

Tom Stoppard, *Darkside*, a BBC play for radio incorporating *The Dark Side of the Moon* by Pink Floyd, lyrics by Roger Waters, Faber & Faber, 2013, pp. 55, 2 CDs.

Czech-born Tom Stoppard is arguably the most universally acclaimed living British playwright. From the play which made him widely known virtually overnight, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) to his most recent full-length original play, *Rock'n'roll* (2006), this playwright has enjoyed constant success among international audiences and critics alike. Stoppard is also the author of several screenplays (including *Brazil*, for the 1985 cult film directed by Terry Gilliam, and *Shakespeare in Love*, for the 1998 multi-award winning film by John Madden) and a master of adaptations, having adapted novels and other authors' plays for both stage and screen, including Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (adapted for television in 1975 and directed by Stephen Frears), John Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* (for the 1987 film by Steven Spielberg), a series of acclaimed versions of Anton Chekhov's plays (*The Seagull*, 1997; *Ivanov*, 2008; *The Cherry Orchard*, 2009), Pirandello's *Henry IV* (2004), up to the more recent adaptations of Ford Madox Ford's novel *Parade's End* and Lev Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, both penned in 2012 for television and cinema respectively.

His radio plays, on the other hand, constitute one of the most precious facets of the work by this prolific playwright, but one which is far lesser known internationally, as radio plays in general are seldom produced in other countries in translation. This is a pity, as Stoppard's plays for this medium include gems such as *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1972) – a reflection on how one often translates visual perceptions into fallible concepts to tragic denouements – and *In the Native State* (1991) – a masterpiece of

codeswitching, later adapted into the play *Indian Ink* (1995) – to name but two.

After a long lapse of time since his last full-length radio play in 1991, and with the exception of the short piece *On 'Dover Beach'* (2007), it was thus a great pleasure to be able to listen, and now to read, Stoppard's latest venture in the field: *Darkside* was broadcast on BBC Radio 2 on 26 August 2013 and published by Faber & Faber in November 2013 in a package including the CD of the play and the complete script as well as Roger Waters's original lyrics from the album. The impressive cast includes Bill Nighy as Dr Antrobus/the Witch Finder, Rufus Sewell as Mr Baggott/Ethics Man, Adrian Scarborough as Fat Man and Amaka Okafor as Emily. A second CD, with the unusual contents of PDF files of the text translated into various languages, completes the package.

Created as a celebration for the 40th anniversary of Pink Floyd's iconic album *The Dark Side of the Moon*, *Darkside* is the occasion for Stoppard to dwell yet again on a cherished theme, the music and thoughts of this influential British rock band, also one of the inspirations of his latest original play for the stage, *Rock'n'roll* (2006), which evoked in several moments the genius of Syd Barrett and evidently relished the mysteriousness of this fallen artist.

With *Darkside*, Stoppard has written a compelling drama based on and inspired by the album's fascinating meditations on fear, madness, greed and the passage of time. It is an abstract interpretation of Pink Floyd's music and its possible meanings, dramatised by a small cast of recurring characters, with the album's songs woven throughout the piece as a soundtrack.

The play begins with the same heartbeat that opens *The Dark Side Of The Moon* album. As the increasingly chaotic music builds we are suddenly called to witness with our ears an impending disaster: a runaway train speeds towards an unstable bridge. Just be-

fore it plunges into the river, a sort of superhero named Ethics Man appears and diverts the train to another track, saving the lives of everyone on board. But now the speeding locomotive is headed toward a young boy who is standing on the other track. He doesn't see the train coming, and is quickly run down and killed. Without apology, Ethics Man tells a crowd of horrified people that he «did what had to be done».

This is just the first of a series of thought experiments and moral dilemmas, running through the hour-long play, which is vividly imagined by Emily, a philosophy student. The play dwells on grand themes which are both thought-provoking and imbued with Stoppard's characteristic wit and humour. Each scenario is loosely connected to themes found on *The Dark Side Of The Moon* album. As Stoppard's play evolves, Ethics Man himself revisits his views on life, first as a Utilitarian Consequentialist (the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few) and then as a Nietzschean Egoist (God is dead and nobody's making the rules), before settling somewhere between what he calls the Kantian «do as you would have everybody do» and the Hobbesian «do unto others before they do unto you».

Remarkably, Stoppard has succeeded in writing a meaningful commentary on a foundational work of our contemporary culture, Pink Floyd's seminal *The Dark Side of the Moon*, re-imagining it in a way that remains true to the album's original spirit and intent. Prior experience of the album, which remained in the charts for 741 weeks from 1973 to 1988 and enviably stands the test of time, is not really required as Stoppard's work stands as a piece in itself. However, listeners might wish to listen to the complete album to be able to offer their own interpretation and compare it with the one of the author.

The words of actor Rufus Sewell (who had also played rock music lover Jan in *Rock'n'roll's* London production) clarify

*Darkside*'s narrative construction: «To the wrong people it could be some annoying voices interrupting their favourite album or it could be an album interrupting something they want to listen to».

*Darkside* confirms the creative vitality of this author. The whole opus of Tom Stoppard – for theatre, cinema, radio and television – is a testimony of the power of his verbal gymnastics to offer meditations on various aspects of human life, which are intellectually stimulating while remaining deeply entertaining.

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