The fictionality of time in modern tragedy

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THE FICTIONALITY OF TIME IN MODERN TRAGEDY

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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My heartfelt gratitude extends to

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the role of time in the plays of three major playwrights – Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and David Ives’ *All in the Timing*. By examining the treatment of time in these respective works, I will attempt to trace the associations between modern theatre and classical tragedy, specifically on how the definition of tragedy has evolved – from the Greek playwrights’ structured unity of form, to epistemological anxieties present in Modernist theatre, and finally tipping over to ontological concerns characteristic of the Postmodern. The metatheatrical qualities of each play will provide the platform for this discussion, with the form of the play-within-the-play paying emphasis to the artificiality of reality and the multiplicity of perspective, both which have their roots in time. Through this discussion, I hope to establish that these plays are, by Arthur Miller’s definition, “modern tragedies” in the contemporary sense of the term. By scrutinising the difference between the heroes of classical tragedy and these characters in Miller’s mould of the “Common Man,” each section in this paper will discuss the tragic implications of this comparison, asserting in the process that each play’s heightened awareness of the many temporalities—in different worlds—observes the isolation of man, reflecting his abject futility in the face of mortality and time.

INTRODUCTION

I think that life is a very sad joke, because there is in us, we do not know how, or why or whence, the necessity of constantly deceiving ourselves with the spontaneous creation of a reality (one for each and never the same for all) which from time to time we discover to be vain and illusory.

—Luigi Pirandello

Within this short excerpt, Pirandello, intentionally or otherwise, touches on several points which are particularly intriguing. For instance, the casual usage of the commonly-used phrase from “time to time” is ironically deceptive, especially when one considers Pirandello’s close associations with philosophical discussions of reality and illusion, two variables which he cleverly fits into the same lines. That he asserts the possibility of more than one reality—from time to time—suggests the separation of these multiple realities by the means of time. Indeed, I believe that it is this very awareness of time—as recognised and displayed in Pirandello’s writing—that allows for the comparison of one moment with another, providing such a wide range of interpretative possibilities.

Drawing from this example, I intend to investigate the role of time in modern theatre, specifically in the work of three major playwrights: Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and David Ives’ *Time Plays* in *All in the Timing*. Through this discussion of time, I hope to establish that these plays are, by Arthur Miller’s definition, “modern tragedies” in the contemporary sense of the term.¹ For Miller, “the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in need of the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity,” at the same time giving rise to the fear “of being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world.”² This is a description that can be

1. From Miller’s essay “Tragedy and the Common Man.” *The Sunday Times*, 1949.

2. Miller from C. W. E. Bigsby. *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study*.

applied to each of the plays chosen in this paper, providing a compelling angle to its theatrical concerns.

To establish my premise for this paper, I will begin my discussion with a short introduction of how time has been philosophized, interpreted, and subsequently, manipulated in the theatre more generally. The main point of contention of the paper, however, will focus on how the plays I have selected fit into this discussion of time; namely, how the formalistic and thematic concerns of each play revolve around considerations of temporalities in relation to reality and illusion, and at a deeper level, tragedy. As drama critic Vimala Herman postulates, “[d]ramatic interactions are orientated to the deitic centre, the time of speech exchange, and therefore, the ‘present’ of speech is the unmarked time of dramatic speech event” (62). In other words, the very essence of theatre has its roots in time; the very form of drama is representative of the artifice displayed in its mirroring of reality. It would hardly be surprising, then, that plays contemplating the relations between the real and the illusory also employ time to this effect.

Each of these plays displays distinct characteristics one associates quite naturally with the Theatre of the Absurd, as well as meta-theatrical tendencies reflective of the postmodern. Completing the introduction will be a discussion of meta-theatre, which I find extremely important if one is to fully appreciate the intricacies of time and the presence of multiple realities in drama. In each of the selected plays in this paper, the meta-theatrical features are explicitly evident; *Spiel in Spiel* in German dramatic theory, or *le théâtre dans le théâtre*, The Play within a Play works as a theatre device commonly seen in certain genres of theatre and dramatic literature. As Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner explain, “dramaturgically speaking it describes a strategy for constructing play texts that contain, within the perimeter of their fictional reality, a second or internal theatrical performance” (Fischer and Greiner, *Acknowledgements* xi); within a performance already formed on stage, the actors serve the

double function of an internal, secondary audience in addition to their primary roles as characters in the narrative.

It is these very devices which each of the playwrights I focus on makes use of in overt fashion. Even on a fundamental level of a random play, there is already an expected confrontation between the concepts of *diegesis* (narration) and *mimesis* (imitation) on the stage, and, moreover, a constant negotiation between what is narrated and what is acted. In a more overtly meta-dramatic piece however, the situation is more complex; there are multiple diegetic levels, what Jean Baudrillard considers “a self-contained authority... a total relativity... in the sense that... signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real” (Baudrillard 7). In other words, there is not only a simple distinction between the interiority and exteriority of the play, but an infinite extension of realities that build off one another. For Pirandello, Stoppard and Ives, the co-existence of multiple realities in their plays creates a sense of uncertainty, for both the audience and characters on stage.

Bill Angus describes this phenomenon as a “floating variable”, leading to the establishment of “a point of indeterminacy at the heart of the relationship between the author and audience” (Angus 55). It is precisely this “point of indeterminacy” which this paper aims to research more thoroughly in these plays; it is a point which is ever present in the medium of theatre, with its ambiguous definition inviting a constant stream of interpretation. Without a sense of grounding in their respective temporalities, the audience loses its control of time, and subsequently reality. Consider a moment in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*: When the Father is caught—by the Mother—in the process of embracing her undressed daughter in Madame Pace’s shop, he insists that his wife was “in time”, whilst the Stepdaughter says, “treacherously” that the Mother was “not in time.” Like the Mother, the audience does not know which time frame to adhere to in this moment of “indeterminacy,” and more importantly, which side to believe. In essence, Time ceases to exist, since all parties involved

are trapped in this moment eternally, the lack of knowledge disabling any means of progression, linear or otherwise.

Indeed, the question of time in theatre is not something new. From the Greek Tragedies and the Three Unities of Aristotle, to the French neo-classicist plays of Moliere, Racine and Corneille, leading up to the modernist and Avant-Garde movement involving Arnaud, Ibsen and Beckett, playwrights and theorists alike have maintained a sustained interest in how time works on the stage, even as conventions and concepts have changed greatly over that same time. The fascination with time, beginning with Aristotle's Unity of Time, stems from the need to bridge representation with the material, since the very form of drama, be it realist or meta-theatrical, is one already acknowledged to involve the performance of artifice. This ongoing evolution of how time is visually appreciated—and contemplated—in theatre over the ages serves as an important backdrop to this project, and of my attempt to better understand these playwrights' fascination with time.

From the Aristotelian convention of restricting the plot time to a single day, it has been established, from the classical philosophers to contemporary writers such as Marcel Proust and Henri Bergson, that time in reality is never linear, a phenomena that presents itself overtly in theatre. In his work *The Empty Space*, Peter Brooks asserts that the theatre cannot function as a kind of linear unfolding; rather, it is a process of “freeing” and not of “fixing” or “capturing” the process:

theatre happens in the here and now. It is what happens at the precise moment when you perform, that moment at which the world of actors and the world of the audience meet. A society in miniature, a microcosm brought together every evening within a space. Theatre's role is to give this microcosm a burning and fleeting taste of another world, and thereby interest it, transform it, integrate it. (236)

Theatre, in other words, is a structure of lateral interrelationships and interconnections. Eric Bentley notes that “[d]rama is a brief form, forever under the constraint of passing time – the time allotted to the whole performance” (Bentley from Herman 9). The “whole performance” consists of a reality being created right in front of the audience, the temporal existence of a world “at the precise moment.”

To dismiss time in drama as chronologically linear is a limiting mistake commonly associated with how reality is perceived. As suggested in the Pirandello quote, however, there is never one singular temporality, simply because multiple perspectives exist, even within an individual. In order to address these misconceptions, I will use this introduction to explore certain philosophies associated with time, particularly Henri Bergson’s concept of the *durée*, or duration, in relation to theatre’s concept of time. Bergson’s *durée* is defined as a type of multiplicity, one which can be separated into two major types of multiplicities; as Bergson explains in *Time and Free Will*, “two species of quantity, the first extensive and measurable, the second intensive and not admitting of measure, but of which it can nevertheless be said that it is greater or less than another intensity” (Bergson 3). In other words, time can be divided into two forms of measurement, the first chronological and the second intuitive. According to Bergson, the multiplicities are separated thus: “one discrete or discontinuous, the other continuous, the one spatial and the other temporal, the one actual, the other virtual” (Bergson from Deleuze 117). I find this to be both a suggestive and useful claim, reflecting what the playwrights in this study are evidently acutely aware of.

Following Pirandello’s description of life as “a very sad joke,” the discussion of different temporalities in theatre leads us to consider the tragic implications present in these works of modernist/postmodernist works, specifically with man’s helplessness against the passing of time. From the structural and thematic concerns of their work, Pirandello, Stoppard and Ives’ plays are not Tragedies in the Classic sense of the Greek term. In George

Steiner's seminal work *The Death of Tragedy*, Aristotelian Tragedy—and the Classical Unities that make up its composition—is described as an appeal to authority and reason, two qualities that are less distinct in modern theatre. The structure of neoclassicism, as Steiner describes, dictates that

[u]nity of time and place... are but instruments towards the principal design, which is unity of action. That is the vital centre of the classic ideal. The tragic action must proceed with total coherence and economy. There must be no residue of waste emotion, no energy of language or gesture inconsequential to the final effect. Neo-classic drama, where it accomplishes its purpose, is immensely tight-wrought. It is art by privation; an austere, sparse, yet ceremonious structure of language and bearing leading to the solemnities of heroic death.

Steiner's account seems to be in stark contrast to the playwrights discussed in this paper. For one, the stipulation that "[t]he tragic action must proceed with total coherence and economy" is wasted on Pirandello, Stoppard and Ives. Their works, reflective of the characteristics of modern theatre, display a particular kind of "time awareness, namely, that of historical time, linear and irreversible, flowing irresistibly onwards," even if they do not adhere strictly to this chronological view of time (Calinescu 13). Indeed, these playwrights seem to make the very point that "residue of waste emotion [and] energy of language or gesture inconsequential to the final effect" is unavoidable.

As Karl Jaspers observes cynically in *Tragedy is Not Enough*, tragedy "becomes the privilege of the exalted few – all others must be wiped out indifferently in disaster." The irony of this sentiment is reflected in Pirandello, Stoppard and Ives' work: their protagonists are not great heroes, and the plays do not revolve around any great deeds or tragic flaws. Each of them are, by Miller's assessment, just reflections of a "Common Man," no more.

Their fates are almost irrelevant in the greater scheme of things. There is nothing “heroic” about the Son’s death in *Six Characters*, or Ros and Guil’s demise at the end of *R&GAD*, or Trotsky’s inevitable end in Ives’ play. In other words, there is nothing purposeful about how these works are played out. Each character is left to suffer in his or her own solitude, inconsequential to the rest of the world. In addition, the circularity of time only means that these flaws will be repeated, over and over again, without any sense of reprieve.

Devoid of any clear purpose and resolution, the result of this meaningless meandering has its own set of tragic repercussions. Indeed, the plays are tragic *precisely* because they do not allow their audiences to achieve a state of *catharsis*. This purging of emotions is achieved through realisation, a bridge of understanding formed between play and audience. And it is this experimenting with time, and consequently with appearance and reality that any sense of a stable reality is denied to the audience. The very notion of man’s mortality, and his inability to stem the flow of time, is itself a form of tragedy. By experimenting with how time may be perceived on stage, each playwright draws our attention to the many temporalities and perspectives present in one scenario, and how transitory and artificial the appearance of an event may be. The cause of tragedy, then, can be said to be a consequence of the metatheatrical disruptions in the play. Without any semblance and possibility of a stable reality, an individual is left in a state of what McHale terms as “intractable epistemological uncertainty,”³ a condition where the problem of “‘unknowability’ or the limits of knowledge” is foregrounded. Alone in facing these uncertainties and isolated from the rest of his community, only one thing is certain to this man; as Sartre puts it succinctly, it seems that “the only true thing is play acting”

3. McHale proposes that the epistemological uncertainty is the dominant concept of modernism, and this is illustrated by Dick Higgins’ series of questions: “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?” Other questions include “What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable?” (*Postmodern Fiction*, 9)

as being fades into appearance at all degrees, it seems that the real is something melting, that it is reabsorbed when touched. In these patient fakings, appearance is revealed at the same time as pure nothingness and as cause of itself. And being, without ceasing to set itself up as absolute reality, becomes evanescent. (31)

Whilst reflecting on Sartre's take on the illusory nature of reality, it is necessary to contemplate the concept of death in theatre. Each chapter will therefore also discuss how death in theatre relates directly to the concept of time. As Guil describes it aptly, death is "the absence of presence, nothing more... the endless time of never coming back, a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound" (139). When Henry stabs Belcredi in Pirandello's *Henry IV*, the latter's imminent death coincides with the contemporary Henry's symbolic demise; to avoid incrimination, he is forced to forever remain in the persona of Henry IV, directly causing a simultaneous conflation and disruption of multiple temporalities, not only for himself, but for the others around him. When the Boy commits suicide in *Six Characters*, the Father protests "Pretense? Reality sir, reality!" Time comes immediately into focus here; the boundaries separating the various temporalities—plot time, stage time, and perspectives of duration—are thrown out of the window.

Chapter One begins with a discussion of the Pirandellian character, primarily focusing on Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, making secondary references to his *Henry IV*. Beckett's observation above with regards to change and time resonates nicely with Pirandello's perception of life, albeit from a different angle. The Pirandellian character, not dissimilar to the souls of Dante's imagination, is described by Mariani as "[e]xiled in the limbo of formlessness" (Mariani 5-6). Through this analogy, time is deprived of the movement Beckett suggests, yet it is this enforced deprivation which allows the audience a clearer view of what entails a being unconstrained by the boundaries of time. Without the

progression of time, each moment is eternal, rendering the discussion pertaining to change moot. In other words, Time is a necessary enabler in the opposition between reality and illusion, and the form of theatre is self-implicating, even as the actors, subjected to the requirements of the stage for their characters' existence, exist in an eternal moment, or moments, of a fixed reality.

The consequent cognitive dissonance appears to be a result of this ongoing process which finds its existence in limbo, a constant negotiation between appearance and reality. According to Italian critic Giacomo Debenedetti, this sense of limbo takes place simply because "Pirandello kills [the presence of] Time," while Bentley builds on Debenedetti's assessment with his own apt description of this phenomenon: "[Pirandello's] events do not grow in Time's womb. They erupt on the instant, arbitrarily" (Bentley 18). When Time is contained, the limitation, or rather, seizure of movement means that there is no transition, and therefore no process of negotiation between appearance and reality as suggested earlier. It is indeed, just this sense of non-movement, and consequently, non-being—a sense of reality trapped in limbo—that the paper is interested in exploring further.

In his essay *Studi sul teatro contemporaneo* (*Studies on Contemporary Theatre*), Adriano Tilgher proposes the "antithetical coupling of life/form as [Pirandello's] working metaphor" as a response to the convenient opposition between illusion and reality (Bassanese 89). Tilgher's dualistic formula essentially defines the "Pirandellian theater as the contrast between life and form". This "antithetical coupling" is in itself a form of limbo, as it seeks a favourable compromise between each opposition; indeed, it appears to be a recurring concept in the selected plays for this paper, particularly in Pirandello's *Six Characters*. As Bentley explains it, The Characters in the play "do not approach, enter, present themselves, let alone have motivated entrances, but are suddenly there, dropped from the sky" (Bentley 18-19). Each armed with a supposedly fixed "identity", an affirmed set of character traits and an

unchanging storyline, the Characters have no past or future to speak of. They are permanently temporally displaced, and thus cannot claim to be real, any more than a social role can claim to be allocated specifically to one singular individual. In other words, we will see that these Characters are experiencing what Robert Schechner, borrowing from R. D. Laing's existential psychoanalytical term, describes as "ontological insecurity"⁴. Taking into account both the plot and form, the conceptual relevance of time will be factored in line with the thesis.

This state of ontological insecurity is reflected less overtly in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, yet the tragic implications are no less severe. Focusing specifically on how time seems to stretch on indefinitely in the play, the second chapter will examine Stoppard's play and its relation to the larger thesis of this paper. As two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pass time on the most mundane of subjects, as they wait for the appearance of each subsequent event of *Hamlet*'s narrative. Like the Six Characters of Pirandello's imagination, they are periphery figures, lacking the presence of full-bodied characters and subjected to the workings of a larger narrative. In their static situations, Ros and Guil do not wait aimlessly for time to pass; they engage in many activities, albeit meaningless ones, which are supposed to occupy time, to hasten the process of passing time. The key here, as this paper aims to convince, is their inability to move back or forward in time. The form of drama, with its fluctuations between artifice and reality, then reflects a perpetual state of aporia, one that is very much present in Stoppard's play.

Besides the main protagonists Ros and Guil, other facets of meta-theatre are also present in the other minor characters. Like Pirandello's Characters, there is a troupe of Players who do not seem to have a socially defined role, perpetually in the process of

4. Quote taken from "The Inner and the Outer Reality". Tulane Drama Review. 7. 3. (Spring 1963), 193. Schechner originally applies the term "ontological insecurity" to Ionescu's personae.

playacting; this performance within a performance reemphasizes the artificiality of reality. Through their contact, it is clear that Ros and Guil are both part of a script, their fates sealed, since the audience already knows what will happen in Shakespeare's original play *Hamlet*. As the Players act out the very play itself (transitioning from *The Murder of Gonzago* to *Hamlet* and to *R&GAD* itself), Stoppard's working reiterates to the audience a sense of repetition, a simultaneous juxtaposition of two seemingly separate realities—past and present—that in actuality, are one and the same. Towards the end of the play, Guil's wistful statement strikes an ironic chord within the audience: "[t]here must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said – no. But somehow we missed it" (141). In essence, because there is no sense of temporality, there has never been a "beginning" in the first place. If the concept of timing is, in reality, nothing more than a coincidence, this inversion becomes poignant in the form of drama, since timing on stage is always controlled. Indeed, it will become increasingly clear how Stoppard's fascination with the exterior and interior workings of reality resonates well with Pirandello's own concerns regarding appearance and reality.

This is where David Ives' aptly named collection of short plays *All in the Timing* comes into the picture. In his Time Plays, Ives experiments with how time functions on stage, whether it is in philosophical or dramatic terms. When placed beside the previous two playwrights, it may seem strange to include another of much less acclaim and stature in the theatre world. Yet, Ives' fascination with the workings of time in drama makes it worthwhile to consider his works. Whilst Pirandello and Stoppard do involve humour in their plays, there is a certain lightness to Ives' choice of words—in terms of dialogue and stage directions—that seems to set him apart from his predecessors. Ives' plays do not have great force of satire in the design, nor overtly existential undertones. More explicitly, the epistemological anxiety present in *Six Characters* and *R&GAD* is not as evident in Ives' works: rather, there is a shift

to the ontological that is indicative of either acceptance or resignation of the characters' respective plights. For instance, Ives' more well-known comedy *Sure Thing* is structured around an attempt by a young man to pick up a young woman. The main protagonist is enabled to retract his words and gestures every time an error is made, and this constantly disrupts the audience's perception of continuity, destabilising our sense of reality. When we take into consideration Pirandello and Stoppard's weightier subject matters concerning existence and death, Ives' seems comparatively more frivolous in nature:

However, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that to trivialise Ives' work as simply comedies would be to demean certain conceptual and philosophical possibilities. Among Ives' plays in *All in the Timing*, I have selected three: *Sure Thing*, *Foreplay: or The Art of the Fugue* and *Variations on the Death of Trotsky*. Each of these plays offers a different variation of how time may be displayed on stage. In *Foreplay*, three versions of the same character are displayed on stage at the same instance, an uncanny visual spectacle which forces us to consider the many different temporalities that may occur simultaneously in the same space and time. *Trotsky*, on the other hand, offers a heavier proposition: the historical character by the same namesake is given another day to live after an axe has been lodged in his head; the twenty-four hours, whilst reflective of Aristotle's Classical Unities, is ironically turned on its head when Trotsky is unable to "die" in one sequence. The scene is replayed multiple times, and with each further take, the audience is even more uncertain as to how a recollected scene can ever been seen as remotely authentic. Each subsequent death brings the stage further and further from reality, as the plural temporalities create a kind of disjunctive tension which undermines any possibility of chronological unity.

Through this display of meta-theatricality, the sense of aporia is re-enforced. How change can be ascertained is a question one can only deliberate if the significance of time is factored in; a comparison of two different temporalities, before and after a moment, provides

ground for the analysis of change. As Samuel Beckett points out in his essay *Proust*, “[y]esterday has deformed us... yesterday is irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely weary because of yesterday, we are other, we are no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday” (Beckett, *Proust* 17). If these words are to be held true, neither ontological plane, if they can be ever separated at all, can ever be regarded as or considered static in nature. There is no direction one can speak of, or narrow down empirically: “[t]ime, unlike space, is asymmetric in the more specific sense of irreversible. Whereas something can in principle proceed any direction with respect to space, it is typically claimed, it cannot do so with time” (Wagner 47). In other words, it is this paper’s contention that both reality and appearance are always in transition, in a perpetual state of negotiation. Perhaps, it is as Bergson says, that “[R]eality... is a perpetual becoming. It makes or remakes itself, but it is never something made.”

OF SHIFTING TIMES AND REALITIES: THE PIRANDELLIAN TRAGEDY

A man will die, a writer, the instrument of creation: but what he has created will never die! And to be able to live forever you don't need to have extraordinary gifts or be able to do miracles.

Who was Sancho Panza? Who was Prospero?

But they will live on forever because – living seeds – they had the luck to find a fruitful soil, an imagination which knew how to grow them and feed them, so that they will live forever.

— Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

The writer sits at his desk, waiting for the next person to show up. He has been doing this every Sunday morning, from seven to ten, just listening to their stories. These people who do show up, many who are discontented and tormented in their own ways, he questions them politely, attempting to satisfy them, to accept them in his own mind and in his writings. The writer is not asking for much. At least, that is what he feels. All he wants is to see them as they see themselves, to find a semblance of self-reflection in their own minds. This is easier said than done. He is not convinced by their narratives, embellished and self-serving accounts which do not sound authentic in the least. The characters who come along know this. They all want his approval, to be given life in his future writings, to witness the unfolding of their stories to reality. The ones who come from his past complicate the situation, and some of them remind him of memories he does not want to remember. It is not surprising then, that given their understandable desperation, the writer turns many of them away. He is not convinced by their tales, and sees no need to continue their narratives.

Of the rare few who satisfy the writer's requirements, he finds a narrative for them, a framework that he creates for their stories. Some of them are people from his past, and the writer recognises them. They were once very much part of his reality, characters who lived through the source of their own essence without the need for his approval. Not all of them are turned away, only those who do not capture his literary imagination. Yet, this character Dr.

Fileno, he refuses to go away. The author is perplexed. He informs Fileno that he has done all he can for the poor doctor, that Fileno deserves a better writer, one who can capture the essence of his character. Polite as his words are, the reader catches the gist of the writer's careful wordplay: Fileno, like most of the rest before him, has not captured the writer's imagination. For this very reason, the writer will not continue to write his character into narrative, and the meaning for Fileno's uncertain existence thus remains uncertain. Without a writer, he is doomed to wander for all eternity, searching for the purpose and meaning of his ontological existence. Such is the fate of a fairly typical character in Luigi Pirandello's world.

In this short scene—involving authors and characters—from his unheralded novella *The Tragedy of a Character*, Pirandello introduces the plight of a character burdened by a lack of purpose, one that is no different in this respect from any of the six in what is perhaps his most famous piece of work, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. In this paper's discussion of the importance of time and metatheatricality in the understanding of tragedy in modern drama, the tragic Pirandellian character cuts a lonely figure in the face of temporal transition. Confronted with the mutability of time, it is as Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy* describes, that “[t]he worst of time, like the best, is always passing away.” Each of these characters shares the fears of a Boethian tragedy; whether time passes meaningfully or not, the phenomenon of transition renders any differentiation between these two temporalities irrelevant.

This temporary atemporal anxiety resonates with Pirandello's fascination with an individual's interior consciousness. Like many of his contemporaries, Pirandello was drawn to what Anthony Francis Caputi describes as “the crisis of Modern Consciousness”. Caputi makes the well-founded assumption that Pirandello was “a key figure in that shift of sensibility by which the consciousness with its many-layered life replaced the inherited structures of tradition in the West as a matrix of value” (Caputi, *Introduction* 1). Rather than

be dictated to by what he regarded as the superficiality, and to a certain extent, unknowability of appearance, Pirandello was more interested in exploring and contemplating the “crisis of internal consciousness”. In other words, his view of life is comprised not simply of one all-encompassing narrative, but of a series of illusory events that do not have a chronological sequence.

As a testament to his craft, the term “Pirandellism” was coined, a term which many later playwrights who displayed similar characteristics in their work have been associated with. Pirandellian characters question or/and reject the conditions and values which are imposed upon them by society, with “its customs, its prejudices, its philistinism, its self-assurance, its claim to knowledge and superior wisdom”; in other words, they speak out—either silently or in open defiance—against the failing bourgeois system and express growing doubts about identity and fundamental existential beliefs (Mariani 3). At the turn of the twentieth century, the structures of authority in the bourgeois world had lost their credibility, along with the sense of security and stability that had governed society’s principles and institutions severely shaken after the horrors of World War I. The loss of faith in “positivism” rendered the previously omniscient presence of scientific knowledge and authority irrelevant, even as the bourgeois world’s previous displays of presumption and arrogance were unable to sustain its certainty in continuity. The lack of a unified version of reality, the disintegration of a “debased reality... no longer sustained by the now empty forms of its false ideals,” inevitably led to a sense of betrayal that was felt strongly by intellectuals who had believed so strongly in it (Mariani 4). Pirandello was one of them.

Robert W. Corrigan’s aptly named *The Theatre in Search of a Fix*, which offers an excellent summary of the evolution of modern theatre, poses the critical question: without a sense of purpose or direction, where does one begin the search for epistemological—and even ontological—certainty? If time should continue its relentless drive towards an unforeseeable

sense of an ending, where does this leave the unsatisfied intellectual, who questions the meaning of his life, at every twist and turn? Even as each Pirandellian Character searches for an Author for enlightenment, it becomes clear that there are already seeds of doubt planted even before he or she begins. In Corrigan's words, "[t]he tragic writer in all ages has always been chiefly concerned with man's fate: ultimate defeat and death" (6). If this statement holds true, then only the form of tragedy has changed. From the classical Greek tragedies to Modern theatre, the struggle with one's fate has always been a constant factor. This struggle with fate, or as the Greeks term it, *Ananke*, or Necessity, is "the embodiment of life's smallness, absurdity and fragility; it is the acknowledgement of the limitation and mortality of all human experience" (6). It is a struggle which time cannot hope to resolve.

Pirandellian characters are thus to be recognised as ones who suffer a "timeless existential condition, but also the particular condition of humanity of our time" (Mariani 3); they can be surmised to comprise of three distinctive characteristics: "the multiplicity of personality", "the relativity of truth", and alienation, "the opposition of life, fluid and ever-changing to the rigid permanence of art" (Melcher 33). All three factors share an intricate relationship with time. For multiple personalities to exist in an individual, each separate personality operates under a different temporality, even if coexisting simultaneously. Truth is relative because reality is never static; what may be true at one point changes with the passing of time. And it is this rationale which provides the basis for the last trait: the awareness of time passing enables us to see life as a process that is always in a state of transition. This directly opposes the principle of art, which embodies the permanence of timelessness. With these definitions at hand, Pirandello's emphasis becomes clear: the relationship between appearance and reality—its mutability and interchangeability—allows one to experience the artifice of reality, the (temporary) truth of the human condition in this paradoxical statement.

It is thus Pirandello's apparent obsession with time that weaves the fabric of his philosophical plays. And yet, the Pirandellian play's treatment of time is quite unlike what Boethius asserts. As Giacomo Debenedetti claims, Pirandello "kills [the presence] of Time." The thrust of this chapter lies with this assertion, one that forces us to rethink the philosophy of time in Pirandello's works: What does it mean to "kill Time?" How can time be actually removed from reality, and if so, how does Pirandello manage it? Bentley attempts to describe this phenomenon by means of an analogy: "[Pirandello's] events do not grow in Time's womb. They erupt on the instant, arbitrarily" (Bentley 18). This is not to say that there is no presence of stage time in his works at all. Neither does it mean that the events in his play do not follow any discernable pattern prior to this "eruption". Rather, the Pirandellian character, not so dissimilar from the souls of Dante's imagination, is described aptly by Mariani as "[e]xiled in the limbo of formlessness" (Mariani 5-6). Through this analogy, time is deprived of the movement Bergson suggests, yet it is this enforced deprivation which allows the audience a clearer view of what how one may act when he or she is unconstrained, or rather, constrained ironically by the (lack of) boundaries of time.

Without the progression of time, each moment is eternal by default, rendering the discussion pertaining to change almost irrelevant. In other words, time is a necessary enabler in the opposition between reality and illusion, and the form of theatre is self-implicating, even as the actors, subjected to the requirements of the stage for their characters' existence, exist in an eternal moment, or moments, of a supposedly fixed reality. For as one who is reading *The Tragedy of a Character* eventually realises, these characters seek to break out of this entrapment, and the consequent cognitive dissonance in the work appears to be simply a result of this ongoing process which finds its existence in limbo, a constant negotiation between what appears temporarily on the surface and the unknowable, indecipherable essence that lies beneath. When time is contained, the limitation, or rather, seizure of movement

means that there is no transition between the sequence of events, on stage, text or otherwise. Therefore, there can be no process of negotiation between appearance and reality, as suggested by the metatheatrical qualities of a Pirandellian play.

In this desperate yet ultimately futile struggle, it is worth considering whether Pirandellian plays can be regarded as anything but tragic in their structure. There are brief instances of humour, yet these rare moments are fleeting. Indeed, if the argument can be made that *Six Characters* and *Henry IV* are best considered tragicomedies, the imaginary laughter becomes derisory, and it is unclear whether it is directed at the characters on stage, or is reflected back upon an unsuspecting audience. In the face of absurdity, one laughs because he knows not what else to do. Referencing Ionesco's works, Esslin asserts that "[t]o give theatre its true measure, which lies going to excess, the words themselves must be stretched to their utmost limits, the language must be made to almost explode, or to destroy itself in its inability to contain its meaning" (Ibid, Esslin 187). In this process of "intensification, acceleration, accumulation, proliferation to the point of paroxysm, when psychological tension reaches the unbearable," liberation takes "the form of laughter" (187).

This release of tension, almost a state of orgasm, reflects symptoms similar to Aristotle's *catharsis*. Yet, the premises leading to these two phenomena are vastly different. Catharsis demands a form of realisation, to understand the futility of man's struggle against his fate. To laugh at this dissolution of emotions suggests a form of self-mockery, an attempt to bridge this void by means of derision. After the sounds of laughter have died away, the remains of its echoes are not enough to sustain any semblance of form. In a Pirandellian play, however, even this urge to laugh, this illusion of *catharsis*, is denied us. If the cathartic effect serves as a kind of recognition of how these events may translate to reality, the Pirandellian characters that make us question the very world we live in convinces us that this translation is

not possible. This is perhaps where the real tragedy of modern theatre—and Pirandello's theatre—lies.

By exposing as illusions what society perceives as reality, Pirandello's focus on the artifice of form is an attempt to display the impossibility of mirroring reality. In this apparent denouncement of mimesis, he is almost anti-Aristotelian; by being unable to replicate reality, we are doomed to exist in one that never stays the same. In this sense, Pirandello's view of modern tragedy ironically becomes clear: his vision of tragedy is driven by the very evolution of modern tragedy, and by the consequent loss of the structural certainties which defined the classical tragedies. Indeed, this speech from Anselmo Paleari, a character from Pirandello's novel *The Late Mattia Pascal*, is often labelled as the statement best representing Pirandello's views on Modern Theatre:

If at the climax of the play, just when the marionette who is playing Orestes is about to avenge his father's death and kill his mother and Aegisthus, suppose there were a little hole torn in the paper sky of the scenery... Orestes would still feel his desire for vengeance, he would still want passionately to achieve it, but his eyes, at that point, would go straight to the hole, from which every kind of evil influence would then crowd the stage and Orestes would feel suddenly helpless. In other words, Orestes would become Hamlet. There's a whole difference between ancient tragedy and modern, Sinor Meis—believe me—a hole torn in a paper sky.

A character like Orestes, like a more modern version of Hamlet, is described as continuing his performance even as he realises the artificiality of the stage he is acting on. The willingness to continue displays Orestes' awareness of himself as a puppet, and whether this awareness translates to acceptance is not yet clear. Perhaps this brief commentary seeks to emphasise how a seed of doubt, regardless of how small, may affect the interior thoughts of

an individual, even if he or she continues the performance, and this is reflective of how Pirandello “envisions modern tragedy as writing the tragedy at the loss of the certainties presupposed by classical tragedy” (Witt 92). With the loss of a grand narrative and the coherence its structure brings, reality is less certain than before.

According to Adriano Tilgher “the structure of the tragedy [in *Henry IV*] is such that the stages of its development... pass before our eyes in a swift and relentless succession of scenes, bound together by a profound and powerful logic” (Tilgher from Mariani 61). When the main protagonist makes his first appearance in the play, Henry is introduced as a madman, trapped within a role he was supposed to play only for a costume party. After some time, it is revealed that he was involved in a horse-riding accident, which severely impaired his sense of reality, leading to this prolonged state of “play-acting.” The only problem with this “play-acting” is that this party took place twenty years ago. In an ironic twist of events, Henry has adopted—literally—the role of the character he was supposed to play, a man from eight hundred years ago. Whilst it is evident that Henry is both temporally and socially displaced, what amazes us initially is how the people around him adhere to his whims and fancies, even going so far as to assume roles from the same century he is entrapped in. It comes as a shock then when Henry reveals himself to be man of the twentieth century. Like the rest of the people around him, he too has been playacting, and the degree of manipulation becomes two-fold: his counterparts are controlled not only by the role, but by the actor of the role. When one considers the potential number of temporalities that may arise from this confusion, it is clear that Henry’s state of (in)sanity has disrupted the play’s supposed fabric of reality, both epistemologically and ontologically.

To understand Pirandello’s *Henry IV*, it may be useful to consider a line from T. S. Eliot’s *Burnt Norton*: “[t]o be conscious is not to be in time.” Whilst it is impossible to summarise the specificities of the play’s complexities in a single line, the notion of time in

one's consciousness, both individual and collective, is a concern that runs throughout the narrative. Ironically, Henry cannot be of this collective temporality if he wants to remain conscious. Yet, the constant shifts in narratives and the temporalities on stage have undermined any possibility of a coherent, shared form of reality. The other characters are following Henry's lead, yet Henry himself is only putting on a show. In other words, it is a reality that may collapse at any given moment, subjected as it is to Henry's whim and fancy.

Like Fileno, Henry displays certain distinctive traits that reflect him as a Pirandellian character. Shifting in between personalities, Henry experiences a timeless, existentialist condition. Yet, unlike the situation in *The Tragedy of a Character*, the writer is not an obvious external entity, but Henry himself. And yet even as he tries to exert a measure of control on his surroundings, there are some things he cannot change. Viewing a portrait of his youthful self, trapped in an eternal moment, Henry suffers from the realization that this youth can never be retrieved. The lost years become the heaviest of burdens, and the struggle to bridge this distance becomes a daunting, impossible task. As a historical figure, Henry IV will remain at the age of twenty-six for eternity, "fixed and immutable... never [suffering] the horrors of age" (Brustein 297). Like the Characters of *Six Characters*, Henry writes himself into the narrative, precisely because history is like form, "the outlines of a plot already written, foreordained, predetermined, seeking" (297). As the man Henry of the twentieth century, he cannot deceive himself:

I was terrified because I understood at once that not only had my hair gone grey, but that I was all grey, inside; that everything had fallen to pieces, what everything was finished; and I was going to arrive, hungry as a wolf, at a banquet which had already been cleared away.

This is a powerful moment in the play, not least because there is so much going beneath these metaphorical allusions. Living in an existence in which he is acutely aware of how every

event takes place “precisely and coherently in each minute particular,” Henry realizes that the Doctor’s metaphor of a “stopped watch” represents the very state of delusion he is in. The stopping of one time piece does not by any means affect any other temporal zones outside of its contained environment. The delusion of adhering to an individual temporality, without consideration of any collective, chronological time frame, would be perceived as insanity in the eyes of society. By arriving at the wrong time, Henry’s expectations remain in a state of unresolved dissatisfaction. Figuratively speaking, the change in circumstances may have removed his opportunity, but it has not dissolved his hunger. Physically, Henry cannot dismiss the visual signs that things have changed, and are still in the process of changing. The image in the mirror reveals all.

Indeed, the very act of looking in the mirror echoes Pirandello’s *il teatro dello specchio*, “the mirror theatre” or “theatre of the looking glass.” An image is created, one that stares back at the audience. Pirandello invented this self-conscious, dissociative technique to discuss how one’s identity is always given by others:

When a man lives [writes Pirandello], he lives and does not see himself. Well, put a mirror before him and make him see himself in the act of living. Either he is astonished at his own appearance, or else he turns away his eyes so as not to see himself, or else in disgust he spits at his image, or, again, clenches his fist to break it. In a word, there arises a crisis, and that crisis is my theatre.

(Pirandello from Bassanese 54)

This image is compelling for many reasons. Firstly, it is not entirely inaccurate to assume that one’s reflection in the mirror is a representation of truth; that is, what we see standing in front of the mirror *is* physically present. Here, the relation to theatre is evident. Like a script played out in front of an audience, a play is a physical process; we see the gestures, hear the exchange of dialogue of those on stage, clap and cheer or groan in despair, with or without

the people beside us. The metaphor works, only because of the transitory nature of both mediums. Every reflection in the mirror denies replication, not only because of physical positioning and dimensions, but also because the person standing in front of the mirror is never the same person. Time is passing, and even a split-second of detachment does not change this fact. There are echoes of a Lacanian reading as the individual stands in front of a mirror, and recognizes—in a self-conscious moment—that he has a self, one that is detachable not simply because of the temporary image he sees himself.

Yet, the implications which Pirandello wants us to consider may be considerably severe. A reflection in the mirror is a visual illusion; it does not reveal anything below the surface. Jean-Paul Sartre's commentary on another playwright, Jean Genet, is relevant here, considering that Pirandello's influence on Genet's work: like Genet after him, Pirandello makes one see "what was in the precipice to whose edge existentialists brought us; and there is no holding back, once one has seen it", and he achieves this aim by, as Sartre terms it, making "the nothing shimmer at the surface of the all" ("The Finiteness of One" 136). Reality, it seems, is made up of nothing more than fleeting images, impressions that are constantly changing. When one takes into account that an individual is made up of more than these fleeting images and impressions, we begin to acknowledge the presence of one's interiority, of the self and not the appearance. As Tilgher puts it, an individual "is forced to give oneself a Form that one can never be satisfied with, because always, sooner or later, Life pays for the Form it has given itself, or has let others impose on it; and in this clash between Life and the Form into which the individual has channelled it or others have channelled it for him, we find the essence of the theatre of Pirandello" (from Mariani 57).

Upon reflection, one can almost make the claim that Pirandello is nihilistic; Professor Tilgher's assessment that he "kills" time may be interpreted differently, without the seemingly destructive associations. Indeed, the word "kill" can be problematic, considering

that this may not be the worst fate that may befall an individual. Following certain resonations between the two perspectives, it may be possible to consider Pirandello's treatment of time in relation to Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence instead. In the English translation of Nietzsche's *Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, Bernd Magnus summarises Karl Löwith's definition of Nietzsche's theory of the eternal return:

On the one hand... eternal recurrence is a cosmological theory replete with a history he traces back at least to Heraclitus. In all of its formulations, however, it suggests that, roughly, a finite number of states of the world and the infinity of time, any single state of the world must recur. More than that, it must recur eternally: the eternal recurrence of the same. At the same time, however, Nietzsche's aphorisms also exhort an imperative, namely the injunction to live in such a way that you would gladly will the eternal recurrence of your life—without change or emendation—over and over again.

(*Foreword*, xv)

Time and her properties are not removed, but rather, are sequentially in a state of change. The Characters, like those of Nietzsche's imagination, are doomed to relive each moment in exactly the same way. It may be a stretch to claim that Pirandello dismisses the naivety of believing in free-will, yet it is his treatment of his characters, each a puppet on a separate string, that gives us this acute sense of futility. Like Pirandello the playwright, Henry is the puppet-master, controlling all the people around him on a string. Yet, he is a puppeteer and puppet at the same time; even as he seems to be controlling his surroundings, Henry's string leads back to himself. The image of one limited in his movement as a consequence of his own actions resonates once again with humanity's struggle with fate.

Henry's plight aside, it must be clarified at this point that Nietzsche's definition of tragedy was never confined to pessimistic or tragic connotations, even if the concept of Eternal Recurrence might be conveniently read so. Even in the short definition above, Löwith places emphasis on the fact that there is the directive "to live in such a way that you would gladly will the eternal recurrence of your life—without change or emendation—over and over again." The key—and inherent problem—therefore lies in living one's life in "such a way," and this is easier said than done, considering that mistakes made along the way may not be a matter of choice. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche goes one step further, questioning whether there can be a "pessimism of strength" that, instead of acquiescence, provides a form of challenge:

Is there a pessimism of strength? An intellectual preference for the hard, gruesome, malevolent and problematic aspects of existence that comes from an abundance of existence? Is there perhaps such a thing as suffering from superabundance itself? Is there a tempting bravery in the sharpest eye which demands the terrifying as its foe, as a worthy foe against which it can test its strength and from which it intends to learn the meaning of fear?⁵

Given that the basis of Nietzsche's will to power was drawn from Schopenhauer's notion of the will, it is interesting to note that the attitude reflected in this short excerpt betrays none of the "*resignation*" outlined by Schopenhauer, who claims that characteristic of the tragic is "the dawning of its knowledge that the world and life can afford us no true satisfaction, and therefore *not worth* our attachment to them" (*The World as Will and Representation*, 1, 416; emphasis in original). In this state of resignation, Schopenhauer introduces the *principium individuationis*, or principle of individuation, stating that "it is only by means of time and space that something which is one and the same according to its nature and its concept

5. In Wagner's Sigfried the hero does not know the meaning of fear, and sets out to try to discover it.

appears different, as a plurality of co-existent and successive things” (*The World as Will and Representation*, 1, 113).⁶ With this statement, Schopenhauer reduces the individual’s individuality to mere appearance, denying the possibility of choice, alternate scenarios and effectively, the presence of will; that “in [spite of] a world of suffering and misery an individual calmly sits the support and trust of the *principium individuationis* [...]” (*The World as Will and Representation*, 1, 416; emphasis in original). Yet, in this short statement, the sentiments of “support and trust” provide an ironic, even paradoxical, edge when one considers the lack of choice to even support and trust in the first place.

In “exchanging Schopenhauerian pessimism for a fully affirmative attitude towards life,”⁷ Nietzsche clearly romanticises the notion of tragedy as “a worthy foe,” not as an adversary to be feared. Indeed, his counterpoint on Schopenhauer’s Principle of Individuation is marked by a profound difference in their respective attitudes towards the concept of will. As Nuno Nabais summarises in his article “Individual and Individuality in Nietzsche”, there was already a “process of rupture” that divided the works of master and disciple, one that was “manifested in the search for a justification of the empirical individual existence” (Nabais from Pearson 79):

Nietzsche thus breaks not only with Schopenhauer over the definition of *principium individuationis*, but also concerning the ethical consequences of the absence of a real empirical correlative for individuality. Thus, while

6. Schopenhauer thought that our everyday experience of the world was of separate, distinct empirical objects (i.e. things subject to the ‘principle of individuation’) and that their distinctness was inherently connected with applicability of the ‘principle of sufficient reason’. Roughly speaking, two things are distinct (individuated) only if we have grounds (sufficient reason) to distinguish them and if we have such grounds they are distinct. However, Schopenhauer also believed that all use of the principle of sufficient reason (and thus all individuation) was a result of the operation of the mind, and hence the everyday world of distinct objects of experience was a mere appearance, in fact an illusion. Schopenhauer was very interested in Indian religion and claimed that his view that the everyday world is an illusion was just a Western version of the Vedantic doctrine that the world we experience is nothing but the ‘veil of maya’. Although the everyday world is a mere appearance, there is a reality behind it to which Schopenhauer thinks we sometimes have access. The ‘reality’ of which our empirical world is an appearance is what Schopenhauer calls ‘the Will’ and we can have non-empirical access to it in our own willing – we know that we will directly without ‘observing’ anything – and in certain kinds of aesthetic experience. Since this ‘will’ is by definition outside the realm within which one can speak of individuation and the distinctness of one ‘thing’ from another, it has a kind of primordial unity.

7. Raymond Green’ Introduction to *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp. viii.

admitting that individual existence amounts to an injustice in the face of the One, Nietzsche does not follow Schopenhauer in proposing a process of ascetic negation of the individual will but endeavors to justify the plane of appearance itself, and, therefore, the empirical existence of each individual.

While acknowledging the possible intention to separate his views from Schopenhauer's, Nietzsche's "endeavors to justify the plane of appearance itself" clearly dismisses the option of acceptance, much less resignation. Yet, to follow Nietzsche's approach in Henry's unenviable position would require one to command will power beyond that possessed by a normal human being. This describes the figure of the *Übermensch*, Nietzsche's famous metaphor for "what it means to transcend the dualism and alienation of the human condition," a higher being that "exemplifies the will to power as domination in its extremity" (Shutte 123). An "overman" of such willpower, unburdened by personal fears and desires, would thus have the strength to negate this state of suffering in Eternity. Transcending the struggle against time, Henry would have the willpower to fully accept all his realities—past, present and future—and confront, or will, the prospect of Eternal Recurrence.⁸

However, it is painfully evident the strength of Henry's willpower is considerably more limited, thus denying an alternate reading of Eternal Recurrence a more optimistic perspective. Rather than consider the validity of his choices and consequently accept his fate, Henry is tormented instead by the paths that he has not taken, and it is not difficult to see why. If there is an infinite number of finite states that has to occur in an infinite stretch of time, there will always be an alternative possibility that is preferable, and the knowledge of these possibilities prevents one from ever attaining fulfilment. Considering this burden of regret

8. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche offers his thoughts on the *Übermensch*, or as he terms, "Superman": "These masters of to-day – surpass them, O my brethren – these petty people: they are the Superman's greatest danger! Surpass, ye higher men, the petty virtues, the petty policy, the sand-grain considerateness, the ant-hill trumpety, the pitiable comfortableness, the "happiness of the greatest number" – ! And rather despair than submit yourselves. And verily, I love you, because ye know no to-day how to live, ye higher men! For thus do ye live – best!" (205).

and nostalgia, to ask Henry to accept reality as it has unfolded is to deny him the possibility of redemption. Without the luxury of Nietzsche's vantage point, it becomes an act of condemnation, restricting him to one possible scenario and depriving him of any authority or control of his fate. When Henry realises that he is "grey" both internally and externally, the notion that this could have been prevented makes the situation all the more unbearable. This explains why the appearance of Frida is so important, as she offers Henry a second chance, at least on the surface, of reworking history. As Pirandello notes on a personal level:

the harder the struggle for life and the more one's weakness is felt, the greater becomes the need for mutual deception. The simulation of force, honesty, sympathy, prudence, in short, of every virtue veracity, is a form of adjustment, an effective instrument of struggle... And while the sociologist describes social life as it presents itself to external observation, the humorist, being a man of exceptional intuition, shows—nay, reveals—that appearances are one thing and the consciousness of the people concerned, in its essence, another. And yet people "lie psychologically" even as they "lie socially". (Pirandello from Lewis 133)

All the characters in *Henry IV* are, in essence, engaged in this mutual form of deception, if only to make existence more bearable. The only problem comes in when the lack of consistency becomes less apparent, and the characters in question are unable to keep up with this uniform façade.

All the same, the need to maintain these appearances transitions from the artificial to the necessary. Trapped already in a state of performativity, the characters of *Henry IV* have already shaped their identities according to the script, and a break now in performance may result in abject consequences. Pirandello's assessment—that "appearances are one thing and the consciousness of people concerned, in its essence, another"—fails to mask the fact that

these entities are easily conflated. Frida's appearance, then, provides Henry the opportunity to change the current state of affairs. Ironically, this opportunity is no less a show of deception than its predecessor. The fact remains that time has already passed, and the younger girl is no replacement for her mother, neither in her name, her appearance or her role. Henry may rework history according to his perception whilst ignoring the rest, yet it is both a self-deluding and impossible one. Without a fixed chronological frame of time to adhere to, all the characters involved are in their respective states of temporal confusion. It is only a matter of time before the façade falls apart, which is the very fate that befalls Henry at the end of the play. It is a similar fate that will plague the rest of Pirandello's characters (and many of Stoppard's as well).

Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* begins with a moment of theatrical confusion. As the Manager jumps up in rage and shouts: "Is it my fault if France won't send us any more good comedies, and we are reduced to putting on Pirandello's works?" this moment of self-reflexivity adds a layer of comedy to what already seems like an unorthodox performance hinging on the ridiculous. From the first, the staging of a "rehearsal" and not an "actual play" would seem to display too overt an attempt at meta-theatricality. Even less subtle is the comment about French "good comedies". Here, Pirandello deals the first of the cards in his hand; he comments ironically on the demand for pretentious, bourgeois plays of the higher class, even as they were on the verge of losing credibility. The Manager's desire for these "good" plays thus condemns him as one whose ideals are dictated by society; he goes by the trends, possibly without deeper intellectual considerations. From what we understand of Pirandello's intentions, "good" is termed by society, promising a cohesive, perhaps even authoritative structure, unless of course, the Manager's tone may be read as ironic. However, even as the audience is unable to come to a conclusive impression of the Manager, the play has moved on as the manager begins talking about eggs and egg-shells, or,

more specifically, how the actors “represent the shell of the eggs [they] are beating”. Whether he is making a reference to the binary between reality and appearance, it is too early to tell.

This is the make-up of Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. At the beginning of the play, there is no sense of a starting point; when the play concludes a couple of hours later, the ending is similarly non-conclusive. To determine a confrontation between *diegesis* (narration) and *mimesis* (imitation) on this stage is an understatement; even in the early exchanges, it is clear that there are multiple diegetic levels present in Pirandello’s overt display of meta-theatricality. Unlike *Henry IV*, where there is at least a semblance of a distinction between the interiority and exteriority of the play, provided by a historical backdrop, there is none in *Six Characters*. Without a form of grounding, Bill Angus’ “point of indeterminacy” aptly describes the situation that unfolds: as with the effect of meta-narratives, a constant stream of possible interpretations disrupts the audience’s sense of time. The lack of grounding in their respective temporalities results eventually in a loss of one’s sense of reality.

To illustrate what Angus means by that “floating variable,” it is imperative that we first examine the introduction of the Six Characters. Shortly after the exchanges between the Manager and his Actors, the doorman signals the arrival of the Characters. To get a sense of what Bentley describes as an almost “unearthly appearance”, it is first worth contemplating the introduction of the Six Characters as articulated by Pirandello’s stage descriptions:

At this point, the DOOR-KEEPER has entered from the stage door and advances towards the manager’s table, taking off his braided cap. During this manoeuvre, the Six CHARACTERS enter, and stop by the door at back of stage, so that when the DOOR-KEEPER is about to announce their coming to the MANAGER, they are already on the stage. A tenuous light surrounds them, almost as if irradiated by them – the faint breath of their fantastic reality.

The word “fantastic”, used tellingly in the stage narratorial direction, betrays the unnatural arrival of The Characters. As “[a] tenuous light surrounds them”, there is enough visual suggestion to alert the audience of existence. Yet, it is imperative that one does not forget the narrative preceding their arrival:

LEADING MAN: I’m hanged if I do.

THE MANAGER: Neither do I. But let’s get on with it. It’s sure to be a glorious failure anyway. (*Confidentially*) But I say, please face three-quarters. Otherwise, what with the abstruseness of the dialogue, and the public that won’t be able to hear you, the whole thing will go to hell. Come on! come on!

PROMPTER: Pardon sir, may I get into my box. There’s a bit of a draught.

THE MANAGER: Yes, yes, of course! (*Six Characters* 5)

Other than the mention of “a draught”, there is no other hint that pre-empt the abruptness of their appearance. Yet, this is not due to a complete lack of foreshadowing. We know that something is not right with the reality unfolding on stage, that with the self-awareness in its own artificiality something strange will inevitably happen. The problem is that we do not know when this event will take place, and the lengthened duration of time spent in this anticipation only increases the tension. Bentley’s description of their appearance as “dropping out of the sky” sums up the situation perfectly.

The banter between the actors and their manager is nothing out of the ordinary, and they are equally as surprised as the audience at the Characters’ arrival. It is important to note, however, that with this arrival the Actors on stage serve both as actors and audience; they are part of the play, yet at the same time they are detached, observing the proceedings without active participation. Indeed, if we consider the Manager’s control over the initial rehearsal to be somewhat incomplete, the Characters’ introduction only further dissolves him of any authority. Like the audience, the next course of action is lost on him. The sudden insertion of

an external narrative has disrupted his thought process, as his confusion creates more uncertainty for the members of the audience. At this instant, the questions which arise becoming increasingly ontological in nature. For whilst before this diegetic interruption, the stage time is linear, after the Characters' appearance, the physical space shared is still the same, although the moment of disbelief has uncovered the existence of an alternate reality.

Even as the audience is distanced from the reality of the play, Pirandello destabilises even that sense of continuity through the Manager's next move:

THE MANAGER: ... what do you want here, all of you?

FATHER: We want to live.

THE MANAGER: [*ironically*] For Eternity?

THE FATHER: No, sir, only for a moment... in you. (*Six Characters* 7)

The Manager voices the very question that the audience wants to ask: what do these Characters want? There is a shared sense of urgency here, a need to define and to classify these strange people, to understand and subsequently justify the existence of agency and intentionality. At the same time, the feeling of anticipation is a conflicted one, since the possibilities are still unknown at this stage.

Whilst it is not stated specifically in the script, the duration between the question and the Father's answer is critical. Depending on what effect the director desires to achieve, a difference in timing changes the whole dynamics of the play. As drama critic Vimala Herman postulates, "[d]ramatic interactions are orientated to the deictic centre, the time of speech exchange, and therefore, the 'present' of speech is the unmarked time of dramatic speech event" (62). The situating of one's deictic centre, though inherently problematic, is extremely important. According to Bühler, the deictic centre is the origo, or "reference point from which the speaker positions his discourse in time, space, social role or personal identity". In the realm of a constructed environment (such as a stage), it is used as a means of orientation

within “the somewhere-realm of pure imagination and the there-in-there of memory” (Bühler 23). The presence of multiple deictic centres implies a series of alternate temporalities, inviting simultaneously the possibility of multiple realities, destabilising our sense of stage time.

In the very same scene the deictic centres are exchanged between the Father and the Manager, as the audience begins to find that its deictic centre is now dictated by the Father. As a result, the Father cannot answer too quickly for fear of destroying the suspense that may be potentially created, and this fear may be self-serving, for reasons of sincerity, emotional manipulation or otherwise. Yet, Pirandello has forged a second possibility. A quick response creates a completely different scenario altogether; it is as if the Father knows that the question is coming, and he has answered before he is supposed to, or at least, with the necessary hesitation we expect from him. Not only does this supposed discrepancy suggest a different alignment in temporalities, there is also a sense of repetition, as if this has all happened before, and that the stage proceedings are all contrived to create an illusion of the present.

The language of the stage dialogue—namely, the consistent use of present tense—facilitates this show of deception. That these characters on stage may be playacting underlines the artifice of reality on stage.

A man will die, a writer, the instrument of creation: but what he has created will never die! And to be able to live forever you don't need to have extraordinary gifts or be able to do miracles.

Who was Sancho Panza? Who was Prospero?

But they will live on forever because – living seeds – they had the luck to find a fruitful soil, an imagination which knew how to grow them and feed them, so that they will live forever. (*Six Characters* 7)

Indeed, that the Characters may live “for a moment” in the actors, in contrast to Sancho Panza and Don Abbondio living “eternally”, forces us to contemplate certain ontological uncertainties that arise with this comparison. For even whilst it is evident that the definition of a moment here is determined chronologically, this is perhaps too superfluous a reading of Pirandello’s intentions, as the juxtaposition of these two expressions of time can also be read as an act of synthesis, or in other words, a (literal) conflation of temporalities. Assuming that one considers time to be subjective, or in Bergson’s terms, intuitive, the length of a moment is inherently problematic; objectively, it can be merely described as a short period of time, an expression which in itself is vague in its specificities. Indeed, a moment may become eternal. A series of moments may each become eternal, if distinctly separated.

Such close scrutiny of time and its dynamics reflects Pirandello’s acute awareness of time, and its associations with appearance and reality. The Father’s request for a moment seems an innocuous one; in reality, the word eternity is almost cruel in its irony. To consider the playing of a role as a momentary event is to suggest that the past can be forgotten. This is debatable. Once a role is performed, nothing can change that fact, yet to be remembered is a different matter together. To live, that is to be part of the fabric of reality, the Characters feel the pressing need to be recognized. Above all, they want to be remembered. The Father’s outburst (“to be able to live forever you don’t need to have extraordinary gifts or be able to do miracles”) reeks of bitterness, as he lists fortune as the reason for eternal existence. Yet, this contradicts the very statement he has uttered moments earlier: “because he who has had the luck,” says the Father, “to be born a character can laugh even at death.” The arrangement, or perhaps more accurately, the temporal sequence of the sentence structure creates a tension in this short frame of utterance, a distancing between the texts that cannot be defined entirely by chronology. It may be the self-referential factor that draws our attention to the very being of these Characters, and to question the Father’s statement even as the multitude of

possibilities begin to open up with this very discussion – not a singular play-within-a-play, but to the extent of plays-within-plays.

It becomes imperative, then, that one recognises the dilemma that is unfolding/has unfolded/will be unfolding/will have unfolded in front of us. In his canonical work *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode borrows the term *kairos* from the ancient Greeks and defines this moment as “a point in time charged with significance.” As opposed to his other conception of time, *chronos* as “clock time, passing time, waiting time... one damn thing after another,” *kairos* is “our way of bundling together perception of the present, memory of the past, and expectation of the future, in a common organisation” (Kermode 46). In other words, the Characters are looking for a moment of *kairos*, even as they are unconsciously creating one at the very same time. Indeed, it may be necessary to clarify the use of these two terms: “*kairos* requires *chronos*, which becomes a necessary precondition underlying qualitative uses of time; when taken by itself, conversely, *chronos* fails to explain the crisis points of human experience” (Sipiora 15). To clarify the purpose of *kairos*:

Kairos is an ancient Greek moment that means “the right moment” or the “right opportune.” The two meanings of the word apparently come from two different sources. In archery, it refers to an opening, or “opportunity” or, more precisely, a long tunnel-like aperture through which the archer’s arrow has to pass. Successful passage of *kairos* requires, therefore, that the archer’s arrow be fired not only accurately but with enough power for it to penetrate. The second meaning of *kairos* traces to the art of weaving. There is “the critical time” when the weaver must draw the yarn through a gap that momentarily opens in the warp of the cloth being woven. Putting the two meanings together, one might understand *kairos* to refer to a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved. (White 13)

Simply put, *kairos* refers “to a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved.” The implication of this analogy finds its roots in the Characters’ desire. By qualifying this moment as one of *kairos* and not *chronos*, it may be seen as an attempt to resolve each Pirandellian character’s atemporal dilemma. In other words, this moment is a “crisis point,” and consequently, a moment charged with significance.

Pirandello’s works thus dramatizes “the possibility of either adapting oneself to the fragmentation of time as *chronos*, or resisting fragmentation by finding some means of gathering the fragments and redeeming *chronos* into *kairos*” (Stocchi-Perucchio 137), identifying the ontological struggle faced by the Characters. To the Actors and the audience, this sentiment is ridiculous, almost laughable and certainly impossible to comprehend. If reality can be assumed to be fluid, one takes for granted the multitude of *kairos* that have yet to appear. For the Characters, their lives are dictated by a script, limited by a history that is remembered for its necessity, and not its entirety. Consider the Stepdaughter’s dialogue:

THE STEP_DAUGHTER [to MANAGER]. Worse? Worse? Listen! Stage this drama for us at once! Then you will see that at a certain moment, I... when this little darling here .. [*takes the CHILD by the hand and leads her to the MANAGER.*] Isn’t she a dear. [*Takes her up and kisses her.*] Darling! Darling! [*Puts her down again and adds feelingly.*] Well, when God suddenly takes this dear little child away from that poor mother there; and this imbecile here [*Seizing hold of the BOY roughly and pushing him forward,*] does the stupidest things, like the fool he is, you will see me run away. Yes, gentlemen, I shall be off. But the moment hasn’t arrived yet. After what has taken place between him and me [*indicates the FATHER with a horrible wink.*] I can’t remain any longer in this society, to have witnessed the anguish of this mother here for that fool... [*Indicates the SON.*] Look at him! Look at him! See how indifferent,

how frigid is, because he is the legitimate son. He despises me, despises him
 [Pointing to the BOY.] despises the baby here; because... we are bastards. [Goes to
 the MOTHER and embraces her.] And he doesn't want to recognize her as his mother
 – she who is the common mother of us all. He looks down upon her as if she were
 only the mother of us three bastards. Wretch! [She says all this very rapidly, excitedly.
 At the word “bastards” she raises her voice, and almost pits out the final “Wretch!”]
 (*Six Characters* 8)

The “certain moment” that we are meant to see is another reference made to *kairos*. Yet, the very mention of us moving towards this “moment” conveys the very artifice of the scene, and of the very form of theatre. As the Stepdaughter lists off the events in a supposed chronological sequence, she comes to the point where she is supposed to run away. Yet, crucially, “the moment hasn't arrived yet.” The second mention of a moment is a calculated move on Pirandello's part, its purpose twofold: firstly, there is the heightening of the audience's awareness of time; secondly and more importantly, the Stepdaughter's knowledge of what will happen next is pre-emptive, dissolving the scene of any of the realistic credibility it will have when the actual scene takes place. For what will happen next has already “taken place”. The usage of both future and occasional present tenses in her narration results in a situation of disjunctive temporalities, for even if the Father's example as explained earlier is to be considered subtle we are left bewildered in this instance of blatant display of discrepancy. Any essences of realism that the audience can associate with the play is removed completely.

Indeed, such a differentiation between *kairos* and *chronos* provides a path into understanding an individual's inner consciousness. However, the importance of identifying a *kairic* moment cannot be understated. Like Fileno and the rest of his rejected counterparts, each of the Pirandellian Characters searches for an Author because they want to be written

into a narrative. And it is in this shared search that they lack one critical element – a moment of *kairos*. For without a distinctive *kairic* moment, there is no reason for the Author to remember these Characters, much less write them into a narrative of his imagination. The reason—and desperation—for selling their performance becomes clear: an entertaining and compelling description of their story will almost guarantee them their “eternal moment.” In other words, these Characters are all searching for their moment of *kairos*.

However, this search for *kairos* is problematic, particularly so if the classical meaning of the term is considered. In essence, these Pirandellian Characters are looking for intervention from a higher power, perhaps even the dramatic technique Euripides was famous for: *deus ex machina*. Assuming this assumption is true, the efforts to weave a tale of such intricate complexity may be for the sole purpose of inviting the Author’s intervention. This perspective brings us back to a moment in *Henry IV*. In the beginning of Act II, Belcredi and the Doctor are seen exchanging words:

BELCREDI: It may be as you say, Doctor, but that was my impression.

DOCTOR: I won’t contradict you, but believe me, it is only... an impression.

When Donna Matilda interrupts their conversation, the Doctor explains that Belcredi “was alluding to the costumes [they] had slipped on.” This moment is one easily neglected, not only for the shortness of the moment, but also the apparent insignificance. Yet the word “impression” not only relates back to the definition of a *kairic* moment, which is, arguably another variation of *kairos*. It is important to identify and distinguish the subtle differences between these two terms, however closely linked—temporally—they seem to be. The difference lies in the source of origin: it is a mark of indention created immediately by experience or perception on contact. Whilst this description is physically conceived, the reaction comes from within, a quality which seems to seek the approval of a higher authority, of circumstances and fate. Can an impression transcend memory? This links back to the form

of Art, to the external and perhaps even to the eggs shells mentioned by the director, which hide the essence within.

Through the synthesis of Character and Actor, the level of destabilisation is taken one step further. From the moment he accepts their proposal, the Manager literalises the concept of a play-within-a-play, even as the audience witnesses the literal—paradoxical—unfolding of an artificial reality. The Characters are still physically on stage, yet on an ontological level, they are *not* on stage. Actors selected to act the role of Characters have to confront the same diegetic confusion as the audience: their job is to bring life to the character in the script, yet this is ironic considering the very character is right in front of them, in its full authenticity, if such a word can ever be used in this elaborate situation. A Character can never claim to be fully authentic, even if there is an actual historical narrative to be considered. Playacting, then, is recognised for what it is, an attempt at re-enactment, a narrative that is already untrue even as the premise of its purpose is to replicate truth. The Stepdaughter reminds us of this with her derisive laughter: as the Actress is allocated the role of the Stepdaughter, the Character rejects the move as inadequate:

THE STEPDAUGHTER: [*excitedly*] What? what? I, that woman there? [*Bursts out laughing*].

THE MANAGER: [*angry*] What is there to laugh at?

LEADING LADY: [*indignant*] Nobody has ever dared to laugh at me. I insist on being treated with respect; otherwise I go away.

THE STEPDAUGHTER: No, no, excuse me... I am not laughing at you...

THE MANAGER: [*to the STEPDAUGHTER*] You ought to feel honoured to be played by...

LEADING LADY: [*at once, contemptuously*] “That woman there”...

THE STEPDAUGHTER: But I wasn't speaking of you, you know. I was speaking of myself – whom I can't see at all in you! That is all. I don't know... but... you... aren't in the least like me. (*Six Characters* 9)

What we see here is that even as the Characters seek to exist outside of their roles, the Actors contrive to fit into one that is not their own. Indeed, when the Stepdaughter speaks of “herself”, we return to the description of her character, a luxury that an audience watching a play has to do without: “dashing, almost impudent, beautiful”. These adjectives give us a sense of her appearance and mannerisms, matched possibly by the person on stage. However, without mentioning the subjectivity of one's taste and possible definition of terms, there is nothing one can decipher of her internal Self. It is logical, one assumes, that the Stepdaughter is not referring to the Lead Actress' looks, but rather, the sense of her essence, what the Father refers to as “our temperaments, our souls”. Yet, it may very well be a combination of both.

As the narrative progresses, there is the startling realisation that what the Stepdaughter strives for is an impossible ideal, a perfect re-enactment of the event at Madame Pace's shop. The Manager, however, is exasperated by her demands, protesting that it is impossible to “construct that shop of Madame Pace piece by piece”. The process of reconstruction is an allusion to memory, as Pirandello draws our attention to the nature and process of recollection. We know from the multiple references made between the various characters that the incident has passed, and that it is the one narrative which contains all their respective narratives. All the Characters are marked by it, some less obviously so. For the Manager who has not participated in the event, he does not share the same emotional attachment. Indeed, he *cannot* share any emotional attachment. The details are broken down into basic outlines (“a white room with flowered wall paper”) and a serviceable platform (“We've got the furniture right more or less”), with none of the empirical accuracy that is

desired by both the Father and the Stepdaughter. This shows clearly the difference in motivation: the Manager seeks to create a semblance of the past, whilst the Father and the Stepdaughter aim to go one step further – to recreate even in its entirety.

What is the role of memory in metatheatres? On a fundamental level, past and present are separated into two different worlds, and this metaphor finds its relevance in metatheatres. The similarity between these two worlds—of the past and present—may be found in a difference—in temporalities. Through building on a difference in narratives—and consequently temporalities—the play-within-a-play achieves its effect. And by also considering the trope of memory, this effect is enhanced. One’s inability to bridge two distinctive worlds reflects the situation of other binary oppositions, of not only past and present, but also appearance/reality. Thus, it may be interesting to consider the differences between Character and Actor in terms of memory, and not simply time on its own. Does memory, for instance, validate one’s interiority? Pirandello forces us to confront this question in the very instant the Mother explodes:

THE MOTHER: (*jumping up amid the amazement and consternation of the actors who had not been noticing her. THEY move to restrain her*) You old devil! You murderess! (12)

The Mother’s sudden outburst is instigated by something Madame Pace has said (“And even if you no like him, he won’t make any scandal!”). Like the Father and the Stepdaughter, the Mother is emotionally involved with the play. Yet, they are involved—emotionally—on very different levels. The Stepdaughter finds amusement in what we understand to be a shameful family episode; the Father shows signs of discomfort, yet he is a “professional” enough a Character to continue the act. The Mother, on the other hand, has conflated the past and the present, supposed playacting and reality. The Manager, alarmed by the reaction to what he considers only a play, tries to remind the Mother that this is all playacting: “Hasn’t all this

already taken place in the past?! I don't understand you!" The Mother's response "No, it's taking place now; it's always taking place! My torment isn't over, sir! I'm alive and present, always, in every moment of my torment, which recreates itself, alive and present, always" (12).

As the audience, we are nearly as confused as the Manager. Is the Mother in this state because she refuses to "break character"? Or is this who she really is, "alive and present, always"? According to the Preface of the play, the Mother "does not care at all about living... she has no doubt whatsoever about being alive; nor has the need to ask herself how and why she is alive ever crossed her mind. She has no consciousness of being a character since she is never, not even for a second, detached from her "role"... she lives in a continuity of feeling that knows no interruption; thus she cannot become aware of the nature of her life, that is, of her being a character" (Preface to *Six Characters*). The key point here is her lack of consciousness of "being a character"; in other words, the Mother's interiority is her exteriority. She cannot understand the concept of playacting, because she is acting, always, in earnest. The tragedy of the situation, of course, is that her mind will always be focused on one singular narrative, and from her reactions, it is evident that the memory is not a happy one. One way of seeing the Mother's predicament, therefore, is to see her as representative of an individual whose memory has taken precedence over the present.

Even the make-up of the episode is intricately concerned with timing. As the Mother recollects the painful moment of catching her husband and daughter in an incestuous act that almost happened, the horror of being almost late, the enormous difference in outcome over a few minutes is Pirandello's message not only for her, but for the audience. Had she been much earlier, the meeting might never have taken place. Had she not been there in Madame Pace's shop, the traumatic incident might never have happened. But this supposing is redundant; it has happened, and as the Father describes, "she caught me in a place, in an act,

in which she shouldn't have met me..." (14). The fact that the Stepdaughter is a prostitute and simply working is lost on us, simply because her role is not an independent one. It is a clash of roles, an untimely coexistence of both her masks that causes this conflict.

Perhaps, the real tragedy here may be the Stepdaughter's ability to distance herself from these questions of morality, something which the Mother is unable to do. "She is here to capture me, freeze me, keep me hooked and suspended for eternity, pilloried, in that fleeting and shameful moment of my life", explains the Father, and for all his eloquence, it is a statement that is damning in many ways. The choice of words used is accusatory in its tone, and though he stresses the fact that the incident was merely a moment, it is evident that it is anything but "fleeting". The attempt to locate Aristotle's notion of the tragic flaw, or *hamartia*, is futile. The struggle is not for a greater purpose, but for the affirmation of one's self. Since tragedy "cannot exist if the protagonist does not eventually come to recognise that he is morally responsible for his deeds and that his acts are the direct offspring of choices he has made" (Corrigan 9), the Father shows himself devoid of the qualities required of a tragic hero. In this eternal moment of self-righteousness, he has contrived another form of tragedy, one that is lesser in significance, but no less in magnitude.

At this concluding point of the discussion, it may be useful to return to an earlier moment in the play. Confronted with the Manager and Actors on the madness associated with playacting, the Father offers the first of his philosophical musings: that playacting "is merely to show you that one is born to life in many forms, in many shapes, as tree, or as stone, as water, as butterfly, or as woman. So one may also be born a character in a play." This simple statement resonates well with Richard B. Sewall's sentiment in *The Vision of Tragedy*: "Here with all the protective coverings stripped off, the hero faces as if no man ever faced it before the existential question—Job's question, 'What is man?' is Lear's 'Is man no more than this?'" Both responses vary in the simplicity of their respective expressions, yet the profound

complexities associated with this depth of thought are not dissimilar. That man is no more than what fate has shaped him to be is a worrying prospect. If man is indeed deprived of the ability to decide the significance of his existence, the passage of time becomes nothing more than a mundane process of contrivances, made under the guise of social illusions, before inevitable death. It is then, as Schopenhauer writes, that “[t]hus, as if fate wished to add mockery to the misery of our existence, our life must contain all the woes of tragedy, and yet we cannot even assert the dignity of tragic characters, but in the broad detail of life, are inevitably the foolish characters of a comedy” (*The World as Will and Representation*, 1, 322).

WAITING FOR HAMLET: ROS AND GUIL'S ATEMPORAL DILEMMA IN TOM STOPPARD'S
ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

GUIL: But why? Was it all for this? Who are we that so much should
converge on our little deaths?

PLAYER: You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's enough.

GUIL: No – it is not enough. To be told so little – to such an end – and still,
finally, to be denied an explanation...

— Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

There is one particular sequence in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* when the two principal protagonists, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, find themselves in a situation of utter chaos and confusion. A performance—*The Murder of Gonzago*—is taking place within the very play itself, and some of the characters in the staged play are acting out different roles that were not originally assigned to them. To members of the audience who have read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is evident that a pivotal moment is taking place. As two minor characters in *Hamlet*, Ros and Guil are left temporarily without a role in this crucial scene. As the performance transits from play to play, reality to reality—*The Murder of Gonzago* to *Hamlet* to *R&GAD*—the Player sums the situation up aptly: “[i]t was a *mess*,” and Ros concurs that “[i]t's going to be chaos on the night” (*R&GAD* 79). Almost immediately, Act Two begins, and Guil pulls Ros back, reminding his counterpart that they are, after all, just “spectators.” At this point of time, both Ros and Guil are just observers, like the audience, except that they have no clue of what will happen next, hopelessly ignorant as they are of the Player's sentiment that “[e]vents must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion” (*R&GAD* 79).

Seeing that they are not physically involved in this chain of “events,” Ros and Guil's relative insignificance in *Hamlet*, and their contrasting roles as protagonists in Stoppard's play, serves as an intriguing vantage point in this paper's discussion of how time is presented in modern tragedy. As two courtiers serving the prince, Ros and Guil only appear sporadically—arguably as instruments rather than full-bodied characters—in some of the

scenes. By selecting precisely the very scenes which the pair are found missing in Shakespeare's original play, Stoppard offers an account of their lives in these moments of absence, and more importantly, their views of the play's narrative from another perspective. Both figures in question are naturally unaware of Hamlet's original narrative, as they exist presently within Stoppard's fictional realm. However, as they re-enact and experience notable events from Shakespeare's play, it becomes painfully evident that the end has already been crafted, and like the title suggests, Ros and Guil will die before the final curtain falls.

Indeed, this very scene involving *The Murder of Gonzago* surmises the intricacies of Stoppard's play and its treatment of time. In this play-within-a-play-within-another-play, there are several different temporalities that run simultaneously. Yet, not all the characters on stage are aware of this multi-layering of realities. As Ros and Guil exchange hushed comments among themselves whilst listening to the Tragedian's live commentary, the rest of the players, acting their respective roles in *Gonzago*, are equally mindful that this is only a performance. It is only the characters from *Hamlet* who remain seemingly unaware that they are being watched. Even Hamlet, responsible for the staging of this renamed play (*The Mouse-trap*), is oblivious to the presence of the courtiers. Ros and Guil seem to have been effectively removed from the reality that is unfolding on stage, trapped as they are in the confines of their own play. This whole sequence, in Anthony Jenkins' words, "only seems absurd because of the limitations of one's particular angle" (Jenkins 40). It is only from the omniscient view of the audience that the plays-within-the-plays begin to make sense.

As Daniel K. Jernigan notes, "[m]uch has been made of the debt Stoppard's early work owes to Pirandello" (17), and in view of the plays' respective compositions, it is difficult not to see why. Like the Pirandellian character, Ros and Guil are left wandering about aimlessly without the direction of a script, their realities "thoroughly circumscribed by the ontological limits of theatre itself, as well as by those few stage directions originally

provided for by Shakespeare” (Jernigan 18). As a result, both Pirandello and Stoppard’s characters are in a constant state of existential anxiety, even if they have contrasting approaches to this fix. Whilst the Pirandellian character is pushed into a desperate search for his author, Ros and Guil choose to wait, even though their fears may very well mirror that of the Six Characters’. Both courses of action—the dual acts of waiting and searching—different as they are, display characteristics that reflect ties to the Theatre of the Absurd. Martin Esslin describes this condition as a consequence of double absurdity, “the deadness and mechanical senselessness of half-conscious lives [...] of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certainties” (400-401). Notably, the suggestion of incompleteness with the term “half-conscious” provides an interesting slant to Anthony Caputi’s term “the crisis of modern consciousness”: the discovery of one’s consciousness reveals at the same time one’s unconscious, which is of course reminiscent of Pirandello’s characters’ unconscious search for their author, as well as Ros and Guil’s unconscious state of passivity.

Labelled by the playwright himself as “an extremely comic tragedy,” Stoppard is evidently reluctant to separate the two terms when it comes to *R&GAD*.⁹ Yet, it is ironically the absurdist aspects of *R&GAD* that outline the play’s inherent tragedy. When the play begins with ninety-nine coin tosses worth of heads, the utter absurdity of this gesture may evoke the audience’s laughter initially, yet one cannot even begin to imagine the amount of time Ros and Guil have spent repeating the same action, over and over again. The lack of meaningful action demeans their very existence. Ros and Guil are not tragic heroes in the mould of Hamlet, or the Heroes from the Greek Tragedies. They do not have the same burden of destiny, or the tragic flaws which they have to resolve. Yet, their plight is no less tragic. Indeed, compared to the other characters in *Hamlet*, Ros and Guil are practically irrelevant to

9. Interview with Richard Mayne, *Artist Descending a Staircase* on the BBC Radio Three “Arts Commentary.” 10 November 1972.

the narrative. With their vague appearances and even less distinct personalities, the courtiers would not have been missed even if they were replaced by another pair of servants. As Shakespeare presents clearly in the text, Ros and Guil's only importance in life is based purely on their childhood ties to the prince, as well as to their need to accomplish the dark task given by Claudius. In other words, Ros and Guil exist solely to serve the purposes of others, with none of the "personal dignity" Arthur Miller speaks of in this paper's introduction. As Guil, "shaking with rage and fear" at the Player's performance in their very first encounter, surmises, "[b]ut it's this, is it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this—a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes" (*R&GAD* 27), we can see how demeaning their tasks and experiences actually are.

Indeed, Stoppard's treatment of the courtiers has been described as a form of "exploitation," of the "comic potential of Ros and Guil's situation in *Hamlet*," resulting in "a confused paralysis most cogently expressed in modern terms by Estragon and Vladimir's circumstances in [*Waiting for Godot*]." Jenkins contends that this is done "in order to arrive at a statement about death that is both serious and of universal application" (Jenkins 37). What this paper is more interested in, however, is the use of the word "paralysis." The idea of being paralysed and consequently unable to move in time mirrors the kind of limbo found in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a state of non-movement which the principal characters of *Godot* find themselves in. To have a sense of being requires the moving of time, and without this movement, there is no means of differentiating the real and the artificial. In other words, the characters are trapped in eternity. According to Aristotle's Classical Unities, the measure of time in narrative and on stage is contained in a specific framework of "not more than twenty-four hours." The playwright's intention for introducing eternity, paralysis or *aporia* on stage can thus be interpreted in two ways: a deviation away from realism, or ironically, a more accurate portrayal of time and its multi-layered nature.

By focusing on the minor narratives present within Shakespeare's larger narrative, Stoppard draws our attention to the multiple perspectives that may simultaneously co-exist at the same time, if only to emphasise how utterly insignificant they are. Indeed, this sentiment is reflected in Stoppard's other *Hamlet* inspired text, *The Fifteen-Minute Hamlet*. In *Hamlet*, the pair are frequently absent, a phenomenon ironically reversed in Stoppard's *R&GAD*, where Hamlet is the one missing most of the time. In *The Fifteen-Minute Hamlet*, where Shakespeare's original play is compressed into fifteen minutes, Ros and Guil do not appear at all. That there is no time, literally, for their appearance highlights once again their lack of significant involvement in the major events. Claudius does make overt references to England, so that we are reminded of that fact that his devious plot is still in place, but Hamlet seems to be going alone. No mention is made of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They are not included in the cast, nor even referred to. Indeed, the whole episode at sea is restricted to four lines of stage directions: "At sea. Sea music / Hamlet enters on parapet, swaying as if on a ship's bridge / Sea music ends / Hamlet exits" (*The Fifteen Minute Hamlet*, 9). In Stoppard's play, we know that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were at sea with him due to the multiple references made to "sea sounds" and "obscure but inescapably nautical instructions" made at the very beginning of Act Three. One possible reading of this is that Ros and Guil, in their relative insignificance to Shakespeare's play, play their roles in these transitions in between the major events, the very transitions that Stoppard has chosen to omit.

An even shorter version, the one-minute Hamlet, is described as "an encore for the fifteen-minute Hamlet [...] written (or rather edited) for performance on a double-decker bus" (Stoppard, *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth*). The image of a double-decker bus is obviously a playful description, yet it aptly captures how time passes quickly on a bus ride. Indeed, the purpose for further reducing the potential lengths of the play may be artfully frivolous on the surface, but it is fascinating when one considers the potential dramatic

effects of such an endeavour. According to Kelly, this is due to Stoppard's "dialectical habit of mind, his attraction to intellectual qualification, uncertainty and to irresolvable questions" (Kelly 17). That there are dramatic possibilities involved in this enterprise forces one to reconsider the role of time in theatre, particularly the number of lines and actions that can be completed in a minute.

These variations are indicative of Stoppard's fascination with how time functions, a fascination which in some respects derives from *Hamlet* as well. With the transitions between his soliloquies and the pretence of madness, Hamlet's multiple personas in Shakespeare's play makes it seem nearly as if two plays are taking place at the same time, a calculated move on the Prince's part in his quest for revenge. Like the players that mystified him in Act 2, Hamlet realises that playing the fool does have its advantages, even if he cannot initially understand how people can change so quickly—and so completely:

Is it not monstrous that this player here
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit
 That from her working all his visage wanned,
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
 A broken voice, his whole function suiting
 With forms to his conceit—and all for nothing (*Hamlet*, 2.2.578–584)

The idea that an actor's function may change its form according to his fancy is disturbing to Hamlet, since the quick shifts in between personas are not visible to the eye. Words exchanged verbally may appear to mean one thing on the surface, but they may or may not betray the speaker's true intentions, instead confounding "[t]he very faculties of eyes and years" (*Hamlet*, 2.2.593). Indeed, Ros and Guil face this very same problem in *R&GAD*. Whilst observing the Prince at separate intervals, Ros remarks that "Hamlet is not himself,

outside or in. We have to glean what afflicts him,” to which Guil responds: “He doesn’t give much away” (*R&GAD* 67). To say that Hamlet is “not himself” is a reference to how their perception of him now is inconsistent with their impression of him before. Considering that much time has lapsed since they were familiar with each other, Ros and Guil’s observation is not a surprising one. As Ros explains later in the play,

a compulsion towards philosophical introspection is [Hamlet’s] chief characteristic, if I may put it like that. It does not mean he is mad. It does not mean he isn’t, Very often it does not mean anything at all. Which may or may not be a kind of madness. (*R&GAD* 116)

Since Hamlet “does not give much away,” it is impossible to know what he is thinking unless he tells us directly. As a result, Ros and Guil are confused as to whether he is really mad, or whether they can even begin to define the term “madness” with their lack of knowledge.

Important to this discussion then is the function of the soliloquy in Shakespeare’s play. When Hamlet begins one of his soliloquys, time is frozen momentarily as he addresses the audience, a gesture intended by Shakespeare to emphasise the Prince’s interiority. Indeed, the soliloquy, in its function as a display of self-awareness or consciousness, asserts that “there can be no evidence for the self without the speaking voice in which and by which the individual self is identified” (Augustine from Stock 63). Augustine also considered the reference to one’s self as “a phenomenon that takes place within an awareness of the duration of time” (63). The “duration of time” refers evidently to how one perceives time intuitively, leading to the construction of a self that is “temporally conditioned and narratively conceived” (63). In other words, there is already a sense of disjunctive temporality, of the different selves existing in different timeframes. In one moment, Hamlet is a madman who poses no threat to his enemies; in the next, he is the mastermind behind their downfall.

In this shadowy world of lies and deception, Hamlet is not only “the most ruthlessly observed character in the play [but] also its most unrelenting observer” (Neill 314). Under the guise of a madman, Hamlet, like Henry in Pirandello’s *Henry IV*, is thus able to fool everyone around him whilst plotting his next move, and his success in trapping his uncle, particularly during the performance of *The Mouse-trap*, shows him to be a rather shrewd observer and manipulator, one who can “act natural” when the situation demands. In contrast, Ros and Guil, who were sent by Claudius to trail Hamlet, end up being watched—and removed—instead. The act of zooming in on Ros and Guil in *R&GAD* is thus an act that aims to “defamiliarise” *Hamlet* by “[performing] a critical function which nudges it into new and unfamiliar outline” (Sammels from Bloom 36). The existence of Ros’ and Guil’s narratives within the main narrative of *Hamlet* outlines the many different temporalities that may take place at any one given time – chronologically in the reality of the play, and internally in the thoughts of the characters on stage. When Ros and Guil converse between themselves with no other character in sight, time seems to slow down. The possibility of any chronological timeframe ceases to exist in that moment, since their isolation on stage removes any trace of a shared reality. Each subsequent address to the audience is another metatheatrical moment which emphasises how there may be other moments in the play where unseen characters are expressing their innermost thoughts.

Therefore, in his very act of “turning *Hamlet* upside down,” it is not surprising why Stoppard questions “whether tragedy is an adequate metaphor for life” (Sammels from Bloom 36). By choosing to focus on the “common folk” in Shakespeare’s narrative, Stoppard shows us that tragedy is not an event associated solely with the heroes and prominent characters. Indeed, Ros and Guil’s plight provides ample proof that even supposedly lesser men have their own sets of tragic issues to deal with. Viewing *Hamlet* from an alternative perspective thus produces many narrative possibilities. Ironically, it is Ros and Guil’s very lack of

narrative in the original play that we see just how isolated they are from the rest of *Hamlet*'s characters. That there is no one else who cares about them, or provide them with answers to their existential questions, construes a contained state of solitude.

Indeed, it is ultimately the very metatheatricality of Stoppard's play that forges its strongest link to tragedy. Reconsider for a moment during the scene in *R&GAD*'s treatment of *The Murder of Gonzago* when the "two smiling accomplices" appear near the climax of the play. We know they are the tragedians acting their roles in the play, just as we know how this play is performed in Shakespeare's original work. The two accomplices are obviously Ros and Guil themselves, playing out a scene that is part of the script(s). By clothing all them in identical coats, Stoppard makes it evident that the pairs are one and the same, which would be clear enough even for audience members with no prior knowledge of the plays. In this awkward moment of self-observation, one realises that this scene has not come to pass in *R&GAD* itself. By observing the very events that will happen in the future (of their plays), two immediate temporalities—present and future—are already taking place on stage. As the Player "whips off their cloaks preparatory to execution," the "King" reads: "Traitors hoist by their own petard? —or victims of the gods?—we shall never know!" (*R&GAD* 82). In a moment of self-reflexivity, Ros and Guil are effectively witnessing how they will die, even as the audience is led back to the very title of this play.

Yet, at this very crucial moment, Stoppard reminds us that the layers of reality in this play are not two-fold, but *multi-fold*. The whole mime so far has been "fluid and continuous," but now Ros "moves forward and brings it to a pause." According to the stage directions in the script, we are informed that the reason for his action is recognition – he has realised that the similarities between the cloaks:

ROS: Well, if it isn't——! No, wait a minute, don't tell me—it's a long time since—where was it? Ah this is taking me back to—when was it? I know you,

don't I? I never forget a face—(*he looks into the SPY's face*)... not that I know yours, that is. For a moment I thought—no, I don't know you, do I? Yes, I'm afraid you're quite wrong. You must have mistaken me for someone else.

(*R&GAD* 82)

When Ros reaches and brings the play to a pause, the dynamics of this metatheatrical sequence is once again thrown out of the window. For even whilst mere moments before, the courtiers were uninvolved observers standing by the side, when Ros decides to get involved, the whole play is slowed down just so that he can take a closer look at his doppelgänger. Here, Stoppard demonstrates the clear lines demarcating chronological and intuitive time, bringing to our attention the many temporal zones involved in one supposedly singular reality. The fact that time slows down is representational of one's thought process, and as Ros contemplates the implications of his and the figure's uncanny resemblance, time stops moving temporarily for him, even as everything else is going on as per normal. And that this phenomenon can be physically represented reflects the very artificiality of reality on stage.

What is even more disturbing about Ros' observation is his sudden recollection of the past. Unless he is experiencing a schizophrenic moment of narcissism, Ros' statements such as "a long time since" and "taking [him] back" appears illogical, especially considering that Ros, apparently, has never seen this play before, a fact that is affirmed by Guil just moments later. The only possible solution then, is that this moment of *déjà vu* is no coincidence – that this confrontation of selves may be an event that has actually taken place before, and is repeating even as Ros speaks – that in a situation similar to that experienced by the Six Characters from the previous chapter – that Ros is just discovering that he is no different from a Pirandellian character, an actor in a play and a figure in the larger scheme of events. That he is now aware of the ontological possibilities of other worlds further complicates his existence. One of these worlds is, of course, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Indeed, as the primary

play framing the rest of the plays, it seems only natural that *Hamlet* should provide the chronological framework as well.

This may well explain why Ros and Guil are always engaged in the most mundane of activities – when they are not involved in any of the proceedings in Shakespeare’s narrative, there is little else for them to do but try their best to pass time. In this series of absurd gestures, “[t]ime may seem to have stopped but one is more aware of it than usual because there is no distracting action except the trivial actions of coin-tossing or idle conversation” (Hayman 36). In other words, the courtiers are effectively waiting for time to pass before the next event draws them back into *Hamlet*’s narrative. Yet, Jenkins contends that their actions “are not simply a means to fill time,” a trait more commonly associated with Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* as Vladimir and Estragon indulge in a series of conversations, all which end in the final exclamation: “We are waiting for Godot!” (Jenkins 41). The situations in both plays may appear to be similar, but they are, in reality, very different. Whilst there is no resolution forthcoming in Beckett’s play, there is an ending already promised in the very title of Stoppard’s play – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will die, regardless of whatever else may happen:

PLAYER: Generally speaking, things have gone about as far as they can possibly go when things have got about as bad as they reasonably get. (*He switches on a smile.*)

GUIL: Who decides?

PLAYER (*switching off his smile*): *Decides?* It is written.

Jenkins’ assertion, that “whereas *Godot* presents us with an entrapping circle, or spiral at best, *Rosencrantz* is linear” is worth considering in this context (Jenkins 40). For as the player says, everything is “written,” apparently implying that the events preordained will come to pass, regardless of any words or actions made by the characters in this play. Indeed, the act of

passing time becomes quite necessary, considering that without performing these activities, the play—and with it, time—would stop altogether.

One: I'm willing it. Inside where nothing shows, I am the essence of a man spinning double headed coins, and betting against himself in private atonement for an unremembered past... Two: time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times... Three: divine intervention, that is to say, a good turn from above concerning me... Four: a spectacular vindication of the principle that each individual coin spun individually (*he spins one*) is as likely to come down heads as tails and therefore should cause no surprise each individual time it does. (*R&GAD* 16)

There are several interesting references made to time in this seemingly meaningless banter, observations that may be relevant to their immediate situation of coin-tossing. Notably, Guil's first couple of observations produce two overt references to time. What he means here by "[i]nside nothing shows" seems to be a reference to his subconscious, whilst an "atonement for an unremembered past", in essence, considers the phenomenon that "time has stopped dead." Putting aside the fact that Guil has effectively described his own situation in a metatheatrical moment, it is the phenomenon that "time has stopped dead" that is key in this specific episode. This goes back to the notion of *Ananke*, only that it is now a specific moment of the characters' struggle against time. Ros and Guil are obviously disturbed by this coin tossing activity, resulting in this (prolonged) speculation about the reality they are in.

That this exchange takes place quickly and without a pause suggests a few possibilities, both dramatic and philosophical. From the very beginning, it is evident that Guil has spent considerable amount of time contemplating the reasons for this strange phenomenon. Rather than focusing solely on his surroundings, Guil has started to question

the reason for his existence. This is a natural consequence of “battling against himself,” an inward journey to his internal state of consciousness. Indeed, the separate reference to a different temporality, specifically in the form of “an unremembered past,” serves as a subtle reminder that Guil’s focus is not only his immediate present, but also the times before. This heightened awareness of time, stemming from his increased awareness of one’s individual consciousness, has translated into stage time, with the extended amount of dialogue of *R&GAD* reflecting its content. Interestingly, there is also the notion of “divine intervention,” a theatrical device which considers Euripides’ *deus ex machina*, or in this case, intervention from outside of the text. Again, this considers the possibility that time may not move forward on its own, but requires a “push” of sorts. Whilst the Greek playwrights Euripides and Aeschylus introduced gods and divine presences to affect and control the narrative, Stoppard’s own contriver comes in the form of an ambiguous description:

ROS: That’s it—pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters—shouts—What’s all the row about?! Clear off!—But then he called our names. You remember that—this man woke us up. (*R&GAD* 19)

This “man standing on his saddle” is mentioned again later in the narrative. Remaining a shadowy figure, he is responsible for jumpstarting the narrative in a past which none of the characters can quite remember. All Ros can recall is that “[i]t was urgent—a matter of extreme urgency, royal summons, his very words: official business and no questions asked [...] Fearful lest [they] came too late” (*R&GAD* 19). And this discontinuity is reflected in both courtiers inability to recollect the most important piece of information: in Guil’s words, “[t]oo late for what?”

Even though an audience with knowledge of Hamlet is “entitled to some direction,” this is denied to Ros and Guil. For just as Guil realises that being “picked out” by this divine source “simply to be abandoned” later is something out of his control, it becomes

increasingly clear that time has been arranged chronologically, regardless of individual perspective. It is only after a gradual process of recollection and chance encounters that they begin to understand that they are characters from another larger narrative. Ironically then, it is not clear whether their attempts to “push” time forward have any effect at all. In fact, the opening scenes seem to suggest that the two courtiers are victims of “throwness” or *Geworfenheit*, what the German philosopher Martin Heidegger describes as “being involuntarily thrown into this world.”¹⁰ This suggests that searching for reason alone is insufficient to explain their existence, since “any knowing, cognition, or understanding is inevitably conditioned by the affect that provides background setting” (Smith from Mootz III and Taylor, 26). In other words, any attempt to trace the courtiers’ origins through knowledge or memories may not only prove to be futile, but also irrelevant. Thus, there is no sense of being, at least not yet, perhaps because coming to terms with this event requires time, which, according to Heidegger, “is never experienced as arriving; it is always experienced as passing” (*Nietzsche*, 102).¹¹ Stoppard’s play begs to differ on this point, however, as the pre-existing knowledge of *Hamlet* on the part of the audience suggest that one is constantly awaiting for time to arrive. More specifically, we are waiting for the time when Ros and Guil will remember what is meant to happen. And before that event transpires, time may be passing, but it is not a phenomenon that is experienced by the audience. Time in this interval ceases to move.

10. Going by the definition in Richard Sembera’s *Rephrasing Heidegger: A Companion to Being and Time*, *Geworfenheit* “is a neologism of Heidegger’s and has no normal German meaning. The word literally means “throwness.” It is employed in opposition to *entwerfen*, “planning,” which literally means “to throw forth.” Some commentators have tried to draw a connection between *Geworfenheit* and the verb *werfen*, meaning “to throw,” “to give birth to a litter” (*Wurf* can mean “throw” or “litter”), although this interpretation strikes me as fanciful. A possible source of the “throwness” metaphor is Spinoza’s letter to G. H. Schaller dated October 1674 (numbered LVIII in Van Vloten’s edition), in which Spinoza explains the subjective sense of free will by pointing out that a hurled stone, if it had an intellect, would imagine that it were flying under its own power” (254).

11. “Time in Human Life” from *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life: Empirical Investigations of Human Experience* by Howard R. Pollio, Tracy B. Henley and Craig J. Thompson. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Indeed, the courtiers' temporary state of amnesia has crippled them, leaving them clueless as to what will happen next:

He tosses the coin to GUIL who catches it. Simultaneously—a lighting change sufficient to alter the exterior mood into interior, but nothing violent.

And OPHELIA runs on in some alarm, holding up her skirts—followed by

HAMLET. (*R&GAD 34*)

This abrupt interruption is jarring, especially since Ros and Guil have just moved on from a considerably comedic episode. Yet, there is a hint of what is to come: after a series of “heads,” Ros realises that the coin after the last toss “was tails” (*R&GAD 34*). As Jenkins puts it, “[l]ighting changes and the sudden shifts from the contemporary to the Shakespearean mode lurch us from one world to another in as unsettling a way as that experienced by Ros and Guil” (Jenkins 47). The lack of continuity resulting from these sudden shifts from one play’s narrative to another may be confusing to one watching the play for the first time. An audience with pre-existing knowledge of Hamlet is able to interpret this “invading action,” but if one considers the interruption from the courtier’s perspectives, it is as alarming as they make it out to be. To move from one narrative to another, without clear transitions in between, thus leaves them without a sense of grounding in any concrete reality.

Indeed, the characters from Shakespeare’s play bear down on Ros and Guil almost at will, with no prior warning. This is something that the pair cannot control, albeit not for lack of trying:

ROS: (... *wheels again to face into the wings*) Keep out, then! I forbid anyone to enter! (*No one comes – Breathing heavily.*) That’s better... (*Immediately, behind him a grand procession enters...*)

When no one “enters”, one’s reality stays consistent. At least, that is what Ros and Guil hope to achieve, even as they attempt to control the flow of interruptions. As Hamlet’s characters

arrive, “smoothly and determinedly, and then sail off again” (Jenkins 47), Ros and Guil are left hanging, perhaps even more bewildered than before. This is ironic, considering that their reality contains no sense of time, and that the Shakespearean interventions, at the very least, create some sense of temporality that grounds the stage’s reality. When Ophelia runs on stage, the audience is given a sense of where this scene lies in the greater scheme of the original play; chronologically, there is now a sequence to work with, since we know now what will come next: the entrance of Claudius and Gertrude. By giving the audience a sense of the chronological sequence, Stoppard has once again managed to manipulate the flow of time in the play.

More importantly, Ros and Guil are “frozen” in the scene. In this metatheatrical moment, Stoppard has once again “stopped” time for Ros and Guil. They are not part of this scene; they are observers, just like the audience below the stage. In other words, two temporalities are taking place simultaneously: the courtiers in their own separate reality, and *Hamlet*’s proceedings, which takes place according to Shakespeare’s script. Any interference at this point would throw Hamlet into disarray. As Ros and Guil “unfreeze” after Ophelia and Hamlet exit the stage, Guil attempts to move. But as soon as he shouts “Come on!” it is Claudius and Gertrude who enter, not Ros. And so once again the pair are interrupted. After the royal couple interrupt them for the second time, Ros erupts: “Never a moment’s peace! In and out, on and off, they’re coming at us from all sides.” His eruption is a composition of many emotions from the complete lack of control the pair have over their respective fates.

A closer observation of the respective events fails to clarify or resolve this atemporal dilemma:

ROS: And talking to himself.

GUIL: And talking to himself

ROS and GUIL move apart together.

Well, where has that got us?

ROS: He's the Player.

GUIL: His play offended the King——

ROS: —offended the King——

GUIL: —who orders his arrest——

ROS: —orders his arrest——

GUIL: —so he escapes to England——

ROS: On the boat to which he meets——

GUIL: Guildenstern and Rosencrantz taking Hamlet——

ROS: —who also offended the King——

GUIL: —and killed Polonius——

ROS: —offended the King in a variety of ways——

GUIL: —to England. (*Pause.*) That seems to be it.

Ros jumps up.

ROS: Incidents! All we get is incidents! Dear God, is it too much to expect a little sustained action?! (*R&GAD 117-118*)

In a few lines, Ros and Guil have succinctly summarised the chain of events into a few simple sentences. By effectively reducing these significant moments into a series of “incidents,” the courtiers’ request for “sustained action” seems almost frivolous. Yet, there is something even more disturbing afoot in this exchange, which is that Ros and Guil seem to have a very clear grasp of everything that is happening in the play, which is surprising considering their relative lack of involvement. If Ros and Guil both have a clear idea of what is happening, the gaps caused by the temporal discontinuities are perhaps less severe than what they claim. Even more subtle are the changes taking place simultaneously in Ros and

Guil. In one scene, Ros is a contemporary figure who banters with his counterpart, whilst in another, he is a courtier who is dignified in both manner and speech:

ROS: Both your majesties
 Might, by the sovereign power you have of us,
 Put your dread pleasures more into command
 Than to entreaty.

After Claudius and Gertrude's arrival, the two no longer speak in the same tongue. Rather, they switch to an Elizabethan dialect which contradicts everything that the pair have displayed so far. For not only do they know their roles, but also the very mannerisms and words that must be said. Indeed, it almost seems as if there are two Rosencrantzs—and two Guildensterns—on stage, each for a separate play the temporary presence of these doppelgängers serves as a further reminder that one's persona may change any moment.

These pervasive metatheatrical moments serve only to complicate the audience's perception of Ros and Guil. In some scenes, they seem to be two lost sheep recollecting whatever they can of their memories, yet in other instances, they seem to know what exactly is expected of them. In these abrupt shifts between personas, it appears, as Lionel Abel explains it, that the courtiers “knew [that] they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them... they are aware of their own theatricality (Abel 60). One possible explanation for this relative confusion is that Ros and Guil are both playacting, even in their already existing roles as courtiers to Prince Hamlet. As Abel explains, “the persons appearing on stage in these plays are there not simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them.” After all, these plays are “theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized” (60), and therefore it is only befitting that Ros and Guil are consciously aware of their every word and action.

Yet, being consciously aware of every word and action does not change the fact that the two courtiers are unable to situate themselves chronologically in time, even if the occasional appearances of the characters from *Hamlet* may provide a rough sketch of a timeline:

GUIL: When the wind is southerly.

ROS: And the weather is clear.

GUIL: And when it isn't he can't.

ROS: He's at the mercy of the elements. (*Licks his finger and holds it up—facing audience.*) Is that southerly?

They stare at the audience.

GUIL: It doesn't look southerly. What made you think so?

ROS: I didn't *say* I think so. It could be northerly for all I know. (*R&GAD 57-58*)

This short exchange between the pair reveals certain characteristics of the stage that are often taken for granted. For instance, there are no fixed directions on stage. Depending on the director's wishes, any direction on the play's reality on stage can be "southerly." Indeed, Ros and Guil's "poor sense of direction," according to Daniel K. Jernigan in *Tom Stoppard*, "is not just a manifestation of their indeterminate character[s] but also an example of how theatre space itself can enter into "the zone"" (Jernigan 22), an artificial space that is very much detached from the audience's sense of reality. As the two courtiers stare at the audience, perhaps for at least a hint of an answer, the uncertainty of their existence becomes even more pronounced than before.

Even ascertaining the position of the sun provides more questions than answers. In his attempt to decide whether it is morning or night, Guil "gets so caught up in hypotheticals about where the sun might be that he fails to notice whether or not there is even one"

(Jernigan 22). As a matter of fact, whether the sun is “easterly” on stage is entirely subjected to the playwright’s directive, and cannot be used as a measure of time:

ROS: I merely suggest that the position of the sun, if it is out, would give you a rough idea of the time; alternatively, the clock, if it is going, would give you a rough idea of the position of the sun. I forget which you’re trying to establish.

(*R&GAD* 59)

Ros’ inability to remember what they are establishing merely proves to show how confusing it is to either quantify or qualify time. When he “forgets” whether it is the position of the sun or clock they are discussing, the information is not easily retrievable or verifiable, even if it has just occurred moments before. Karl Mattern sums their plight up aptly: as “[n]o clear direction or orientation can be distinguished [...] the only sure thing seems to be the uncertainty of their existence” (Mattern 12). This epistemological uncertainty is suggestive of the possibilities raised by multiple perspectives, a connection made even clearer by the metatheatrical qualities of Stoppard’s play. As Ros laments, ironically, “[t]he sun’s going down. Or the earth’s coming up, as [f]ashionable theory has it. (*Small pause.*) Not that it makes any difference” (*R&GAD* 125). His statement is almost too literal to fault, since the position of the sun is something beyond humanity’s control, regardless of one’s perception. Yet, Stoppard cleverly points out one important fact that may be lost on us: there is no sun in the theatre, only an artificial one if required. Indeed, there is nothing random about a sun on stage, controlled as it is under the stage directions, to be raised any time that it is summoned. The controlled nature of time on stage is once again reflected in this short exchange.

Indeed, trying to find one’s bearings on stage is similar to the process of locating a direction in time, a gesture that may be arbitrary at best. Unlike the act of locating an object or destination, which may simply be an issue of finding the right direction, time can “only” ever move forward or backward in terms of direction along a linear path (never from side to

side). To be sure, locating the exact position of a moment in this supposedly more straightforward situation is more difficult than it appears to be. To predict the future in the direction forward is an almost impossible task, since events are shifting and changing all the time. The direction backwards, naturally assumed to be movement into the past, is no less problematic. In an individual's memory, the past is a composition of many parts, and the means of selecting which part to begin the process of recollection with is not a straightforward decision.

According to Jill L. Levensen, the nature of *R&GAD*—a composition of several paradigms including the works of Shakespeare, Beckett and Wittgenstein—represents Stoppard's "preoccupations with specific obstacles to the functioning of reason: lapses of memory and the variables of perception" (161). By placing them side by side, these paradigms are effectively in conversation with one another, much like how Stoppard is constantly in dialogue with his philosophical and theatrical concerns. In an interview with Giles Gordon in 1968, Stoppard claimed that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "both add up to me in many ways in the sense that they're carrying out a dialogue which I carry out with myself."¹² In another interview with Ronald Hayman, Stoppard asserts: "What I'm always trying to say is 'Firstly, A. Secondly, minus A.'"¹³ These deceptively simple phrases offer a clearer picture of Stoppard's theatre – Stoppard's reference to his external and internal monologues implies that there is a clear demarcation line between one's exterior and interior realities. At the same time, it also reflects how one's view of a particular moment in time is only temporary.

Incidentally for Ros and Guil, the process of trying to differentiate South and North can be a direct allusion to their problems with time. By depriving them of the very directions they require, Stoppard seems to be suggesting that there are more complex—and tragic—

12. Stoppard quoted in Gordon, "Tom Stoppard," p. 19.

13. Stoppard quoted in Hayman, "First Interview with Stoppard," p. 10.

implications at work in the play. If South and North are analogous terms separating past, present and future, it implies then that Ros and Guil are unable to comprehend which time zone they currently exist in. Yet, in view of the alternative, being lost in time may be considered a kind fate, and one that is oddly familiar due to a simple reason: that this is because Ros and Guil have already experienced it, and are currently experiencing for the possibly umpteenth time.

On the crossing to England, Stoppard uses the metaphor of two people on a boat to represent their plight, as Guil remarks: “[w]e can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current” (*R&GAD* 122). The “larger” movement here evidently refers to the framework of a larger narrative, and may be assumed to be an overt reference to *Hamlet*. As Sammels points out, “the pressures of collectivism are stylized in the dilemma faced by the courtiers—whether to resist or accede to the momentum of the action that threatens to sweep them away” (109). If Ros and Guil are indeed aware of their own theatricality, the Player’s line, “Decides? It is *written*,” is thus even more ironic, considering that this is a fact that Ros and Guil already know, and that they are merely going through the motions. It is this very choice of non-agency that may prove dangerous:

PLAYER: We’re tragedians, you see. We follow directions—there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means. (*R&GAD* 80)

There are many definitions of what tragedy entails, and the Player offers an example of the tragic from his perspective. In his opinion, there is no spontaneity involved in reality. Yet, he fails to consider what Ros and Guil have begun to realise — that the tragedy of time lies not in one’s lack of choice, but rather in one’s inability to recognise crossroads when they are presented to us.

In a self-reflexive moment of reflection, Guil muses: “There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it” (*R&GAD* 125). Besides the problem of locating this “beginning” which Guil speaks of, he is presupposing a possibility that they could have asserted their wills in a *kairic* moment. Mary Ann Frese Witt recognises the implausibility of such an event, observing that “it would seem that, after much time spent in trying to rehearse their roles and being initiated into theatre, they have become, for posterity, the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern” (Witt 137). Ros and Guil may have accepted their destinies eventually, but they are still unable to fully comprehend the performative nature of their shared reality. As actors in this staged reality, it is not difficult to understand their continual state of ignorance or denial.

Indeed, in this self-conceived moment “where [they] could have said no,” Ros and Guil would do well to heed Nietzsche’s commemoration of eternity as one where there is “no securing of continuance [...] but an eternal recurrence of the same coming into being and passing away” (Nietzsche from Löwth 227). According to Heidegger, Nietzsche’s thought about eternal recurrence “[denies] the unlimited flux of Becoming” (21), providing an understanding of the relationship between repetition and ontological reality that coheres seamlessly with the philosophical make-up of Stoppard’s play. If the factors of memory and transitions are to be considered in relation to Stoppard’s narrative, it becomes painfully clear that Ros and Guil’s moment of self-awareness is simply the cruel act—on the playwright’s part—of granting two beings the knowledge of their existence, only for the purpose of letting them realise the futility of their respective situations, with no hopes of redemption. This is identical to the plight experienced by Oedipus the King – the Oracle’s prophecy may have granted him knowledge of what is to come, but it does not reveal exactly how he may avoid these events, much less change them. In other words, tragedy is unavoidable, and it is

difficult to see how Nietzsche's well-chronicled romanticising of Eternal Recurrence may be read more positively in these particular circumstances.

If Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* can be considered to be a play with tragic implications, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is no less a tragedy in its own right. Stoppard's work and its emphasis on the artificiality of reality—enforced by the metatheatrical elements of the play—brings into perspective our experience of the passing of time; that “with the knowledge that for all the points of the compass, there's only one direction, and time is its only measure.” Amongst the many analogies of tragedy littered in the text, Ros' conclusive example of lying in the box comes to mind:

ROS: It could go on for ever. Well, not for *ever*, I suppose. (*Pause.*) Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying in a box with a lid on it?

GUIL: No.

ROS: Nor do I, really.... It's silly to be depressed by it. I mean one thinks of it like being *alive* in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is *dead*... Which should make all the difference... shouldn't it? I mean, you'd never *know* you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being *asleep* in a box. Not that I'd like to sleep in a box, mind you, not without any air—you'd wake up dead, for a start, and then where would you be? Apart from inside a box. That's the bit I don't like, frankly. That's why I don't think of it....

GUIL stirs restlessly, pulling his cloak round him.

Because you'd be helpless, wouldn't you? Stuffed in a box like that, I mean you'd be in there for ever. Even taking into account the fact that you're dead, it isn't a pleasant thought. Especially if you're dead, really... ask yourself, if I asked you straight off—I'm going to stuff you in this box now, would you

rather be alive or dead? Naturally, you'd prefer to be alive. Life in a box is better than no life at all. I expect. You'd have a chance at least. You could lie there thinking—well, at least I'm not dead! In a minute someone's going to bang on the lid and tell me to come out. (*Banging the floor with his fists.*)

“Hey you, whatsyername! Come out of there!”

GUIL (*jumps up savagely*): You don't have to flog it to death!

Pause.

ROS: I wouldn't think about it, if I were you. You'd only get depressed.

(*Pause.*) Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean, where's it going to end?

(*R&GAD 70-71*)

In this short philosophical outburst, there are links, albeit abstract ones, that can be drawn to the nature of time in metatheatre. Instead of stating “when's it going to end?” Ros uses the adverb “where,” displaying a kind of spatial awareness that time requires a form of almost physical situation. It seems almost as if time can be concretised with the use of frames.

Indeed, Ros' differentiation of the realities within and out of the box displays an uncanny resemblance to the two frames of time within an individual's state of consciousness: the chronological time-frame in the larger scheme of things, and the intuitive, which represents the time frame governed by individual perception. Considering that there is an internal reality within a larger frame of reality, one must too consider that there are smaller frames of temporalities within a larger temporality. The very form of metatheatre, with its multiple diegetic realities embedded in its narrative, allows precisely this display of disjunctive temporalities.

As Ros points out, whether one is contained within a larger narrative is something that is unknowable, much less controllable. All one can do in such a situation is to wait for someone to “bang on the lid,” a reaction that is random in its plausibility. Yet, the very act of

lying there, waiting for this one minute of intervention, presents a considerably daunting prospect—when will this minute take place? Unlike the scenarios discussed earlier, there are no Ophelias or Hamlets to provide any temporal intervals and landmarks. There is no way of verifying or quantifying the time lapses in between the first moment of contemplation, and the next moment of activity. Indeed, it is almost like a period of eternity within a larger scheme of infinite time, where time ceases to move with the lack of action. By Saint Augustine's use of the term in his work *Confessions*, eternity is “for ever still [*semper stans*]... nothing moves into the past: all is present [*totum esse praesens*]. Time, on the other hand, is ever all present at once” (11:13). In this paradoxical definition, it is no wonder that the act of waiting translates inevitably into a state of existential anxiety. Since eternity has fixed everything else in stone, the notion of time, and determinism, is rendered irrelevant.

To compound matters, to be risen from one's stupor is not an entirely ideal scenario. Ros' sentiment that life is better than death seems to be an objective choice of action, yet it does not change the fact that the individual remains isolated, regardless of whatever eventually transpires. In this atemporal dilemma, man's plight is reduced to a state of relative insignificance. By dissolving both agency and choice, this ability to “extract significance” from melodrama, or more specifically, the act of dying, reflects how death itself has no meaning, other than the one given by human understanding. The notion of death provides the means to an end, perhaps because the very experience of death is not something one can anticipate its actual occurrence:

GUIL: I'm talking about death – and you've never experienced that. And you cannot act it. You die a thousand casual deaths – with none of the intensity which squeezes out life... and no blood runs cold anywhere. Because even as you die you know that you will come back in a different hat. But no one gets

up after death – there is no applause – there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that’s – death – (*R&GAD* 123)

Guil refers to two notions of death here, one that is actual death, the other the idea of death. Death does not mean the end of time, only the end of a particular individual’s perception of time. If Ros and Guil are already dead—or destined to die—right from the beginning of the play as the title suggests, this may explain why their perceptions of time have been distorted right from the beginning, subsequently translating to the disjunctive temporalities on stage. According to Guil, death cannot be acted, and he is right—in the Player’s words, “[t]here’s nothing more unconvincing than an unconvincing death” (*R&GAD* 77). On the stage, with its performance, is nothing more than artifice, where “even as you die you know that you will come back in a different hat.” The Player’s demonstrates this by performing death “naturally”—he feigns his death convincingly, before getting up moments later. Guil, with his “fear, vengeance and scorn” and strong words, has only participated in his façade.

Guil’s strong feelings towards the subject of death only serves to highlight the isolation he fears—it is only in actual death that time, and the existential anxieties associated with its passing, will come to a stop; yet, it is also when the illusory conditions of existence will cease to exist too. There is only “silence,” without the presence of words to forge any bridges of understanding, or even offer momentary comfort. It is here that lies the inherent irony present in Stoppard’s work. The courtiers seek to resolve their battle against mortality by trying to slow down time, to avoid coming to the stage in which time does not move at all. Yet, it is their struggle against time that reflects a more universal concern – that of man’s greatest tragedy. Perhaps, Stoppard has shown us, through his metatheatrical play, that we are contained within a larger narrative “that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current” like the two courtiers, that this existential struggle is a futile endeavour, even if the temporary illusions of different realities may convince us otherwise.

RUNNING OUT OF TIME IN DAVID IVES' *ALL IN THE TIMING*

Whilst there is a considerable lack of academic research done on David Ives' work, there are interesting insights to be gathered from the Preface to *All in the Timing*. In this short piece of writing, Ives offers a series of answers, without including the questions. Some came across as nonsensical responses, with some left hanging without any hint as to what the original question was ("Yes I said yes I will Yes"; "No I never have. Too messy"; "By moistening the tip and saying, "Wankel Rotary Engine," of course"). Others, however, were self-evident answers, with proper explanations coming clearly from carefully framed questions. These "proper" answers did provide useful snippets of information, including details of Ives' playwriting career. Whilst the form of this Preface does not provide any clear insights into Ives' theatre and its dramatic technicalities in terms of content, its unique presentation does draw our attention to how Ives can play with sequence and form.

More importantly, however, is how the form of this Preface reflects one of Ives' comments: "Does it ever strike you that life is like a list of answers, in which you have to glean or even make up the questions yourself? Just asking." On the surface, it is similar to the issues what Guil raises in the previous chapter, that "there were answers everywhere you looked." Their views have a subtle difference: Guil's comment is a reflection of how there are many questions that need answers; Ives offers a reverse in opinion, that there are many "answers," but a noticeable lack of questions to ground them. The absence of these guiding questions indicates *a priori* knowledge, which in turn suggests a form of existential anxiety. Without the experience needed to provide the necessary structure, there is a consequent crisis of confidence that is inherently existential. Regardless of approach, both views come to the consensus that questions and answers are equally important, especially when one experiments with which comes first and after.

Of all the playwrights discussed in the paper so far, Ives is probably the least known of the three. It is also problematic to include his work in a consideration of modern tragedy, since his plays are far more recognised for their wit and humour. When Ives deals with time in his aptly named *Time Plays*, it is not done in an overtly derisive or questioning manner, and the words used in the construction of his plays are considerably playful. Indeed, through the various comically-constructed episodes, Ives ensures that the subject matter does not wander far from comedy, and this can be seen in the three plays selected for this paper: *Sure Thing*, *Foreplay: or The Art of the Fungue* and *Variations of the Death of Trotsky*. When reduced to its fundamental set-ups, the first two plays both involve a series of flirtations and pick-up lines. Placed in settings of trivial implications and even less important characters, both plays do not claim to have any deeper historical or philosophical significance. Moreover, even for *Trotsky*, with its weightier subject matter based on the significance of the historical character alone, is comical in its appearance.

Indeed, there is a lightness to the plays' narrative that is similar, or even lighter, than the work of the previous two playwrights discussed in this paper. Ives' stage dialogue can be seen as "light," simply because his chosen words lack the force of satire, or any overt form of ideological and political implications. Taking into consideration the element of play in his works, it seems more apt to see Ives' work as postmodern, rather than modernist in nature. For despite the apparent lack of epistemological anxiety in the plays, there are questions concerned with epistemology all the same, as in all three plays—knowledge and how it is acquired—is repeatedly questioned. In *Sure Thing* for example, the different alternate possibilities presented in the protagonist's line of questioning shows how reality is never stable or singular. In other words, Ives prompts us to think of time in the same vein. This epistemological uncertainty associated with time, incited by fact that situations and

perception of events change over time, is even more pronounced when presented in the form of theatre, or more specifically, Ives' theatre.

This existential crisis arguably has its roots in time. By naming his body of work "Time Plays", it is evident that Ives believes time to be the largest obstacle in one's location of these "questions." Much like Pirandello and Stoppard before him, Ives' manipulation of how time is viewed and treated in theatre does not suggest a measure of control, but rather, in its overt display of artifice, emphasises precisely how the passing of time is something man cannot control. In other words, even though most of his subject matter is evidently comical in nature, this paper's thesis that man's greatest tragedy is the passing of time holds firm with Ives' school of thought, justifying the selection of his works in this temporary genealogy of modern tragedy. Thus, in the following discussion, where there will be more questions than answers, this paper will examine the existential plight of each of Ives' characters. This critique will be carried out by the means of observing Ives' treatment of time in his plays, not only its overt emphasis on metatheatricality, but also to address his philosophies with regard to time.

Drawing our attention to the existence of multiple worlds, each of Ives' plays deals with the notion of time under a similar concept. Yet, what makes Ives' work interesting is how he presents this concept in a variety of different ways. For *Sure Thing*, the bell rings signal the different intervals and retraction of stage actions; for *Foreplay*, three versions of the same character—of different ages—sets a scene where past meets present and future; in *Trotsky*, the different variations of how Trotsky meets his end brings to our attention the number of possible alternatives to one single event. Indeed, the very coexistence of multiple worlds already factors in the existence of different temporal zones, re-emphasising the important role of perspective in life. Ives' work seems to present "the creative process, frantic and forlorn, of getting through life," giving the impression that "all human existence is an

improvisatory rehearsal for some grand opening night that may never arrive.”¹⁴ Whether his plays are predominantly epistemological or ontological in nature is less important, when one considers that they may fluctuate between both ends.

Indeed, Ives “offers an absurdity that ‘does not deny reality, but questions its boundaries’, or, in other words, presents us ‘cracks’ within what is perceived as ‘normal’ reality” (Flegar 130).¹⁵ From these descriptions, Ives’ work seems to fit Martin Esslin’s description of absurdist theatre, where

[t]he whole play is a complex poetic image made up of a complicated pattern of subsidiary images and themes, which are interwoven like the themes of a musical composition, not, as in most well-made plays, to present a line of development, but to make in the spectator’s mind a total complex impression of a basic, and static situation. (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*)

From this short excerpt, there are a few key points that require further explication for the purposes of this paper. One of the reasons why Ives’s plays do not “present a line of development” may be due to his reworking of time in the narrative. In *Sure Thing* and *Trotsky*, and to a lesser extent *Foreplay*, the same scene is repeated with minor alterations, each with a separate outcome. These constant disruptions remove any sense of continuity in the play, as the audience is unable to situate the characters in a consistent temporal setting. Indeed, the “complex impression of a basic, and static situation” describes aptly how Ives is able to draw our attention to the workings of time in theatre. By effectively isolating the events separately, Ives has, in Pirandelian fashion, “killed time.” In other words, he paints the portrait of the modern man in his isolation, “[creating] a friction, a borderline existence

14. Richard Corliss, ‘Ringing the Bell,’ *Time*, 31 Jan. 1994.
<http://aolsvc.timeforkids.kol.aol.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,980046,00.html>. Source taken from Željka Flegar, “A Bakery in the Mind: Sound and Emotion in David Ives’ Philip Glass Buys a Loaf of Bread.” *Cambridge Quarterly*. 39. 2. Oxford University Press, 2010. <Project Muse>.

15. Ibid. p. 174.

between nothing and everything, hurry and eternal pause, noise and silence, and finally fiction and fact.”

Indeed, Ives’ plays are always short, concentrated as they are on specific moments or instances in an event. As one of his more well-known and simpler plays, Ives’ *Sure Thing* begins in a comical setting. We have two characters, Bill and Betty, who meet in a café. Every time Bill offers an inadequate question or answer, a bell rings and both characters rewind back to the moment just before he utters the wrong statement. Like a computer game where the reset button is always in place just in case something goes wrong, the successful sequences before are in a sense frozen in time, available so that Bill can make a retraction at any point of time. For instance, towards the end, Bill manages to nail a series of exchanges without any error:

BETTY: Do you like Entenmann’s crumb cake...?

BILL: Last night I went out at two in the morning to get one. Did you have an Etch-a-Sketch as a child?

BETTY: Yes! And do you like Brussels sprouts? (*Pause.*)

BILL: No, think they’re disgusting.

BETTY: They *are* disgusting!

BILL: Do you still believe in marriage in spite of current sentiments against it?

BETTY: Yes. (*Sure Thing*, 17)

These statements are made at random, without any clear link between them. Yet, Bill is allowed to progress on because they are exactly the sentiments Betty wants to hear. This is in stark contrast to his bad streaks:

BETTY: So you didn’t stop to talk because you’re a Moonie, or you have some weird political affiliation—?

BILL: Nope. Straight-down-the-ticket Republican.

(*Bell.*)

Straight-down-the-ticket Democrat.

(*Bell.*)

Can I tell you something about politics?

(*Bell.*)

I like to think of myself as a citizen of the universe. (*Sure Thing*, 14)

From the first few exchanges, it becomes painfully evident that Bill has an ulterior motive. “Picking up” Betty is tricky business, less straightforward than Bill hopes it to be. “You never know who you might be turning down,” he says, and even in its light-hearted, almost desperate tone, the implications are true. In this event, Bill has made his move, and Betty finds herself at the crossroads, albeit an apparently unimportant one. In a seemingly endless series of causes-and-effects, her next decision will lead to another crossroads, and another after that. The title “Sure Thing” provides cause for optimism though, and its pre-emptive quality suggests that Bill will eventually succeed, even though it is not clear at this point.

Bill’s first semi-successful inroad into his series of pick-up lines comes after his third try, the previous two attempts reduced to waste as he chooses the path of non-disclosure, and one may assume that he has also been tempted to do so by Betty’s very response:

BILL: Excuse me. Is this chair taken?

BETTY: Excuse me?

BILL: Is this taken?

BETTY: No, but I’m expecting somebody in a minute.

BILL: Oh. Thanks anyway.

BETTY: Sure thing.

(*A bell rings softly.*)

BILL: Excuse me. Is this chair taken?

BETTY: No, but I'm expecting somebody very shortly.

BILL: Would you mind if I sit here till he or she or it comes?

BETTY (glances at her watch): They do seem to be pretty late....

BILL: You never know who you might be turning down.

BETTY: Sorry. Nice try, though. (*Sure Thing*, 3)

On the surface, “expecting somebody in a minute” and “expecting somebody very shortly” seems to be a similar answer. Yet, there is a small difference in the empirical description. “A minute” is a very specific conveyance of time, as opposed to the ambiguity allowed in “very shortly.” Bill’s quick response shows that perhaps he is subconsciously aware of this difference. It almost seems as if he is conditioned by a fixed structure of time that deals in hours, minutes and seconds, resulting in his sensitivity to these small details. From a practical perspective, a minute may be too little time for Bill to do anything constructive, even as seconds are passing by when he is making a decision. Choosing a passive approach thus seems to be his only viable option.

Bill’s retreat lasts all of three seconds before the bell rings again, and he approaches Betty with the exact same line: “Is this seat taken?” The repeated attempts at getting the seat are laughable, since the percentage of failure has already proven to severely outweigh the odds of success, which reflects Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s fascination with the coin tosses, with the lack of any other possible outcome seemingly dismissed. However, Ives’ intention is not the same as Stoppard’s here. For on his fifth attempt, in the exact same situation, Betty finally offers a positive response. Yet, this situation has already lost its attempt at realism. Logic has disallowed any semblance of a connection, with Ives’ theatrical impulse short-circuiting any possibility of a “real” human connection between our two protagonists on stage. All there is – are the dictates of the text.

These scenes discussed so far may bring forth the suggestion that making a conscious decision requires sufficient time, and consequently, the question: is there ever enough time to make a conscious decision? More importantly, approval at the first obstacle may not necessarily guarantee a smooth progression. In the artificial reality created on stage, it appears that this option may be explored further. Indeed, Bill's initial success is rendered irrelevant upon the very next exchange:

BILL: Would you mind if I sit here?

BETTY: Yes I would.

Immediately, Bill's advances are stopped dead in their tracks. This abrupt setback drives home the point that if we go by the supposition that the narrative, or narratives, have already been written, Bill has the difficult task of weaving his way through multiple states of time, each with a different, yet seemingly similar Betty, with her own set of thoughts and decisions that are changing every conscious moment. The subtle difference between "[g]reat place" and "[g]reat place for reading" may seem inconsequential, yet it is this detail concerning reading prolongs Bill time with Betty. Extending time provides an extension of possibilities, and simultaneously raptures the illusion of how a scene is supposed to end with a bell ring.

Even in this simple set-up, however, there are some stage properties that are instrumental to Ives display of time in theatre. The bell seems to serve the simple function of setting up intervals in the play, so that the audience may know that a retraction has been called for. Yet, this "break" is similar to what Brecht calls "identification," a phenomenon Anne Ubersfeld in *Reading Theatre* calls "sideration" (a momentary blank) on the part of the spectator:

[T]he gap obliges the spectator to put aside not only the action, the succession of the story, but indeed the theatrical universe, and momentarily rejoin his or her own world. Paradoxically, intervals oblige the spectator to come back to a

twofold reality – the reality of the spectator beyond the theatre, and a referential reality pertaining to a story that marches on, advancing action during the interval. In any case, what is seen is the object of denegation; it is the intervals that contain a reference to reality. (Ubersfeld 144)

Brecht's use of the term "gap" refers to the intervals within acts or scenes. For Ives, this is complicated by the fact that the whole play is comprised of *one* act/scene, without the multiple acts and scenes one normally finds in a play. The boundaries are consequently less clear, with the dividing occurring within a moment of supposed fluidity. In other words, whilst the play is technically a singular act in terms of space and chronological timing, it is at the same time subjected to continuous moments of discontinuity. In this way, Ives continuously suspends our sense of time. Every ring of the bell is a signal that Bill has banged into another obstacle, and with it comes the end of one interval and the beginning of another. Quoting Brecht, Ubersfeld's assessment that "it is the intervals that contain a reference to reality" reflects how these multiple intervals within Ives' play displays a show of artifice. It becomes difficult then for this "referential reality" to realistically march on from the audience's perspective, especially since the subsequent "advancing action" is done in the supposed absence of time. In other words, the audience's experiences the sensation of not moving at all, as the play continues in the very same space in time.

Indeed, the situation of Ives' play is very different from what Aristotle envisioned. The Aristotelian Classical Unity of Action dictates that a play should have one main, continuous plot, with little or no emphasis on subplots; *Sure Thing*, with its continuity of plot laced with many alternate pathways, offers a very different proposition. Even as Bill's actor speaks his next line, one wonders how Betty will reply. Significantly, their responses have to deal with multiple levels of diegetic realities. If everything goes according to the script, Bill and his actor know that Betty and her actress will answer in accordance to what was

rehearsed. And yet, how this scene plays out is far from a foregone conclusion. Immersed as we are in the stage's reality, one cannot dismiss the possibility that the next line uttered may not be in line with the script. Behind Betty's character, the actress has a consciousness of her own, one that is liable to making mistakes or saying something completely different on purpose. The uncertainties associated with Bill and Betty's encounter as characters is thus similar to the relationship between the audience and the reality on stage. Because reality is in the state of "becoming" on multiple levels, this draws our attention to the workings of time, both in theatre and life. Even as we are confronted with a series of choices, each decision made does little to provide us with a clearer picture of what will come next.

After finally working his way through Betty's initial defences, the next moment of interest comes in the form of her reading material. Bill does not have a problem getting this particular answer, and it is only when confronted with the name of the book that he has to rethink his position. When he is forced to offer his opinion of Betty's book, his first venture of a comment is "Hemingway," who is not the author and thus stops the conversation short. Unfortunately, whilst *The Sound and the Fury* is well-known as a great piece of literature, it is not something that Bill is likely to have read before, even if he has heard of it. "Hemingway" is immediately met with the ring of failure, but "Faulker" opens yet again a very small window of time:

BETTY: Have you read it?

BILL: Not... actually. I've sure read about it, though. It's supposed to be great.

BETTY: It is great.

BILL: I hear it's great. (*Small pause.*) Waiter? (*Sure Thing, 5*)

In this moment of reckoning, retraction of time may not be sufficient. It becomes a question of knowledge which stretches beyond simple decision-making. In any case, it is too late for Bill to change history: he has not read Faulkner's novel, and two seconds of stage time

cannot hope to replace or compensate for what he does not know. An infinite number of retractions may not give him the sufficient information to placate Betty. At this point, two possible emotions come to mind: nostalgia and regret. Should he have studied harder, so that the option of Harvard is actually available? Indeed, Bill would never have wasted his time at Oral Roberts University had he known earlier that there would be a moment like this.

Certainly, this is by no means a form of tragedy in the league of Aristotle. Bill is no tragic hero, merely an unfortunate one whose flaws affect no one but himself. Not having taken “a whole winter reading [Faulkner]” is perhaps regrettable, but not fatal. And as the bell rings once again, Bill is spared the painful process of “what-ifs,” the regrets which come immediately after each rejection.

Indeed, even if there were no bell rings, Nietzsche’s concept of Eternal Recurrence would still come into the picture, and to address Bill’s circumstances with Nietzsche’s doctrine would produce a verdict that is not tragic or painful, but a situation that would have been strongly endorsed by Nietzsche himself. Karl Löwith defines Nietzsche’s doctrine as “aphorisms [which] exhort an imperative, namely the injunction to live in such a way that you would gladly will the eternal recurrence of your life—without change or emendation—over and over again” (*Foreword*), and Bill has done precisely just that. By effectively changing his present—and future—any time something deviates away from his desired outcome, Bill is essentially exerting his will power on his fate, altering the course of his destiny by experimentation and reneging at appropriate timings. Taking one step beyond the *Übermensch*, Bill has the strength not only to accept the concept of Eternity, but to alter the course of history altogether, based on will power alone. It is this very strength of his will power that cements the positive conclusion at the end of the play, and thus enables him to “gladly ill the eternal recurrence of [his] life—without change or emendation—over and over again.”

However, even though Eternal Recurrence is widely considered to be an inherently positive phenomenon, there are negative conceptual implications that cannot be ignored. The most blatant discrepancy lies in the idea of the *Übermensch*, and the simple fact that Bill, like most people, do not fulfil Nietzsche's mould of the "Superman." In most realities, it is not possible for Bill to exert his will, and thus, a word or gesture cannot be retracted, much as the perpetrator desires another opportunity for change. Since everything has already passed, Bill will never have another moment of opportunity like this, at least, not at the same time in his life, and the promise of an alternate destiny is merely a temporary illusion. And even if he does study at an Ivy League university and read Faulkner in his free time, it does not necessarily mean that there are no other regrets he has to fulfil along the way. Therefore, even though Ives may very well be writing a comedy on the inspiring nature of Nietzsche's will to power, there is also the possibility of him questioning the very point of regret and nostalgia, or perhaps even lamenting the excessive amount of *kairic* moments that seem to cloud the common man's ability to decide. As Bill says pointedly to Betty:

You might not have been ready for him. You have to hit these things at the right moment or it's no good.

Bill's convenient statement requires correction; it is not just hitting "the things at the right moment" but hitting the right things at the right moments. This draws our attention once again to the complexities—and crises—of (post)modern consciousness. Making a right decision at one point of time is insufficient, especially when there are many other junctures and factors to consider. Indeed, what perhaps proves most interesting is the way Ives structures these exchanges, as it almost appears that Bill is the solitary individual lost in a labyrinth of decisions. And whilst may have appeared to be unmoving, as Bill attempts to impress her, all we can "see" on stage are her facial expressions and perhaps the shifting

tones of her verbal exchanges with Bill. Yet, beneath this exterior is also another being making conscious decisions at every juncture.

In *Foreplay: or The Art of the Fugue*, Ives takes this play with time and intervals one step further – by conducting multiple scenes simultaneously in the same act/scene. *Foreplay* begins with a man and a woman playing a round of miniature golf. As they banter whilst moving from hole to hole, the male character, Chuck, constantly philosophises even whilst slipping as many sexual innuendoes as he can into his speech. From their sexually-charged exchanges, it is evident that Chuck is trying to pick the girl up, which explains the very title of the play. Eventually, two other couples join them on stage, one after the other, and we have the experience of seeing three Chucks of different ages, all present at the same time, albeit with different women with uncannily similar-sounding names. The fundamental idea behind this play is clear: to show us three versions of Chuck progresses from an ambitious, cocky youth to middle-aged mediocrity. Each Chuck displays which stage of the labyrinth he is currently in. For the audience, it is convenient to assume that we are observing a sort of chronological progression, one which suggests that the first Chuck will eventually grow into the second Chuck, before evolving into the third and last version. As a result, there is a necessary suspension of disbelief, as we try to accommodate three different versions of the same person existing simultaneously on stage.

The metatheatrical device of having multiple temporalities unfolding physically on stage serves primarily not to disrupt the audience's sense of time on stage, but rather, to draw our attention to the restructuring of space and time on a shared platform. For these separate characters to coexist simultaneously on stage, their separate dialogues have to be coordinated well enough to prevent any overlapping of verbal utterances which would dampen the effect of their respective speeches. The complexity of such a display is executed well in Stoppard's *Arcadia*, one of Stoppard's more recent philosophical plays. In the last scene of *Arcadia*,

characters from the nineteenth century continue with their separate conversations, whilst the other set of contemporary characters go about their own routine. Visually, it is a picture of synchronised confusion. Whilst we are forced on one hand to make sense of two separate sets of dialogues, it is indeed Stoppard's craft and ingenuity that allows each sentence sequence to cohere, even though they mean very different things.

This applies not only to *Foreplay*, but also to *Sure Thing*. When Bill meets Betty in the cafe, it is an event isolated from the rest of the circumstances preceding and extending beyond it. Yet, between the multitudes of bell rings beginning at the very beginning of the play, to the middle of the exchange, even to the very end, it is difficult to ascertain how much of the events can be remembered. With every rejection, Betty sets Bill off on an alternate pathway, each of which is contained within its own space and time. This reflects the very nature of theatre, and its intricate relation to time. Indeed, we are observing thirty-nine Bills, if the multitude of selves is to be in accordance with the number of bells. Whether or not the next figure carries any knowledge of his past experience(s) seems to be a moot point, given that every Bill knows exactly the very actions that he should avoid, which is hardly surprising since he has a well-rehearsed script at hand.

The fundamental difference between these scenes of conflating temporalities is visual. Unlike the Chucks, the sets of characters in *Arcadia* are visually different from each other. Since they are from different time periods, their different dress codes mark each character out. Whilst this may be slightly confusing at first, Stoppard's intention for doing so is rather self-evident. By conflating two separate temporalities on the same stage, the play draws our attention to the concept of space, and the ambiguity of time when addressing this shared space. Essentially, whilst people and culture may change with time, certain philosophies associated with life do not change. With *Arcadia*, stage timing is thus of the utmost importance, a feature which also resembles Beckett's own fascination with stage directions

and timing. According to Beckett in his “seven-step routine”, every single move must follow a certain rhythm for the performance to work. Whilst the degree of severity is much less in *Arcadia*, there will be an inevitable state of confusion on stage if the each move is not properly synchronised, especially since the space for movement and sequencing is limited.

For Ives play, this state of confusion may be visually more confusing when we consider that the three Chucks are dressed in the exact same fashion and sprouting dialogue that seems almost the same. Whilst we do know that this is intended, and each Chuck is a different variation of the same individual, there is still an uncanny feeling of one character facing two reflections of himself, particularly when they utter the same line at the same time. “FORE!” each Chuck shouts, in perfect tandem, and at this precise moment, there is a sensation of three different realities collapsing into one another. As the characters appear simultaneously, we are watching three plays within a play, and it cannot be ascertain which one takes precedence over the other two.

From these exchanges, it seems that the only way to differentiate the three is to pay attention to the women they are with, and even this is not easy: Amy is stated to be in her “early twenties,” Annie in her “mid-twenties,” whilst Alma’s age is not even stated at all. However, there are particular instances when the Chucks call their partners by the wrong names: Chuck II calls Annie “Amy” in one sequence, as does Chuck III minutes later. Logically, Annie and Alma cannot come before Amy, since this is chronologically impossible. This is perhaps Ives’ way of privileging Amy’s existence over Annie’s and Alma’s, and also making the claim that one’s first love experience sets a permanent standard for all that come after. At the end of the play, Amy is described as falling into Chuck’s arms as a declaration of his victory, presumably winning her heart. Is this victory a treasured memory that threatens to conflate the past with the present? Indeed, the spectre of Amy seems to be in their thoughts, even as each variation of Chuck is with a different woman. Perhaps, even the selection of

these women are based on Chuck's memory of Amy, and this may explain their almost identical modes of speech. Here, a tragic element of Ives' play presents itself: an individual's inability to forget the past, even if it haunts and torture's him. Even if Chuck III longs for his first love, it is an event that has long passed, and time's passing does not allow him a second chance.

Like Bill in *Sure Thing*, Chuck I, II and III are all making their way through dialogue, with the intention of seducing their dates. The Chucks are more adept however, and one can discern a similar pattern through the creative use of sexual innuendo. They are "Don Juans," as the women term it, with reputations for seducing women.

CHUCK II: These aren't just *holes* out there.

CHUCK: These are stages on the journey of life.

CHUCK II: The course always leads to the same final place.

CHUCK: But the course is different for everybody. (*Foreplay*, 112)

In terms of dialogue, the sequence of these utterances is well-timed, not unlike how an individual would speak if he were alone. The result is an uncanny sensation of witnessing the very same person in the same time and space. If Chuck II can be ascertained to be the "older" Chuck, the similarity in their speech patterns displays repetition on two levels: both in the nature of a play and its performance, and more significantly, of life and its circularity. For whilst the differences between Chuck I and II are rather subtle, Chuck III comes across as less energetic, and even pessimistic. "Exhausted," he seems less inclined to flirt, and it does not help matters that his date is the only one who gets his name wrong. And whilst it is safe to assume that Chuck III is the oldest version of Chuck to date one may also assume that Alma may be the eldest woman on stage.) "Dick" then is most likely one of the men she has dated, a sizeable number that thus leads to her mistake.

Through the labyrinth of utterances, Chuck III's tone is disagreeable, blunt to a fault, certainly not what we would expect from a man with more experience. Consider this short series of replies:

CHUCK III: You know I can't hit the ball if I don't go "*puck*."

ALMA: "*Puck*"?

CHUCK III: I have to make a noise if I'm going to hit it right.

ALMA: Oh. Okay. Make a noise.

CHUCK III: It's my nature.

ALMA: Okay.

CHUCK III: I'm used to it.

ALMA: Go ahead. Make all the noise you want.

CHUCK (*referring to CHUCK III*): Looks like we've got a real moron up ahead here.

(*Foreplay*, 123)

Even without the suggestion of facial expressions, Chuck III's tone signifies a shift in mood. Whilst the two previous Chucks are flirtatious and push the conversation patiently, Chuck III whines impatiently. The loss of flexibility, suggested by his insistence of making a noise and justifying it by attributing this habit to his nature, seems to be a consequence of age. Yet, the presence—and precedence—of his previous selves makes this even more telling – with the passing of time,

Chronologically, the play has already failed to make sense. Yet, assuming that there is only one present reality, Chuck III's reality is the most recent one, if not the supposedly immediate present. In that event, Chucks I and II serve the role of echoes of previous selves who are not only affecting our perception as the reader and audience, but Chuck III's as well. The actor hears his counterparts and acts accordingly, and the character hears his past selves and makes his decision. Between these separate planes of reality, we find that such

metatheatrical impulses not only mirrors the artificiality of reality, but goes one step further to both metaphorically and physically replicate it. Like an external audience, Chuck is made to observe his past actions, even when he is present in the same reality. If we will make an assessment based on age alone, Chuck III has the least time left in his world, even if that time is fictional. If this concept is applied to the properties of time on stage, Chuck III has the least stage time as well. And so we find that the very form of Ives' play is reflected in the content, or more specifically, in the dialogue. Indeed, Chuck III's words give a sense of lethargy, or in Emil M. Cioran's words, a kind of weariness:

“The sensation of expansion towards nothingness present in melancholy has its roots in a weariness characteristic of all negative states. This weariness separates man from the world. Life's intense rhythm, its organic inner pulse, weakens. Weariness is the first organic determinant of knowledge. Because it creates the necessary conditions for man's differentiation from the world, weariness leads one to the perspective which places the world in front of man. Weariness also takes one below life's normal level, allowing only a vague premonition of vital signs. Melancholy therefore springs from a region where life is uncertain and problematic. Its origin explains its fertility for knowledge and its sterility for life. (Cioran 29)

If theatre replicates life through mimesis, then *Foreplay* emphasises the repetitive and transitory nature of life. As a metaphor for impermanence, the lack of a permanent partner is accompanied by a sense of regret and isolation. Cioran's assertion that “weariness leads one to the perspective which places the world in front of man” holds true here for Chuck III; when Alma ponders over whether she should take the first shot, Chuck III tells her, seriously, that “this game is bigger than either one of us.” Compared with the similar-sounding words of Chuck “miniature golf is bigger than you or me” and Chuck II “this game is bigger than you

or me, you know,” the difference lies not in the syntax then, but rather, in the repetition. It is the third time the audience is hearing these words, and the experience is tiring, especially when we expect to see another repeated performance.

It is clear at this point that unlike the other two, Chuck III feels the heaviness of time, and even as he attempts to assert himself in front of Alma, he is probably aware that experience has, to an extent, given him more knowledge. Yet, the accumulation of knowledge has merely increased his awareness of life’s problems and uncertainties. Time is passing, and Chuck III no longer has the patience to flirt. This is telling right at the end: after Alma finishes the hole, she informs him calmly that he has neither won nor lost, since there are nine holes remaining, and Chuck III immediately replies “[t]he nine circles of hell,” followed promptly by “I resign” (*Foreplay*, 125). The disinterested reply shows Chuck III’s complete reluctance to continue the narrative, or from the point of recollection, to continue remembering the details of such an event.

Ironically, the choice to end the narrative abruptly concurs with the approach in *Six Characters and Ros and Guil*, even if this different approach appears to be very different on the surface. Whilst Pirandello and Shakespeare’s characters seek to extend their narratives, Ives offers us an interesting perspective of how an individual—lucky enough to be given a narrative—chooses to end it prematurely. By doing so, he questions the wisdom of attempting to stop and stall time. Chuck III’s example shows that more experiences, accomplished in an extended narrative, may actually be repeated ones, and this is an aspect beyond the individual’s control. Thus, Boethius’ view that “[t]he worst of time, like the best, is always passing away” is not as tragic as he claims it to be. If life is meaningless anyway, ending the suffering would be preferable to reliving the same experience over and over again. Unfortunately, the common man’s tragic existence does not allow him this choice.

Simultaneously trying to stem the flow of time, whilst attempting to ensure that this extension does not end in repetition, creates a complex situation that is almost impossible to resolve.

Man's struggle with time is complicated even further when one considers the authenticity of history—and memory. Compared to the two plays discussed so far, Ives' third play *Variations on the Death of Trotsky* provides the most compelling composition of the three. Comprising of elements from both plays discussed so far, *Trotsky* is a play that focuses overtly on the workings of time on stage. It is similar to *Sure Thing* in terms of form, where the events are retracted time after time, whilst its tragic overtones at the end resemble those at the conclusion of *Foreplay*. At the start of the play, Trotsky is seen writing furiously at his desk, with the absurd object of a mountain-climber's axe sticking out of the back of his head. After a short dialogue with his wife where she forces him to read historical accounts of himself, Trotsky reaches the part chronicling his death, after which he finally "dies" upon realising that he is supposed to be dead in the first place. The ridiculous image of such an important figure certainly does not fit his legacy, and Ives does not seem to deny otherwise. In the Preface to *All in Timing*, Ives offers his take on the play:

Variations on the Death of Trotsky was not originally intended for production. I wrote it as a birthday gift for Fred Sanders, who directed the first production of *Words, Words, Words*. I had seen an article in the *Times* about Trotsky, which mentioned that after being hit in the head with a mountain-climber's axe, Trotsky lived on for thirty-six hours. I thought it was the funniest thing I'd ever heard, and I got very taken with the question of what one does for thirty-six hours with a mountain-climber's axe in one's head/ What kind of food do you eat? (Fast food, naturally.) (Preface to *All in the Timing*)

From the content of Trotsky's dialogue, the similarities between the actual account and Ives' fictional composition become clearer. Consider Trotsky's last words in his political testament, just before his death¹⁶:

For 43 years of my conscious life I have remained a revolutionist; for 42 of them I have fought under the banner of Marxism. If I had to begin all over again I would of course try to avoid this or that mistake, but the main course of my life would remain unchanged. I shall die a proletarian revolutionist, a Marxist, a dialectical materialist, and consequently, an irreconcilable atheist. My faith in the communist future of mankind is not less ardent, indeed it is firmer today, than it was in the days of my youth.

[Natalya] has just come up to the window from the courtyard and opened it wider so that the air may enter more freely into my room. I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall, and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression and violence and enjoy it to the full.¹⁷

Ives' theatrical work is thus a play on two specific instances in this speech: Trotsky's reflection that "if [he] had to begin all over again [he] would of course try to avoid this or that mistake," followed by the resolution that his life would "remain unchanged"; and his wife's simple gesture of opening the window from the courtyard. Compounded with our pre-existing knowledge that Trotsky is dead, his presence on stage is already a display of artifice, and Ives allows Trotsky the benefit of one more day after his death for this very reason. Doing so, he contemplates the nature of death in a way that is slightly different from the two previous playwrights. By extending time slightly (more specifically, an empirical period of twenty four hours), Ives prolongs the existence of one's consciousness, one that is beyond the constraints

16. Helen Gilbert, *Leon Trotsky: His Life and Ideas*. Red Letter Press, 2003. Print. Pg 47.

17. Francis Wyndham and David King, *Trotsky: A Documentary*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972. Print. Pg 196.

of conventional reality, prompting the epistemologically-challenging question: what does a man do after his time? Ives' use of comedy serves to negate this effect. Instead, he draws our attention to the relationship between being and time. In other words, he provides a heightened awareness of ontological being.

According to a historical account of Trotsky's death, a man named Jackson assaulted Trotsky with an ice pick, leading to his death in 1940. Yet, the manner of this deed has always been shrouded in ambiguity. However, with the exact details of Trotsky's death never revealed, much room is left for imaginative possibilities, and it is upon just this uncertainty that Ives forges his play, albeit in a light-hearted manner. There are some assumptions that are already made: by crafting the figure of Trotsky as one with a pickaxe already in the back of his head, Ives is going with the story that Trotsky was murdered by his gardener by a pickaxe in the most unlikely of circumstances, and that his fate has already been decided before the play begins. Indeed, there are many facets of *Trotsky* that pay attention to the ambiguities of time. After Trotsky's repeated emphasis exclamation ("forever... [a]nd forever and forever"), Mrs. Trotsky comes in with an encyclopedia and reads

"On August 20th, 1940, a Spanish Communist named Ramon Mercader smashed a mountain climber's axe into Trotsky's skull in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City. Trotsky dies the next day." (*Trotsky*, 55)

The presence of an encyclopedia, with its emphasis on specific dates and times, presents an interesting foil to the obvious disjunctive temporalities that are taking place on the stage. The audience cannot miss the axe sticking out of our protagonist's head, yet he is experiencing the uncanny feeling of hearing about an event that will happen in the future, only that it has already happened in the past. Chronologically, the sequence of events has already been conflated. The past becomes the present, the present becomes the future, whilst simultaneously, the future seems to be the becoming of the past.

Ives' attempt at comedy here is well-founded. As the audience laughs at the variations of Trotsky's death, we already know that he is going to die. Indeed, he is dead to begin with:

TROTSKY: Well. All right then. The twenty-first of August 1940. The day I'm going to die. Interesting. And to think that I've gone over so many twenty-firsts of August in my life, like a man walking over his own grave...

TROTSKY: So even an assassin can make the flowers grow. The gardener was false, and yet the garden that he tended was real. How was I to know he was my killer when I passed him every day? How was I to know that the man tending to nasturtiums would keep me from seeing what the weather will be like tomorrow? How was I to know I'd never get to see *Casablanca*, which wouldn't be made until 1942 and which I would have despised anyway? How was I to know I'd never get to know about the bomb, or the eighty thousand dead at Hiroshima? Or rock and roll, or Gorbachev, or the state of Israel? How was I supposed to know I'd be erased from the history books of my own land...?

MRS. TROTSKY: But reinstated, at least partially, someday.

TROTSKY: Sometime, for everyone, there's a room that you go into, and it's the room that you never leave. Or else you go out of a room and it's the last room that you'll *ever* leave. (*He looks around.*) This is my last room.

Like Stoppard's pair Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the audience's knowledge of Trotsky's death affects the way his words and actions are perceived. However, there is a major difference between the two plays that cannot be ignored. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths follow a fixed timeline. Trotsky's has already transcended the boundaries set by his supposed death, a single day which allows him to reflect and contemplate his past reasons for existence. As the audience realises that Ros and Guil are experiencing the last moments of

their lives, Trotsky is allowed the privilege of knowing—or remembering—that this is the last room he will ever leave. As Mrs Trotsky gently reminds him, his experiences at this very moment has already passed on:

MRS. TROTSKY: But you aren't even here, Leon.

TROTSKY: This desk, these books, that calendar...

MRS. TROTSKY: You're not even here, my love.

TROTSKY: The sunshine coming through the blinds...

MRS TROTSKY: That was yesterday. You're in a hospital, unconscious.

(*Trotsky*, 65)

This exchange reveals how reality in one's recollection can be easily mistaken for being authentic, even if the event has already taken place before. Within these variations on his death, it appears that Trotsky's supposed "last day" is merely an extension of his memories, taking place in his subconscious whilst his life slowly fades away. Whilst this makes a major difference in terms of an individual's separate states of consciousness, Ives' does not attempt to disguise the fact that there is precisely nothing to be done with more knowledge, whether it is of the actual event, or the memory of the event. Trotsky's sentimental lamentation does not change the fact that he is dead, and he will die a thousand more times, or as many times as this play is staged again. Ives' cleverly inserted line at the start ("or whatever year it happens to be right now") is a blatant reference to how people move on with time, regardless of how important an individual was during his period of existence. Thus, for every seven variations of Trotsky's play that is performed, there is an exponential increase with every year that Ives' work is still in production. The distance created by every additional year may not be felt immediately, but the accumulated effect begins to show, as the memory starts to fade away.

Mrs. Trotsky's response to her husband's comment about being erased from the history books is provoking on a few levels. Trotsky is reinstated in the history books, "at least

partially, someday,” and this statement’s attempt at comfort carries a message of futility. It is not supposed to convey any sense of consolation, and it will, in actuality, reflect worse on Trotsky if he does find any trace of reprieve. That he will be remembered “partially” suggests at best a fragmented image portrayed of him, which may not even provide the information or characteristics he feels best to be remembered by. And the word “someday” is even more ambiguous. It has no timeline for one to set any date, and it is a lie that resists condemnation or censure simply because it promises an event that will take place away from the present.

Ironically, Trotsky was the subject of such “erasure” in an important historical event. In a famous photograph taken at Petrograd in 1917, Lenin addresses the crowd at the podium, with Trotsky at his right. After Trotsky was removed, Stalin’s censors airbrushed him out of the picture altogether.¹⁸ The line in Ives’ play—“How was I supposed to know I’d be erased from the history books of my own land...?”—makes perfect sense now, reflecting how one is unable to control his fate, before and after death, much like how man is unable to control the passing of time. His narrative is subjected to the words of people associated with him, with a prime example coming from no other than his murderer himself, who claimed that “[i]t was Trotsky who destroyed [his] nature, [his] future and all [his] affections. [Trotsky] converted [him] into a man without a name, without country, into an instrument of Trotsky.”¹⁹ Whilst this account does not seem to tie in with our historical perception of Trotsky, there is no way of verifying otherwise. Thus, Trotsky’s story becomes less of an epistemological question, but rather a question of existence—of knowledge and being.

In other words, Ives’ *Trotsky* is a play on the artificiality of history, the unreliable nature of memory, and man’s inability to stop the passing of time. By placing a historical figure in this situation of ridicule, Ives recognises—and shares this recognition with the

18. Photograph referred to from “The Bolshevik Regime,” *Europe in the Twentieth Century* by Robert Owen Paxton and Julie Hessler.

19. Sayers, Michael and Albert E. Kahn. *The Great Conspiracy against Russia*. London: Collet’s Holdings Ltd, 1946. Pp 334-5.

audience—the unknowability, and ironically, the unchangeable nature of the past. A moment of significance, such as the event of Trotsky’s assassination, requires not only the fact itself, but also the perspectives involved in shaping its appearance. To further complicate matters, these perspectives are too reliant on memory, an unreliable entity in itself. Even the fictional character of Trotsky is hesitant in the recount of his own death. All that remains of his recollection are snippets of impressions, hardly the complete picture of an authentic historical event.

Trotsky’s moving, albeit unreliable conclusion, brings us back to the main motivation of this paper. For as with his predecessors and contemporaries in the field of absurdist theatre, Ives focuses on the cyclical nature of humanity, the lack of meaning behind our actions, and the unpredictability of life. Considering how the nature of time is contemplated and shown in *Sure Thing*, *Foreplay* and *Trotsky*, the lack of meaning behind one’s actions renders the passing of time meaningless, and the isolation experienced by man provides the subtle link to the tragic implications of such a perspective. As Emil Cioran’s aptly titled *On the Heights of Despair* surmises,

[t]he esthetic attitude toward life is characterized by contemplative passivity, randomly selecting everything that suits its subjectivity. The world is a stage, and man, the spectator, passively watches it. The conception of life as spectacle eliminates its tragic element as well as those antinomies which drag you like a whirlwind into the painful drama of the world. The esthetic experience, where each moment is a matter of impressions, can hardly surmise the great tensions inherent in the experience of the tragic, where each moment is a matter of destiny. (Cioran 31)

Without overplaying Cioran’s coincidental use of the “world as a stage,” this emphasised state of passivity accentuates the plight experienced by the characters of Ives’ plays—that of

man's inevitable state of isolation in his awareness of time. When decisions are have to be made in a constrained period of time, these "great tensions" arise from conflicts, both externally in terms of physical interactions, and in one's individual thought processes.

However, to say that viewing life as a spectacle "eliminates its tragic element" may be too wanton a claim to make. Rather, it is this "conception of life as a spectacle" that provides its strain of tragedy—the understanding that man has no control over his fate. The focus on the respective moments of destiny may be reduced to "a matter of impressions." However, these two expressions are not mutually exclusive. The very fact that each *kairic* moment can be reduced to a matter of impressions is in itself an inherently tragic phenomenon, simply because it trivialises one's past, present and future, the memories of the past as well as the purpose of life. This phenomenon has been displayed in each of Ives' plays. Ben finds himself alone in his self-conceived labyrinth of decisions, moving further and further into his web of delusion; Chuck and his future selves play their game of golf and sexual banter with different sets of partners, unable even at the end to escape the weariness of life and the inescapable fact that he is ultimately alone with himself; Trotsky's mangled history and his equally obvious impairment questions not only the actual chain of events, but whether one is ever able to bridge double temporalities of past and future. It is over time and in time that these facts are made apparent.

Indeed, this isolation experienced by man is not reflective of only of Ives' characters, but of Pirandello and Stoppard's as well. Pirandello's *Six Characters* come as a cast with the same narrative, yet they are clearly separated as individuals, each with his or her own agenda in their personal searches for their own *kairic* moments. As the Father makes his speeches, he may wax lyrical and philosophy about their plight as a family, but the fact remains that each Character has to deal with the passing of time in their own respective ways. In Stoppard's case, Ros and Guil are a pair in almost any sense of the word, and even though they are

sometimes—and abruptly—interrupted by the characters of *Hamlet*, they are essentially alone most of the time on stage, with long stretches of uninterrupted activity and dialogue sessions addressed to no one but themselves. More importantly, the existential plight of these characters reflect that of the common man, not the tragic hero in the mould of Oedipus the King. The common man's concerns about his existence are therefore universal, a common experience that is not restricted to a being of higher birth.

Assuming that man's tragedy may indeed be defined by his inability to prevent the passing of time, and the consequent deprivation of catharsis that comes with time's repetitive circularity, the only thing shared then, between the individual and tragic hero, is death. Death provides the means of an end, and more importantly, the point where the passing of time comes to a close. Making the reference to *Oedipus* as one of the greatest Tragedies of classical literature, Corrigan considers "the fact that our doomed need to die is the only means of regaining the spontaneity that life loses under the alienating, repressive systems created by intelligence" (26). If death—and the end of consciousness—is accepted as the only way to acquire one's freedom, time thus lives up to its reputation: as "the devourer of life, the mouth of hell at the previous moment, when the potential passes forever into the actual, or, in its ultimate horror, Macbeth's sense of it as simply one clock-tick after another" (Michel from Coffin 175).

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