



Arcadia

Tom Stoppard

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Arcadia takes us back and forth between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ranging over the nature of truth and time, the difference between the Classical and the Romantic temperament, and the disruptive influence of sex on our orbits in life. Focusing on the mysteries--romantic, scientific, literary--that engage the minds and hearts of characters whose passions and lives intersect across scientific planes and centuries, it is "Stoppard's richest, most ravishing comedy to date, a play of wit, intellect, language, brio and... emotion. It's like a dream of levitation: you're instantaneously aloft, soaring, banking, doing loop-the-loops and then, when you think you're about to plummet to earth, swooping to a gentle touchdown of not easily described sweetness and sorrow... Exhilarating" (Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*).

Arcadia Details

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From Reader Review Arcadia for online ebook

Mahdi Lotfabadi says

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Holly says

Brilliant. I'd had no idea. (I mean, I had an idea of Stoppard's genius, but why'd I wait so long to read this play?) Erudite and multi-leveled: Enlightenment rationality and science (chaos, Newtonian geometry, English gardens) against/with Romantic literature and art (Lord Byron, high emotion, beauty, sex, and wild nature). Indelible characterization. And so, so funny.

John says

I would like to make it clear, right out front, that I adore some of Tom Stoppard's work. But this is insufferable, elitist piffle. The fact that it is so highly praised in so many circles confirms, to my mind, that the arts, like the rest of our culture, are utterly degenerate.

Kurt Vonnegut once described the job of a writer as being "a good date." With "Arcadia," Stoppard wears too much cologne, won't stop talking about himself, blows smoke in our face, farts in the elevator, and seems to think that going Dutch is the height of romance.

I keep picturing a reasonably well-educated audience shelling out \$50-plus per ticket only to find out that they should have studied up on the landscape architecture of the early 19th century, the minutia of Lord Byron's dissolute indiscretions, and the basics of chaos theory. I had the advantage of being familiar with the latter. I had to turn to various references for the rest. (Really, Tom? I'm an uneducated bumpkin because I'm unfamiliar with Capability Brown!? Shmoiks!) Whereas I have the Web at my disposal to elucidate these subjects with little effort, one can imagine the frustration of audiences suffering through this complacent mess 20 years ago.

I suppose Stoppard might earn higher marks if I thought he was having some fun at the expense of his audience. As it stands, this play reads the way Charles Ives sounds: very clever and equally unpleasant. It took me two days to chew my way through this mess and, at the end of it, I didn't feel the slightest connection to any of the characters or themes presented. Stoppard can do much better, and shame on the critics who have praised the emperor's clothes this time around. (Docked one star for wasting my time on the antics of a sad clown such as Lord Byron, who ought to be memorialized in day-glo on velvet.)

Anne says

The only play I've ever read that made me want to be an actor, however briefly--just for long enough to speak some of Stoppard's incredible lines. Witty, erudite, passionate, petty, catty, dry, elegant or vile, there's not a character who doesn't get off a zinger at least once per appearance, and usually oftener. Lady Croome alone barely walks into a room without puncturing egos left, right and center. Encountering a scene of midnight shenanigans in her country house, she tells the perps they're lucky "a lifetime's devotion to the sporting gun has halved my husband's hearing to the ear on which he sleeps." Even the stage directions are good, including in the props list "a turtle sleepy enough to serve as a paperweight."

The play itself is farcical, heartbreaking, hysterical, intellectual, romantic, dramatic, serious and silly, and if you ever see a gifted company perform it, it'll be one of the best nights of theater possible. I was fortunate in that I saw it at the Denver Center the same week I first read the script, and the uniformly excellent cast and the flawless production made it the version all others must live up to. But just reading it can perfectly well blow your mind anyway.

Arcadia is, at its simplest, two stories: that of young prodigy Thomasina Coverly and her tutor Septimus Hodge in the early 19th century, and that of Hannah Jarvis and Bernard Nightingale, contemporary academics researching the Romantic period of English literature (more or less by rifling through Thomasina's things). Physics, mathematics, poetry, botany!, music, romance, plain ol' nooky, all make an appearance in this exuberant--yet concise--play. Stoppard doesn't beat around the bush and he doesn't wait for you to catch up; if you didn't catch the bit about thermodynamics or chaos theory he's not going to repeat himself, so pay attention! Most of the characters are so brilliant or academic, so immersed in their intellectual pursuits that you'd expect to be bored to tears--but Stoppard makes them engaging, endearing, human and hysterical without turning them into caricatures. There's a big pile of science in it coupled with raw, unanswerable emotion, and it's an amazing combination. I have a copy but you'd have to pry it from my cold dead hand.

Jess says

(See full sized image here)

When I announced that I wanted to study both Bio/Chem *and* English at A Level, I was met with a flood of snide comments from various supercilious adults:

"That's a bit of a *divergence*, isn't it? Whatever do you intend to do with *that* combination?!"

Well, having come out the other side relatively unscathed I can testify completely that the Sciences and the Arts are actually perfectly compatible in many ways - (just don't tell Annabella Milbanke, aka ex. Lady Byron) - and when anyone points a finger at me in accusation, I just point them to *Arcadia*.

THOMASINA: Septimus, what is carnal embrace?

SEPTIMUS: Carnal embrace is the practice of throwing one's arms around a side of beef.

God, I wish I'd written this.

I think this may just be the wittiest, most hilarious play out there. Don't believe me? Here are some of the highlights. But can I just clarify that they've neglected to include the funniest bits - probably something to do

with keeping it PG.

Arcadia is a play of breathtaking scope and so masterfully structured. Stoppard makes some incredible didactic statements about the entropy of time and legacy whilst keeping his drama engaging and compelling. The cerebral language (and algorithms) can be quite challenging, but the splendour of *Arcadia* is so much more accessible on a reread so I strongly urge you to give it a second go if the first time left you a bit baffled.

A blisteringly clever tearjerker with fantastic characters (including a fictional avatar of Ada Lovelace, hence the nod to Kate Beaton's cartoons) and a relatively simple but brilliant premise: the inhabitants of Sidley Park in the 20th century are trying to figure out what exactly happened to the inhabitants from the 19th century when Lord Byron came to stay...

BAM The Bibliomaniac says

I think the intricacies of this play are best enjoyed through performance not reading, especially the last acts when centuries cross. There were several laugh out loud lines I rather enjoyed. However, the plot lines of sexual interference, science and math theory, and Lord Byron were just too twisted within the time warp for me to keep straight. I'd much rather see this on stage. I think I'd highly praise its unique direction.

Amber says

I should have liked this more than I did, truly. I mean, I get that this is a play about how one goes about mapping emotional and physical complexity onto intellectual models and how it breaks down and breaks apart, in the same way that Romanticism signalled the end of the Enlightenment, or how the two had trouble coexisting in the same garden. (But they can be united! By fractals! And sex!)

My problems were thus:

1) I didn't like any of the characters. They were all so self-impressed, self-pleasing, and -- while obviously the vessels of very interesting ideas -- not fully fleshed people. They were more like lots of mini Tom Stoppards, dressed in various clothing, making Tom Stoppard jokes and spouting Tom Stoppard philosophies. I probably could have gotten over this had the ideas been solid enough. However;

2) The play collapsed for me under the weight of several sloppy conclusions and overextended metaphors which, judging by the general tone of condescension in the dialogue, seemed to be gesturing at some kind of capital "T" Truth - or at least towards the Truth of the Classicism/Romanticism leitmotif. When Chloe and Valentine are talking about sex as the main flaw in a kind of Newtonian determinism - I was all like, what? "The people you are supposed to like" vs those you do is meaningless. Newton doesn't suppose you like anyone. And the people you do actually like (due to their smell or physical attributes or whatever the evolutionary psychologists would say) is perfectly in step with this kind of determinism (even though I personally don't buy the neo-Dawkinsian absence of free will - but I digress). The point is, I really don't like it when an author tries to shove a Big Idea into a shape that will fit his agenda, not caring if it, you know, doesn't.

3) The extension of Newton's laws to the mapping of a determinist future via a great godlike equation is not Thomasina's or Stoppard's idea - it belongs to LaPlace's Demon, which for some reason is never mentioned.

However, Thomasina's discovery of fractals (which Stoppard just calls iterative algorithms for some reason) and fractals as a kind of "metaphoric shape" of determinism is interesting. The problem is that you can't really draw nature accurately from fractals. The smaller parts that make up a leaf are not leaf-shaped. And the parts that make up those parts are shaped differently still. The fractals Thomasina are drawing are just as sterile and divorced from Nature-reality as the textbook geometric shapes she claims to despise. Or maybe that was the point of Valentine giving up his grouse, for the "noise"? That's interesting -- but I don't think it's Stoppard's ultimate aim. Thomasina's potential unity of classical logic and Romantic naturalism via her "algebraic iterations" is treated with the reverence of a Truth. See Valentine's happy ending when he takes up her equations and feeds them into his computer - I mean, nobody ever questions Thomasina's equations as a false representation of nature. ARGH.

4) Why does the second law of thermodynamics drive Septimus mad? I understand that the heat death of the universe hadn't yet been formally discovered in his time - but Armageddon (classical, Romantic) and Decay (scientific, mathematic) are not new ideas in 1809. And Septimus seems to be a naturally skeptical person anyway who doesn't have any pretensions towards immortality. OK, so maybe it was Thomasina's death that drove him mad, but he only had like two days to fall in love with her. And he was in love with like three people across the course of the play. Yeah yeah, poetic license. This still annoyed me as I don't think Septimus was developed enough for this to seem plausible.

5) Finally, what does sex have to do with any of this, really, except that it is titillating -- perhaps Stoppard thought that his audience would need a cookie to be able to apprehend any kind of "interlectual" concept? Don't get me wrong -- I happen to like sex. But why does it seem that every play I've seen in the past 10 years (excepting Ionesco's super-duper "Rhinoceros" and "The Lady in Black") has been a sex play, chock full of wink-wink nudge-nudge innuendo and bed-swapping infidelity? Sex is a plot microwave - a cheap gimmick for creating fast-n-easy narrative conflict, and if I'm sick of it by age 30 then it must be overdone. Or maybe the sex just didn't appeal to me because the characters were more the author's personal ideas than real people, and rather than be interested in their relationships, I felt trapped in a Tom Stoppard masturbatory fantasy? Wink wink. Nudge nudge. (Vomit vomit.)

However, that said - I did enjoy it overall and at least it tried to weave in some interesting ideas. It was funny besides. And I really appreciate the layered past and present and simultaneous dialogue in the last scene, the overlapping props like fractals iterating in every scene - very clever. So much cleverness in this play and in Stoppard. I wish it moved me more.

Jonfaith says

Mathematical discoveries glimpsed and lost to view will have their time again. You do not suppose, my lady, that if all of Archimedes had been hiding in the great library of Alexandria, we would be at a loss for a corkscrew?

Stellar writing, just a spot under-fed. I would've appreciated more bulk, more fury -- some *Sturm und Drang*. Alas a two-tiered production featuring landed aristocracy, precocious children and the ribald aura of Lord Byron. Ruminating over these historical effects almost 200 years later in the same room are a rasher of academics, including a physicist. There are some stunning lines here. I simply wanted more.

Catie says

This weekend I was looking at my almost seven year old daughter and marveling at how quickly she's grown up. I thought: she's still so young and she's still so new. But then I thought: no, she's not. Not really. The atoms and molecules that make up her body are actually billions of years old. Inside, she carries pieces of what are now distant stars. She carries pieces of the original humans. She carries pieces of me. She carries pieces of her children. And yet, there has never been and there will never be her *exact* configuration of all of these pieces. *She* will only exist for a fraction of the blink of an eye in the history of the universe. She's eternal, and she's so terribly finite.

And I guess that is the main thing that blazed out at me from the pages of this play. I may have missed the point. I may have missed several points. But overall, Stoppard made me think a lot about how we are both eternal and momentary. Nothing is guaranteed. Maybe there is a formula which could take into account the exact position and direction of every atom at a single moment and predict the future. But there will always be an element of the unpredictable. There will always be a theorem too long to transcribe or a letter gone astray or a candle left burning. You might die on the eve of your seventeenth birthday. You might live out decades of solitude and regret. You only get this brief lifetime to make new discoveries and fail spectacularly and learn to waltz. Our lives are one long chain of entropy trade-offs until we finally have nothing left to trade and become dust and ash. But then again, we live on: in memories, however false; in our children; in the very soil. Even things that we think are lost irrevocably have a tendency to turn up again (and again and again – if only we had the perspective to see it happening).

“We shed as we pick up, like travelers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind. The procession is very long and life is very short. We die on the march. But there is nothing outside the march so nothing can be lost to it. The missing plays of Sophocles will turn up piece by piece, or be written again in another language. Ancient cures for diseases will reveal themselves once more. Mathematical discoveries glimpsed and lost to view will have their time again.”

These are just a small fraction of the thoughts which were awakened to vivid clarity in me by this deceptively short, two act play. Stoppard weaves together two generations with history, coincidence, and conjecture. In the past, young student Thomasina and her tutor Septimus discuss geometry, thermodynamics, and carnal embraces during an eventful period at Sidley Park Manor. In the future, “gutsy” academic Bernard tries (and mostly fails) to decipher the past and stir up some scandal about Lord Byron, while the more level-headed Hannah plays the voice of reason. The two generations bleed into and out of each other. Into this circular timeline Stoppard flawlessly integrates Fermat's last theorem, fractal geometry, Newtonian physics, chaos theory, botany, adultery, and fatal monkey bites.

I know that all sounds monumentally intellectual but please don't be scared away. This play is above all, witty, entertaining, and profoundly meaningful.

Perfect Musical Pairing

Chopin - Waltz Op. 64 No. 2

Bonus (Flannery's pick!): Brad Mehldau - Exit Music (For a Film)

After reading this play I now have two more things to add to my bucket list:

- 1) Learn to Waltz
- 2) See Arcadia performed on stage.

Also seen at The Readventurer.

Linda says

Philosophy vs science progress. What is more important to mankind? What makes us happy? The play *Arcadia* (1993) is complex. Stoppard explores many different themes and contrasts such as past and present, and order and disorder. They melt together and show that everything is connected.

The play is set in a country house, Sidley Park, in Derbyshire, and follows the lives of people living there in the 1800's and present day. This is a rich play with more questions than answers. It involves philosophy, history, classic literature, mystical poets like Lord Byron, landscape design, murder speculations, population dynamics, mathematical algorithms and thermodynamics. And everything comes together perfectly. Some of the characters even investigate science that challenges Newton's theories of physics. It's very interesting for people with great curiosity.

The play also investigates the meaning of certainty, the nature of evidence and truth in modern ideas about history, mathematics and physics. Clues from the past can be interpreted in different ways. And because they can't be proven to be false, does that mean they are true? Is truth the necessary opposite of false? The characters are struggling with this problem when they are thinking about history and time. Much of the play centers around time - research about history and attempts of predicting the future with an equation, and the exceptions that make it impossible. They discuss the hypothetical theory about the prediction of the future being prevented by irregularities such as sex. Perhaps love is the exception of the rule, which makes the future so difficult to predict. The disorder in feelings, the contrast, or perhaps the connection, of passion and madness, is a kind of practical example of chaos theory. The concept of order vs chaos theory is explored in different ways, both in personal feelings and physical disorder (the table in the center of the room that collects objects from both time periods). The characters' social order moves into chaos, where time is depicted as a kind of illusion. However, there might be order in chaos, perhaps we are incapable of perceiving it because our lack of knowledge.

There's a tragic theme of smallness, universal insufficiency and the life going in one direction. Despite Newton's equations that goes both ways, there are certain events that are irreversible, like time, and fire and heat (the second law of thermodynamics), as well as the cooling universe and burned relationships. But the characters in the 1800's are living on in descendants and letters. Life is eternal, and at the same time, it is the exception of the rule. Stoppard paints this picture splendidly. When there's chaos, there are no longer any rules, and the different eras intermingle. The structure of the play is a work of art itself.

Last but not least, every theme is evolving from the source of love and death and it's both tragic, comical and thrilling. And regardless of time they think and reflect. This is a play for people not wanting to be served answers, but prefer to interpret and form their opinions along the way. Answers are not important. Conversation is. So, connecting the dots, philosophy or science progress, reflection or knowledge? When the characters face a dark future, and when the world is doomed – due to chaos theory - they turn to music and waltz. So, perhaps that is one answer to the question about what's more important to mankind?

Maxwell says

I first encountered this play my freshman year of college, and here I am in my final semester, reading it once more. If you have read this play yourself, you might see the beauty and significance in that duality. Nevertheless, I *adore* this play so, so much. Tom Stoppard is a complete genius.

The play follows two time periods, the early 1800's and a contemporary setting, both in the same exact location, an English manor house. In the 1800's we observe Thomasina, a 13 year old intellectual, and her tutor, Septimus Hodge. They're both quick-witted and banter throughout the play which is wonderful. In the present day we follow some descendants of the manor house's family, Chloe, Gus, and Valentine, as two scholars, Hannah and Bernard, are researching information about the people who lived and visited the manor in the 1800's.

Stoppard plays with the convention of having the set stay the same throughout the play, no matter the time period, as well as the accumulation of objects from both periods on the table in the center of the stage. It addresses themes of relationships, time and entropy, and arts and sciences. All good things at the center of a **really good** play.

Of course plays are mostly meant to be seen and not read, but if you are going to read any play, I really recommend this one. It's one that has heavily influenced my thinking and my approach to drama, and one that will stick with me for a long time.

Kelly says

[And after all that... it all ends in people waltzing, oblivious to it all going up in flames.

I endlessly, endlessly love this play. (hide spoiler)]

Nick says

The minority report once more, alas. Although reading a play, rather than seeing it in a theater (especially with the quality of actor and actress that Tom Stoppard's work usually brings onstage), is like judging food made with only half the ingredients of the recipe. This is a work half-set in an England about to begin its Regency period, with lots of nineteenth romantic bravura--precocious and doomed genius, trysts in the gazebo, sailing to gather specimens, and dueling, into which Lord Byron threatens to, but does not, intrude. That part is the full Stoppard--impossibly articulate characters, in turn witty, foolish, amorous and philosophical. The problem is that, tenuous as the charms of proto-Regency country estates are, the half-baked but full-throttled academic speculation (inasmuch as scholarly discussions of 19th century English gardens and forgotten poets have a throttle) are even less engaging. Yes, there is much ado about time and philosophy and the art and limitations of knowing, this being Stoppard, but he has taken on these issues with greater invention and wit elsewhere. And perhaps it is these other works that make me so disappointed with "Arcadia." When I read "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern" it was with the excitement of discovery, of seeing a fresh path for English-language theater away from the enclosed family tragedies of O'Neill and the even more enclosed explorations of private failure of Beckett and Pinter. Perhaps some of the energy that John Osborne might have brought if we had been wittier and less narcissistic. In any case, the pre-Regency segments of "Arcadia" strive mightily to generate a heat and energy that the interpolated academic needling dissipates. Sometimes all the Stoppardian fireworks illumine. And sometimes they just explode.

Roger Brunyate says

The Waltz of Time

Reading Iain Pears' brilliant novel *Arcadia* just now, I wondered how it might have been influenced by Tom Stoppard's 1993 play of the same title, which has been described [in the article I shall cite below] as "maybe the greatest play of our age." Answer: very much, and yet hardly at all. Stoppard casts his play of ideas as a drawing-room comedy—or rather two comedies alternating in the same room, the one beginning in 1809, the other in 1990. Pears infuses his ideas into a melange of fantasy, sci-fi, and dystopian fiction, with a few other genres thrown in. But many of them are the same ideas as Stoppard's: principally, the notion that the past and future are inextricably connected, and that science may be simultaneously our prison and our key to escape.

Among the many ideas and images in this play, two in particular stand out. One is symbolized by the changes wrought in the gardens of Sidley Park between 1809 and 1812. What had been a carefully constructed Arcadian landscape of classical balance is turned into a romantic fantasy. "Where there [was] the pastoral refinement of an Englishman's garden, here is an eruption of gloomy forest and towering crag, of ruins where there was never a house, of water dashing against rocks where there was never spring nor a stone." Order versus passion, facts versus feeling, the aesthetic dilemma of the late 18th century, and I suppose our own.

Stoppard's parallel image is mathematical. Thomasina Coverly, the heroine of the earlier period, a teenage genius, is being taught scientific principles by her young tutor, Septimus Hodge, along classical Newtonian lines. But she has two insights. One is to recognize that where most equations are reversible, those of thermodynamics are not: heat will always give way to cold. In other words, math as the calculus of our inevitable demise. The other is the realization that mathematics need not deal only with the perfection of man-made objects, but can describe the random properties of nature as well. She does not have the computing power to develop her instinctive algorithm, but another Coverly descendant 180 years later, using a laptop computer, can do so easily: it is called chaos theory.

In preparing for this review, I read an article by Johann Hari from the *Independent* of Thursday 21 May 2009. It is a brilliant and comprehensive piece that I recommend to everyone, but which has left me with little to say of my own. Except to quote Hari's last paragraph, describing the ending of the play, when characters from the two centuries stumble onstage together. "It's a moment that shows the power of the play of ideas to fuse together concepts and characters into a theatrical grenade. This final scene is the waltz that takes place inside all of us -- of our ancestors dancing with our present, of reason dancing with irrationality, and of hope dancing with despair, as the roaring, crackling sound of the heat-death draws ever closer." The rest of the article is that good; the play is even better.

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Plays are meant to be seen on the stage, so why read them on paper? It's easier for me, I suppose, because I am a director by profession, and scripts are our raw material, like reading the score rather than attending the concert. You can play it out in your own time. You can pause to savor witty lines like "As her tutor, you have a duty to keep her in ignorance." You can feel the genuine emotion welling up through all the clever wordplay. And, an unexpected bonus, you can revel in Stoppard's delightfully off-hand stage directions: "He

takes a chair. She remains standing. Possibly she smokes; if so, perhaps now. A short cigarette-holder sounds right, too. Or brown-paper cigarillos." Tom Stoppard in friendly conversation with his director, Trevor Nunn, quite willing to leave such details to him. But where it matters, in his control of characters and ideas, his touch is masterly. A great, great play.

Margaret says

My favorite play by Tom Stoppard, who's often been referred to as one of the cleverest and most literate minds currently writing for the stage – or anywhere else, for that matter. His work is unfailingly intellectual in the best sense of the word, alive with the energy of a naturally brilliant and inquisitive mind constantly in motion: gleefully absorbing new information, delighting in the juxtaposition of unlikely ideas (philosophy and gymnastics, for example) and forever doubling back to challenge and test its own conclusions. Add to that his irresistible, infectious delight in the possibilities of language – including a gift for epigram that Oscar Wilde would envy and a flair for witty, original metaphor – and you have a playwright who rewards an audience's commitment and attention more richly than any I can think of. Though he's sometimes been criticized for being too intellectual, even self-consciously so, and therefore not capable of engaging an audience's emotions, in *ARCADIA* I think he achieves an artistic equilibrium that no one can question, creating a kind of thinking-person's romance, a play that is both intellectually stimulating and deeply moving. Balancing modern chaos theory against a young girl's awakening sexuality, the birth of Romanticism against the absolute end of the universe, with excursions along the way into English literary history, landscape gardening, the nature of genius, and the tendency of history to shape-shift depending on who's interpreting it, for me this is the most complex and lyrical work in his very distinguished (and still expanding!) canon. Stoppard himself considers it the most successful of his plays from the storytelling standpoint, and it's perhaps also the most successful at making its cleverness intrinsic to character. The historical characters, contemporaries of Jane Austen, are witty because they live in a time when conversation is the arena for virtually every human interaction and a quick wit is valued accordingly; the contemporary characters are clever because they're so highly educated – academics all, they are almost flamboyantly articulate. In both cases, their cleverness is a function of who they are, and not of who Tom Stoppard is. But we do catch glimpses of the author in several of his creations: in the critic Bernard Nightingale, his overactive brain careening from one hypothesis to another; in the scholar Hannah Jarvis, with her belief that our humanity is defined by our restless curiosity about the universe ("It's wanting to know that makes us matter..."); even in the hilarious hack poet Ezra Chater, complaining about the inner circle of critics who so cavalierly dismiss his work as trivial while promoting their own protégés. But the truest voice of Tom Stoppard may belong to Thomasina Coverley, the 13 year old math prodigy, radiant with the prospect of all there is to know, passionate with grief over knowledge already squandered, all the possibilities of life (both intellectual and emotional) still before her. It says a great deal, I think, about Stoppard that this should be so, because in another sense *ARCADIA* is a play that could really only be written in middle age, evoking the magical optimism of youth with the hard-won wisdom of maturity and a wry compassion for human fallibility. It is both vernal and autumnal, equal parts hope and rue, not quite a comedy, but not quite a tragedy either – very much like life. A poignant and exhilarating play.

Bruce says

Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia*, one of the finest dramatic works of our time, manages simultaneously to be audacious, complex, thought-provoking, poignant, and hilarious. It shows no evidence of failing to pass the

test of time because its themes are so perennial and its conception and execution so striking.

The action of the play takes place in two periods of time but the same setting, an English country house in 1809 and the present. Scenes alternate between these periods, a fresh set of characters inhabiting each. In the final scene both sets of characters are present, visible to us, invisible to each other.

Stoppard explores issues such as Enlightenment and Romanticism, Newtonian physics and chaos theory, rationalism and imagination, to mention only a few, and he presents characters trying to make sense of their lives in the context of uncertainty and premonitions that the Second Law of Thermodynamics will determine the ultimate fate of the universe. If all of this sounds terribly cerebral, Stoppard weaves these issues into a fabric that is also highly personal, intensely human, with fascinating characters working out the daily personal and professional agendas that are familiar to us all.

The reader or playgoer will leave this work only apparently, for its issues, insights, and questions will haunt him long after he attempts to turn to other concerns. One cannot help but be moved, challenged, highly entertained, and deeply changed by this wonderful play.

Maree says

I listened to the audio version of this in the car and just loved it. It was a full ensemble, made easy by the fact that it's a play, so everything is spoken anyway. It's so clever, and keeps you on your toes trying to figure out the relationships and what's going on. It was sometimes a little tough to figure out the voices and who was speaking, but I'm pretty sure I got most of it.

The words and ideas in this are just so beautiful. It's a story about science concepts and historical dialogue, and looking into the past from the present as best one can. It's a fascinating study in how it's entirely possible to put together the clues from the past entirely wrong.

Paul E. Morph says

This is another wonderful play by Stoppard. This story takes place in two separate time periods, many decades distant from each other, and the events in the earlier period are being studied and referenced by the characters in the latter.

The play captures the often violent dance of art and science, beautifully arranged in waltz time. It delves into chaos theory and questions how much our knowledge is limited by the time we have and the speed at which we can process information. It asks the question 'what is trivial and what is important' and may cause you to re-examine your previous opinions on the matter (it certainly had me looking at things in a new light). There's even a love story tucked away in amongst all the brain-wrenching bits, so that's nice.

Being a Stoppard play, it is obviously very clever and full of wordplay (OK, and some quite groan-worthy puns, but I'm a sucker for a good pun).

Most importantly of all, there are two tortoises... or is it the same tortoise? Or is it, dare I say it, tortoises all

the way down?

Buddy read with Sunshine Seaspray.

nostalgebraist says

Enough people love this play that it presumably has some good qualities. But I just couldn't get past the snide, obnoxious characters, and the facile, frequently inaccurate treatment of science and math, which panders to the "science is just the product of fallible human impulses and, like, we don't *really* know anything for sure anyway, man" attitude that has become the norm among intellectuals and wannabe intellectuals who, for one reason or another, aren't interested in science.

As a presentation of math and science to a lay audience, the play is a failure. It feels as though Stoppard read James Gleick's *Chaos* (or a similar popular text), misunderstood it, forgot half of it, and then wrote the play on this basis of what remained. When Stoppard tries to write about chaos theory, he fails to mention the central concept -- sensitive dependence on initial conditions (the famous "butterfly effect") and its appearance even in simple systems -- and instead only tells the audience that chaos has something to do with iterated maps.

He mentions that iterated maps can produce fractals that look very much like realistic mountains, leaves, ferns, etc., and implies that the failure of 18th/19th-century dreams of predictability has something to do with the failure to use these realistic, fractal models of objects in physics calculations. (One of the characters proleptically quotes Mandelbrot: "Mountains are not cones, clouds are not spheres.") This, of course, raises the question: if we *do* have fractals now, is predictability no longer doomed? The answer is no, because (almost) all interesting physical systems exhibit sensitive dependence on initial conditions; but Stoppard does not clarify this. An audience member unfamiliar with the material will leave the play under the impression that physicists like Newton and Laplace were overly optimistic about prediction because they did not know about iterated maps, which (somehow!) are supposed to make prediction harder. Since the idea of an iterated map is very simple (indeed, it is explained in the play), this makes these geniuses look rather stupid.

Of course, they actually *did* know about iterated maps. (One of the most famous iterated maps is called . . . wait for it . . . *Newton's method*.) They didn't appreciate the unpredictability of very simple systems, but that unpredictability is a subtle issue, and Stoppard's play doesn't begin to get into it.

There are other errors, too, and they too (uncoincidentally) serve to make early physicists look dumb or oblivious. For instance, at one point one of the characters -- Thomasina, a precocious child who is learning physics -- reads a paper which, given the date and the description of its content, must be Fourier's paper on the heat equation. This paper is famous for introducing Fourier series, but Thomasina seems to think it is remarkable for another reason. She exclaims that Fourier's equations are "not like Newton's equations," for they specify a direction of time, while "Newton's equations" are reversible. This claim comes as quite a surprise, since the heat equation studied by Fourier is simply a continuous version of an equation called . . . wait for it . . . *Newton's Law of Cooling*. Presumably by "Newton's equations" Thomasina specifically means Newton's three laws of motion. But even there, she's wrong: although in some special cases Newton's laws are reversible, they can also describe irreversible forces, and indeed Newton himself believed that the most fundamental forces were likely to be irreversible. (This would explain the fact that many real-life phenomena, like stirring milk into coffee, seem to be irreversible -- another case where Stoppard seems to imply that early physicists simply *ignored* something obvious.)

The play views the march of science with an amused sneer: oh, look at these funny plodding people, convinced that they know so much, yet battered this way and that by their culture, swelling with utopian ambition in the Enlightenment, inventing lurid tales of heat death in the age of Romanticism, and once the 20th century rolls around they create "jazzy" math and lose faith in the old verities . . . Now, I'm not denying that scientists are fallible human beings, but Stoppard's sneer is unearned. The issues involved in the development of theoretical physics are esoteric, irreducibly mathematical, and mind-bendingly subtle. This is serious shit. Really, really smart people have been working very, very hard on it for centuries. I'm sure that Stoppard and some parts of his audience would like to imagine themselves as Thomasina, instantly spotting the errors of those grim old scientists and dispatching them with a light, witty touch. Would that that were possible! But science is *really hard*; when our predecessors have made mistakes they tend to be subtle, recondite ones. Try to catch the masters making *obvious* blunders and you will just fall on your face, as Stoppard has done.

And Thomasina gripes about having to plot simple mathematical curves like parabolas, because they don't look like real natural forms. Never mind that simple curves are tremendously important in science *anyway*. Never mind that facts like this are precious and remarkable precisely because they are *surprising*; if science always conformed to our intuitions (about, say, which shapes are important) it wouldn't have much value. No, Tom Stoppard's audience just remembers its own confusion and displeasure over math in high school and would like its prejudices confirmed. Maybe all those funny curves we had to draw as children really *were* meaningless! Take that, *school*! Now let's go home from the theater and never think about math again.

(Also: love/sex is "the attraction that Newton left out"? Seriously??? I know it's just a joke but it's an awful, cringe-inducingly cutesy one. I have a high cutesiness tolerance and this play is too much even for me.)

Leslie says

Hmmm... lots to think about in this two act play! Despite Stoppard's wonderful touch with the one-line quips and ripostes, this play isn't really a comedy. Within the humor there are some serious ideas regarding how academics interpret artifacts to construct a version of the past and whether the world/universe is determinate or chaotic.

I would love to see a production of this!
