *Stoppard the Playwright*, 101.

⁴⁵ Magnus confesses his plan to lure Moon just before removing his disguise: “we had a shrewd suspicion he would turn up here – and he walked into the trap!” (33).

⁴⁷ Weldon B. Durham, “Ritual of Riddance in Tom Stoppard’s *The Real Inspector Hound*”, in John Harty III, ed., *Tom Stoppard: A Casebook* (New York: Garland, 1988), 91.

In the parodic *mise en scène* of *The Real Inspector Hound*, such disturbing effects seem to affect both the fictive-made-active audience – particularly Moon, who doesn’t feel at ease with his new role as Inspector Hound since he is coerced against his nature to take action, improvise and interact with the other characters in order to make the play progress⁴⁴ – and the ‘real’ audience. The latter, in particular, is jerked out of its complacency by looking at the way the two critics, who previously thought themselves to be invulnerable – much as members of the audience feel at an ordinary performance – are crudely treated on stage (they are both killed), so that “[t]he final sensation is one of nervous wonder, as those on the outside of the turmoil await the moment when they shall be drawn irrevocably into an action that destroys them”.⁴⁵ This is essentially due to the fact that, as Weldon B. Durham points out, when the surprising solution arrives with the discovery of the mousetrap organized by Puckeridge⁴⁶ – who belongs to the world of the critics (and also ours) and not to the one of the play-within-the-play – the audience comes to realize the part of accomplice it has played in springing the murderous plot: “This scheming killer has written a playlet, rented a theatre, ordered scenery, hired a cast, rehearsed it and, to complete the illusion of a play in progress, he has assembled an audience”.⁴⁷

The result is that the real audience, so caught up in the play’s trap, is led to question both its own ‘role’ and its own ‘reality’. With respect to the former, for example, if the audience has acted as an accomplice, it might be entitled to wonder if it too must be considered as a ‘suspect’ liable to be punished for having participated in the construction of the plot, or whether it just wished to fulfil its desires by injecting its own beliefs, dreams and expectations into the play. Just like the poor Moon, who has been willing to see Higgs dead, and who, for this reason, is explicitly, even though wrongly, accused of being his murderer:

Magnus: ‘I put it to you! – are you the real Inspector Hound?!’
Moon: ‘You know damn well I’m not! What’s it all about? I only dreamed... sometimes I dreamed’.
Cynthia: ‘So, it was you!’
Mrs Drudge: ‘The Madman!’
Felicity: ‘The Killer!’
....
Mrs Drudge: ‘The stranger in our midst! (33)

Since Moon is a representative of the audience, and the audience is often charged with nourishing secret desires to change ends or wondering what it would be like

to be drawn into the action on stage,⁴⁸ the audience is brought to question its own role in more general terms also.

As for questioning its own 'reality', the matter is even more complicated. With both the fictive and the real audience brought into the frame of the play-within-the-play, *The Real Inspector Hound* becomes a hyper-theatrical chamber of mirrors in which the reflections of alarmingly overlapping and indistinguishable planes of reality and fiction intersect. Tim Brassell's essay particularly highlights the disturbing effect that this knocking down of the theatrical 'fourth wall', with its consequential confusion and collision of two, three or 'n' levels, produces on the (real) audience, which is left "to contemplate which level of statement (if either) can claim to relate to 'truth' or 'reality'".⁴⁹ By changing the rules of the game, Stoppard produces in the audience a "deep sense of disorientation ... because [he] is not merely juggling with conventions and characters; he is jolting us from one kind of assumed reality into another with quite different terms of reference... [he] demonstrates with frightening ease that planes of reality are neither exclusive nor even consistent" and, displaying "the unreality of *all* acting", he invites the spectators to consider "whether, in terms of another focus beyond their perception, they too are no more than actors in a play" and to beg "the inevitable, logical question: whose illusion is this?".⁵⁰

Actually, according to the much abused metaphor of "all the world is a stage",⁵¹ we all live as if we were actors playing a role. In his well-known text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman set out in 1959 his sociological theory of the individual more or less consciously offering his performance and putting on his own show for the benefit of other people by wearing a public mask, which Goffman calls 'front'. So, one can speak of performing a self in daily life just as readily as one speaks of performing a role in a theatre. The complication is provided by the questions of how 'free' one is to act his/her own part, how much agency one is provided with, and to what extent one can consider him/herself as an actor rather than as a spectator. In other words, is anybody endowed with the power to act instead of merely being acted upon, thus responding to pre-scripted roles? Such questions have been also discussed by Performance Studies theorists such as Schechner, with his formulation of the "restored behaviour" – meaning that one always performs strips of behaviour already behaved, so that performance in everyday life is actually a reiteration of "twice-behaved behaviours"⁵² – and by poststructuralists, who have used the term 'performatives' to indicate the repetition of culturally pre-scripted roles in society. However, just like any script in theatre can never be repeated and received in exactly the same way, so performative behaviours can always contain potentially deviating or disrupting differences when they are constantly re-enacted in different and shifting relational contexts.

In *The Real Inspector Hound*, the problem receives a 'literal' treatment when during the second intermission Birdboot enters the play and there is no evolution towards the third Act but a nearly perfect re-run of the first, with Felicity and Cynthia repeating the same cues and Birdboot interacting with them as if it were 'him' they are interacting with, and not Simon, as they actually call him according to the

⁴⁸ Billington also recalls the "impotence complex" from which, according to Jerzi Grotowski, critics often suffer, "as they sit nightly watching other people re-create life". *Stoppard the Playwright*, 68.

⁴⁹ Tim Brassell, *Tom Stoppard: An Assessment* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 96.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵¹ A quotation from the Third Scene of the Second Act of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

⁵² Schechner has exposed his theory of "restored behaviour" in a number of essays. See for all the recently revised edition of his *Performance Studies: An Introduction*.

limiting script.⁵³ However, the lines now bear new meanings because of the altered circumstances of the performance. Felicity delivers to Birdboot lines identical to those addressed to Simon in the first encounter, but she does it with “a double import”,⁵⁴ given her flirt with the critic in ‘real’ life. As Brassell notes, “without departing from the text, she can break out of her role and address him personally”.⁵⁵ In addition, when things chaotically progress, growing differences emerge – some really disruptive thanks to the uneasy interactions with the new performers – thus departing from the conventional script one would expect. However, this does not prevent Puckeridge’s plot reaching its programmed end. Birdboot and Moon die on the stage after having taken the bait with which they had been lured into the idea of passing from a state of passive onlookers to one of active doers. As a result, the problem can be said to receive a contradictory and complex treatment, reflecting the likewise complex and contradictory processes by which, in real life, through repetition (reiteration of inscribed values) and variation (resistance to them), one can be said to be free to construct his/her own relations and his/her own reality.

If seen in this light, an entertainment like this, no matter how merely playful it may seem or, conversely, precisely ‘due’ to its (chaotic) playfulness, can also be explored in its power to expose, examine and critique more abstract questions such as the overall inscription/resistance mechanisms of participation and agency: “Who is invited to speak, under what conditions and what that is truly meaningful can be said?”.⁵⁶ An ‘entertainment’ like this, in its etymologically inscribed liminality,⁵⁷ can be examined as a fruitful site of investigation because, as Diamond remarks, it is when “performativity materializes as performance . . . between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between someone’s body and the conventions of embodiment” that we can have “access to cultural meanings and critique”.⁵⁸

⁵³ Cynthia often exclaims: “We are not free!”.

⁵⁴ Brassell, *Tom Stoppard: An Assessment*, 98.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ I borrow the words used by Matt Adams for his audience participatory project, Blast Theory, <<http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/>>, 10 December 2013.

⁵⁷ The very word entertainment embodies the ‘liminal’, for “it means from the Latin ‘to hold between’, to be neither this nor that, but the problem in the middle, a problem that staged in liminal surrounds, entertains rather than threatens”. Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), 41.

⁵⁸ Diamond, *Performance and Cultural Politics*, 5.