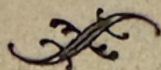


THE DEFINITE MAYBE

Tom Stoppard



EVERY NEW PLAY is old. No, that's going too far, but there is a marketing problem involved, a time-lag between writing and production which is a serious matter for a new writer, because the younger he is, the faster he is learning and changing. And not just writers, of course: as the Beatle said, mournfully plugging the latest LP, 'I don't know – it was all so long ago, we're doing something different now.' That's probably how most playwrights feel by the time the curtain goes up:

I had intended this to be
My next first night but three . . .

I started writing a play some eight years ago. But someone told me that it could take 'anything up to two years to get put on, if it's worth putting on at all', so it hardly seemed worth bothering; I was already late as it was, two years late if you start counting from Osborne' . . .

However, in July 1960, sitting gloomily in the turquoise sea, waiting for the mainland boat to rescue me from the crush of Capri, I remembered that it was my twenty-third birthday; twenty-three and still unpublished, still unstaged – still, as a matter of fact, un-writing, and two more years

¹ John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre on 8 May 1956.

behind my schedule (horrors! – two more, and I shall have to wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled). So getting back to Bristol from my annual three weeks, I handed in my notice after six years of reporting, subbing, reviewing and interviewing and, having contracted to write two weekly columns for a total of six guineas, started writing a stage play, *A Walk on the Water*.

My first play was supposed to have been for the *Observer's* competition in 1958, but that one petered out after a dozen pages that were not unlike *Look Back in Anger*. This one was not unlike *Flowering Cherry*. I took it round to the Bristol Old Vic. Nothing happened for nine months. I wrote seventy-two more columns, and a one-acter not unlike *Waiting for Godot*.

Of course, another writer would not have waited that long. He would at least have revolted against the sheer inefficiency, or the discourtesy of letting nine months go by without a yes, no, or maybe. But I was diffident about *A Walk on the Water* and, anyway, it was obvious to me that my name would be made by the one-acter as soon as someone read it. At the end of 1961 I sent the latter to an agent, who liked it enough to ask if I'd got anything else for him to see. With misgivings and deprecating noises, I sent him *A Walk on the Water*, explaining that it was, of course, rather *passé* compared to the one-acter, but...

Before the week was out I had been summoned to London amid great excitement. An option was bought almost immediately and, drunk with riches (£100), I went out and bought books and a Picasso print. A few weeks later the option had passed to H.M. Tennents, and April (1962) seemed a likely date for the opening. Because it was not unlike *Flowering Cherry* it was sent to Ralph Richardson, who declined it on the grounds that it was not unlike *Flowering Cherry*. There was also talk of Sir Alec. And what did I think of Leo McKern? A year later the option ran out and was not renewed.

INTO THE LABYRINTH

At the end of 1963 *A Walk on the Water*, adapted, was televised, a day or two after the Kennedy assassination. ('Jolly bad luck,' said Rediffusion.)

At about that time, my agent picked up my interest in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and suggested a comedy about what happened to them in England. For good measure, he added that the King of England might be Lear. The possibility appealed to me and I began work on a burlesque Shakespeare farce. By the autumn of 1964 I had written a bad one, but had got interested in the characters as existential immortals. I scrapped the play and in October 1964 started *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, set not in England but within the framework of *Hamlet*. Jeremy Brooks at the Royal Shakespeare Company heard about it and asked for it, and I sent him two completed acts in April 1965. A few weeks later, amid much reported enthusiasm, the RSC commissioned the third act.

There was a prospect of the play going into the repertoire very soon to replace a drop-out, but the third act written under this pressure was not liked so well. Still, there was talk of a revised version going in back-to-back with Peter Hall's *Hamlet*. After a year, in June 1966, the option ran out.

The previous March, a new production company, Albion Players, who had set up shop and started canvassing for scripts, were sent *A Walk on the Water*. Amid great enthusiasm, an option was bought. Peter Sellers was sounded out. Danny Kaye was mentioned. I started rewriting.

Meanwhile, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* had reached the Oxford Theatre Group, via Frank Hauser, and, revised, was performed at Edinburgh in August. Rave from Bryden², telegram from Tynan,³ and another option with a production, probably in October, at the National Theatre. I

² Ronald Bryden was drama critic of the *Observer*.

³ Kenneth Tynan was then Literary Manager of the National Theatre Company.

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didn't believe a word of it. But then the cogs inexplicably went into reverse and the production was brought forward to April. I think it *may* just possibly happen – the director came round yesterday with his suggested cuts, so something must be happening.

Back at the ranch, I finished my third rewrite of *A Walk on the Water*, plus new title, three months ago and haven't heard anything since. The option runs out about the time you are reading this.