

REVIEW PAPER

DRAMATISING EDUCATION IN COMEDIANS AND ARCADIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the dramatisation of education in two contemporary British plays: Trevor Griffiths's *Comedians* and Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*. Both plays encompass different features of classrooms, pupils, teaching methodologies, types of tutors, however at the same time they dramatise the schooling process in England during different epochs. The first section of the paper deals with adults who attend a night school and aspire to be professional stand-up comedians. Griffiths's *Comedians* reflects the idea of how adult workers have to attend classes in order to enhance their employment opportunities in post-war Britain. The play also shows Mr Waters's endeavour to teach his pupils the significance of stand-up comedy and its cathartic role in life. In Stoppard's *Arcadia*, the dramatisation of education predominantly takes place in the Victorian era. It becomes apparent that Septimus is a different kind of a tutor, as he has to teach and inform young Thomasina not just about different branches of science, but also about various aspects of life and experiences which Thomasina has to face and comprehend on her own. The paper emphasises the idea that real education exists everywhere, even outside the traditional classroom setting, and thereby children and adults, as well as teachers, always remain learners who obtain different pieces of knowledge and understanding.

Keywords: Comedians, Arcadia, teacher's role, post-war Britain

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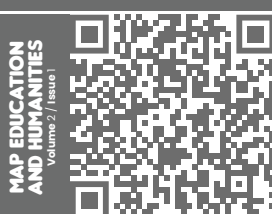
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Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to explore the dramatisation of the theme of education in comedies by Trevor Griffiths and Tom Stoppard. The paper will focus on Griffiths's play *Comedians* (1976), as well as on Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* (1993). It will first analyse Griffiths's text and the manner in which the playwright presented several elements, such as the night school for adults, the role of the teacher, as well as the gloomy classroom environment. Secondly, the paper will discuss *Arcadia* and the theme of education as exemplified primarily through the relationship of Septimus and his young pupil Thomasina.

The first section of the paper examines the return of adults to school in *Comedians*. Namely, a group of five working-class men attend a night lecture on stand-up comedy. The chapter analyses the return of adults to school, the classroom setting, the authority and the role of their teacher Eddie Waters, as well as the manner in which Waters's students perceive their instructor. Waters also tries to teach the aspiring comedians the role of humour, however Waters attempts to educate his students about the seriousness of stand-up comedy. The play ends in a similar fashion as it begins. Namely, Griffiths shows the old school caretaker wiping an obscene joke, similarly to the way in which the caretaker sponges the children's graffiti off the blackboard at the beginning of the play. This paper has been particularly informed by Alireza Fakhrkonandeh's paper "Humour As an Art of Descent and Negative Dialectics: a Deleuzian Analysis of the Functions of Humour in Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians*". Therefore, Fakhrkonandeh's paper will serve as an inspiration for the analytical aspects discussed within the paper.

Finally, this paper explores Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*. Although the play switches between the time-planes (or juxtaposes different time-planes) in its fragmented structure, thus placing next to each other two seemingly different dramatic stories, the paper focuses on only one, the one set at the turn of the centuries, involving Thomasina, the student and Septimus, her private tutor/teacher. The paper will describe the difference between the teacher who holds little authority and his bright young student Thomasina who finds mistakes in Newtonian science. Additionally, the paper will explore the manner in which Septimus tries to help Thomasina understand other, more general, life-related elements outside her garden-like classroom.

Namely, Septimus tries to scientifically help Thomasina understand the term 'carnal embrace', just as Waters helps his comedians understand the notions of respect and self-respect. It becomes apparent that education, which both Waters and Septimus provide, extends beyond the traditional notions of classroom and schooling, albeit using two very different approaches. The paper will present a theme-based analysis in which the theme and role of education will be explored through the techniques of dramatisation.

Teaching Stand-up in Griffiths's *Comedians*

Trevor Griffiths's dramatic piece *Comedians* is a play portraying five working-class individuals, all men, who want to become, as the title itself implies, comedians. The plotline is situated within: "A classroom in a secondary school in Manchester, about three miles east of the centre" (Griffiths, 1976, p. 7). The men aspire to be recognised and selected by the talent scout. They gather at the institution to attend a night-school class and enhance their skills in stand-up comedy. At the beginning, Griffiths describes the school, but also the dark and wet atmosphere. He states that: "Adults will return to school and the school will do its sullen best to accommodate them" (Griffiths, 1976, p. 7). Even the old school caretaker is present, trying to sponge the graffiti from the blackboard while he mutters: "Dirty bastards, filthy fuckers" (Griffiths, 1976, p. 7). The old caretaker's mood is obviously foul, as he uses swear words to describe the children. For this reason, the caretaker's mood and tone seem to reflect the foul atmosphere of the school itself.

The entire mise-en-scene presents the expansion of secondary education in Britain, but the post-war period of Britain also indicates why particular characters return to school. Many working-class men had to attend classes again since well-paid jobs were mostly reserved for pupils graduating from grammar schools, predominantly from the bourgeois social class. Since they could not obtain a worthwhile employment, they have to literally re-enter educational institutes, only this time it is a night school (Fakhrkonandeh, 2020, pp. 119-120). Interestingly enough, classes for 'self-improvement' which are held at such institutions include comedy, but Griffiths also mentions: "Yoga, karate, cordon bleu cookery" (Griffiths, 1976, p. 7). In *Comedians*, the entire classroom setting reflects a traditional studying environment. In other words, everything is arranged to show the teacher's dominance from

the position he is supposed to stand, and where the teacher Eddie Waters actually stands. His authority over the adult pupils appears to be enhanced by his expertise on the subject he is teaching, his ability to control the group and by his overall experience. However, it seems that the most interesting element is the course itself. In this case, Waters teaches stand-up comedy (Aparicio, 2003, pp. 13-14). Waters appears to have been a capable teacher from the beginning, since he is openly praised by Price. Price explains: "Challenor reckons you could have been great ... he said you just stopped wanting it" (Griffiths, 1976, p. 63). Humour is an integral part of any good stand-up performance, thereby Waters seems to appreciate the role of humour, as observed in his lectures.

Waters values the role of humour in his tutelage and as Fakhrkonandeh explains: "To Waters, humour or comedy should fulfil a humanistically redemptive, psychologically cathartic, and ideologically demystifying function: it should be truth-oriented" (120). Hence, comedy and humour can have a cathartic role, however they ought to be, primarily, directed towards exploring the truth. Dramatic pieces, in one way or another, are connected to the truth itself. Waters's classroom should be a testing-ground and it should be a place where students, regardless of their age, are able to make errors in the exploration of comedy, humour and truth. Moreover, they are still allowed the experience of starting anew every time they make a mistake. The classroom setting should also provide the students with a place where they could ask questions. Eddie Waters is anxious to provide his students with answers, yet not all students are willing to hear them (Aparicio, 2003, p. 15). Griffiths, therefore, shows how a classroom in his play can be a place where questions may be asked, but also answered. In *Comedians*, the classroom could be a place of revelation for discovery and self-discovery which does not necessarily have to relate to a particular field, but it can start there. It is to no surprise that Griffiths makes the classroom central throughout the play, just as the teacher is the dominant figure throughout the plotline. The working-class men first gather, then they depart from the classroom and eventually return. Griffiths's characters who return to school again, as well as the school itself, are not two separate entities: "This theatrical image is brilliant because the settings and the actions within those settings dramatically enhance each other and express the plot, the character relationships, the concept, and the theme of the play" (*Comedians* by Trevor Griffiths," 2015). What is more, the school setting

does not exist just as a décor, but rather: "The settings are not simply 'where the action takes place.' The image we are viewing—of the schoolroom and the club stage—has a mark of inevitability that gives force to the action: here, we feel, no other action but the one we are watching could occur" (*Comedians* by Trevor Griffiths," 2015).

The students in *Comedians* are brought back to the education process and in such self-improvement classes they are also taught respect, seriousness and laughter. Namely, the teacher sometimes addresses his students as 'gentlemen' or as 'Mr Price' or 'Mr Murray', because he is prompting his students to feel a sense of respect and self-respect, however he also helps them to grasp the meaning of fundamental seriousness underpinning the joke-cracking business. Waters is sometimes quite fatherly or rather persuasive, as he addresses the comedians by their first names (Aparicio, 2003, p. 16). Evidently, Eddie Waters is a teacher who helps his adult pupils learn far more than just comedy or comedic monologues or jokes. Waters helps his students understand that the role of humour is not just to make the audience laugh, but he also wants the aspiring comedians to comprehend the essential seriousness of stand-up comedy.

In the end, the teacher and his adult pupils leave the classroom, just as children leave the school after the classes finish. Griffiths ends the play with the old caretaker from the beginning, as he arrives to scan the room with a flashlight. He observes the room, the teacher's desk, the pupils' desks, the blackboard and he notices one of Price's jokes. Once he tries to wipe away the joke, he repeats the words from the beginning of the play: "The dirty buggers" (Griffiths, 1976, p. 67). Griffiths is actually "linking the children's graffiti at the start with an adult's mirror image of it at the end" (*Comedians* by Trevor Griffiths," 2015). The aspiring comedians-cum-adults seem to resemble children who attend classes, draw graffiti and complete their own secondary education in this situation. Their own re-education is in fact marked by jokes which are at times either humorous or even obscene. Trevor Griffiths's dramatisation of education is rather different from Tom Stoppard's own portrayal of students, teachers, classrooms and other elements which relate to schooling. The teacher's authority, as well as the relationship which exists between a tutor and his student is particularly different in *Arcadia*.

Stoppard's Portrayal of Education in *Arcadia*

Schooling and pursuit for knowledge are some of the most prominent topics which can be analysed in Tom Stoppard's drama *Arcadia*. The theme of education is dramatised through the relationship between two characters, in this case Septimus and his young pupil Thomasina. Unlike the play *Comedians* which takes place after the events of the Second World War, Stoppard's *Arcadia* is partly set in the nineteenth century, although the play jumps from the nineteenth century to the present period: "In 1809 the daughter of the estate, Thomasina, thirteen years old and a prodigy, is being tutored in maths by Septimus Hodge. Slowly she begins to recognize cracks in the Newtonian physics she is being taught and which is the prevalent theory of the time" (Tiedemann, 2002, p. 49). Thomasina is a particularly bright, affluent young woman who is willing to explore the world around her and test some of the established axioms about nature and the world, as exemplified in her desire to question the laws of physics.

While Septimus is helping Thomasina study, she realises that as one stirs jam into pudding it dissipates, however the same action cannot be reversed as Newtonian physics predicts it could (Tiedemann, 2002, p. 49). Her tutor agrees with the statement, believing that jam, just like time itself, cannot run backwards. Septimus states: "We must stir our way onward, mixing as we go, disorder out of disorder into disorder" (Stoppard, 2008, p. 9). Through her schooling, Thomasina attempts to understand the world around her. She tries to find a relationship between mathematics and the world. However, Thomasina soon realises that such an endeavour is a difficult task, because the geometry which she is studying deals with regular shapes, while the world itself is not formed out of arcs and angles. On the other hand, Thomasina still enquires about the dissolving of jam and her contemplations actually hint towards the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which was gradually developed in the nineteenth century (Tiedemann, 2002, pp. 49–50). Stoppard obviously implements serious academic topics which greatly influenced contemporary sciences. The theme of education is not only reserved for Thomasina's musings over scientific questions, but rather Stoppard dramatises the theme of education through the teacher-pupil relationship, as well as through the dramatic scenery. In Griffiths's *Comedians*, the classroom setting suggests the authority of the teacher over his (adult) students.

On the other hand, the relationship between Septimus and Thomasina is somewhat different, albeit it should be noted that Waters has several students who want to become stand-up comedians. Septimus elaborates on the idea of authority by addressing his pupil's brother Augustus: "I do not rule here, my lord. I inspire by reverence for learning and the exaltation of knowledge whereby man may approach God" (Stoppard, 2008, p. 84). Septimus appears to be a rather uninterested or lazy teacher who does things of his own accord. His own laziness seems to be reflected within the teaching style. He is seemingly too lazy to impose rigid rules and prefers the manner in which he is not directly dominating his student. Thus, Stoppard substantiates that Septimus is more willing to inspire, rather than control or rule over his student.

Moreover, it is not only the position of the teacher which differs in *Comedians* and *Arcadia*, but also the classroom setting in which the education takes place. As examined in the previous section, the play *Comedians* predominantly takes place within a traditional classroom, during the night hours, while Septimus and Thomasina usually study in a garden, gazebo, park and so on. The garden image is the classroom in Stoppard's play, with many of its components such as the gazebo, the lawn, the lake and the trees (Aparicio, 2002, p. 13). The term 'Arcadia' in itself is usually associated with the idealised pastoral milieu. Initially it was portrayed as a mountainous region of Greece: "Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1581–84) was a long pastoral romance written in an elaborately artful prose. (Arcadia was a mountainous region of Greece which Virgil substituted for Theocritus' Sicily as his idealized pastoral milieu)" (Abrams, 1999, pp. 202–203). Thereby, the connection which is formulated between the garden-like classroom and the nature setting becomes apparent. However, the garden itself carries a larger form of symbolic meaning. It should be noted that the garden represents the shift of eras. Namely, it portrays the transition from Classicism to Romanticism:

Since comprehending scientific concepts can sometimes be difficult, Stoppard aids his audience's understanding by paralleling the shift in the scientific paradigm to the analogous transition from Classicism to Romanticism. Here, Classicism metaphorically corresponds to Newtonian science and Romanticism to deterministic chaos. In the play, these artistic movements are embodied in the landscape gardening of the Croom family home. (Fleming, 2013, p. 7)

The authority of both teachers, as well as the classroom setting, greatly differ in *Comedians* and *Arcadia*. However, both teachers are particularly different because Waters seems to be a very confident teacher, while Septimus is described as a doubtful one. He does not lead Thomasina into any serious systematic work, as Waters does with his comedians and teaching drills. When Septimus tries to correct Thomasina's mistakes, it becomes obvious that he does not understand Thomasina's equation (Aparicio, 2003, p. 14). Thomasina may be a bright pupil, and one willing to learn and question the world, yet in her garden-like classroom, she is still relying on her mentor. At the beginning of *Arcadia* Thomasina openly explains to Septimus: "If you do not teach me the true meaning of things, who will?" (Aparicio, 2003, p. 7).

Griffiths's and Stoppard's teachers likewise differ on the notion of providing answers for their respective students. Namely, Griffiths's Eddie Waters is rather willing to provide his students with answers, while Stoppard's Septimus is constantly reluctant to give answers, if he has any, because he is either reading letters or attending to other things. Thomasina literally 'lives' in her classroom from the age of thirteen to seventeen under Septimus's tutelage. It is in the classroom that she explores elements such as Fermat's theorem, sexual enquiries, piano lessons, Latin translations and philosophical speculations (Aparicio, 2003, p. 15). Although Septimus is a reluctant teacher, he is still someone who helps Thomasina explore not just the educational process but the world itself. Just as Eddie Waters tries to teach his comedians respect and self-respect, Septimus contributes to Thomasina's 'general' education which extends beyond the traditionally prescribed roles of schooling. School and education do not serve as synonyms in Stoppard's drama. The prescribed roles of schooling are just some of the forms where education in itself is obtained. Young Thomasina enquires about the 'carnal embrace' and she is willing to actually understand the meaning behind the phrase. Septimus explains the meaning in clinical terms by explaining the following: "Carnal embrace is sexual congress, which is the insertion of the male genital organ into the female genital organ for purposes of procreation and pleasure" (Stoppard, 2008, p. 7). Such a clinical definition removes the sense of human intimacy and the mystery of human sexual relations. Thus, it becomes apparent that "whenever the characters try to fix and understand reality, whether it be through the use of language, through the use of narratives designed to control and explain their

experiences, or through the study of science, they discover that life is not so easily confined and defined" (Fleming, 2013, p. 6). Nonetheless, Septimus's explanation of the 'carnal embrace' may be overly scientific, yet it is still truthful. The pupil-teacher relationship should be based on truth. Thomasina's outburst is particularly noticeable when she realises that her tutor deceived her on the subject of the 'Cleopatra translation'. She calls him a cheat, however this can be attributed to her young age and immaturity (Aparicio, 2003, p. 14). Thomasina in tears of rage yells at Septimus: "I hope you die!" (Stoppard, 2008, p. 43). Stoppard presents childish rage and selfishness, further showing how even a brilliant and aspiring student is still a young child.

Stoppard's characters, both those in the early nineteenth century, as well as those characters placed within the contemporary setting, want to comprehend the world through education and science. Thomasina, Septimus, and Valentine pursue knowledge through science, whereas Hannah and Bernard represent the arts and humanities: "Thomasina intuits the shortcomings of the Newtonian model; Septimus is perplexed and made skeptical by her theorems; and Valentine is a working chaotician. In contrast, Hannah and Bernard are more "scientific" in their outlook and approach" (Fleming, 2013, p. 9). Hannah and Bernard portray a contemporary form of scientific research, however regardless of the period, Stoppard depicts many of his characters in their quest and strenuous effort to obtain good education, information and knowledge. The aforementioned student-teacher relationship exemplifies Stoppard's portrayal of problems, as well as benefits of learning which might be manifested on the path of achieving satisfactory erudition. In this case, the problems are represented in various ways. There are problems in acquiring knowledge and skills, problems of student-tutor relationships, but also problems which depict differences between schooling and education. Stoppard dramatises the complexities of the learning process and at the same time the playwright also shows how drama itself is able to recreate various educational issues which may arise between the student and the tutor.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the manner in which Trevor Griffiths and Tom Stoppard masterfully dramatise the theme of education in their respective plays, namely *Comedians* and *Arcadia*. In the case of *Comedians*, the topic of education revolves

around five working-class male adults who attend a course on stand-up comedy taught by Eddie Waters. In *Arcadia*, the topic of education is dramatised through the relationship between Septimus and Thomasina in the early nineteenth century. The paper addressed the roles of teachers in both dramas, as well as the manner in which both humour and science are explored and questioned respectively.

The first section of the paper focused primarily on Griffiths' *Comedians*. The section examined the return of adults to school in the post-war period in Britain. Also, the paper examined the role of Waters who tries to teach his adult students the art of stand-up comedy. The paper furthermore analysed Waters's eagerness to provide answers for his students, as well as the fact that he is perceived as a particularly skilful teacher by some of his pupils. Waters tries to teach his students far more than the art of telling jokes, because he addresses some of the more subtle aspects of humour, but in his approach Waters also helps the aspiring comedians open up to self-improvement. The deteriorating classroom is also analysed, because the classroom setting depicts the gloomy school atmosphere and because Waters's classroom is the place where the comedians spend most of their time during the play. The characters and the setting actually help the plot express itself fully.

The discussion then shifted to Stoppard's *Arcadia* and the section described education in Stoppard's play, predominantly through the prism of Septimus and his young pupil. The paper explored the manner in which the teacher and his bright student discuss science and the fact that Thomasina also discovers particular imperfections in Newtonian laws. The discussion juxtaposed Waters and Thomasina's teacher as two very different types of tutors, due to the fact that Septimus holds little authority over his own pupil. While Waters attempts to teach his students the role of humour, Septimus is also portrayed as trying to teach Thomasina the basic function of the 'carnal embrace', that is to say sexual intercourse. Lastly, the section addressed the manner in which Stoppard portrayed several characters, in different timeframes. Ergo, Hannah and Bernard present a contemporary academic discourse, while Thomasina and Septimus question scientific laws which would help develop science and education later in the future. Both plays while portraying the dramatisation of education show the reality behind the socio-economic aspect of England, particularly expressed in *Comedians*. Moreover, the two plays indicate that

the process of education touches the lives of both students and their teachers. In fact, young pupils or adult students, as well as their tutors, never actually cease to learn something new. Education entwines both sides, whereby Waters and Septimus learn a lot from their respective students and vice versa. In fact, it should be noted, that real teachers actually never stop learning, in a way, they always remain pupils of their own students. The true form of education and learning exists everywhere, even outside the traditional classroom setting, and suffice it to say, the two aforementioned plays brilliantly exemplify the meaning of education through the prism of drama and theatre.

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