

**TOM STOPPARD AND FERENC MOLNAR:
A COMPARISON OF ONOMASTICS**

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Tom Stoppard's hilarious play **Rough Crossing** was premiered in London in 1984. It had been freely adapted from Ferenc Molnár's classic farce **Játék a kastélyban** (literally 'Play at the Castle'). The original play was first produced in Budapest in 1925. Most likely Stoppard's adaptation is based on P. G. Wodehouse's English translation known as **The Play's the Thing** which premiered in 1926 at the Henry Miller Theatre in New York.

The plot concentrates on how two co-authors, a composer and the cast write, rehearse, and produce a successful play. The dramatic twist occurs when an amorous dialogue is overheard from the adjoining room by one of the authors and the composer who is in love with the actress. In order to avoid a fiasco, as well as unpleasant confrontation by the involved parties, the compromising scene gets cleverly incorporated into the plot as a "play rehearsal." This artful expedient of a play-within-a-play skillfully embellishes the otherwise almost banal plot.

The dialogue supposedly was inspired by an accident when the famous actress Lili Darvas (Molnár's third wife) and her tutor were rehearsing a love scene. The "confession of love" was overheard by Molnár in the presence of a friend who found the scene uncomfortably disturbing. Not so Molnár! He wove a plot around the incident which ultimately resulted in one of his best plays. In spite of the fact that the critics immediately claimed that it was not an original concept, **The Play's the Thing** – aside from **Liliom** – remains his most frequently performed play world-wide. Some critics have called it Pirandellian for its theme of reality and illusions. Molnár himself gave credit to Shakespeare by partially quoting the well-known wall passage by Pyramus and Thisbe from **A Midsummer Night's Dream** in the first act of the play. Stoppard, moreover, is asserted to have incorporated themes from Oscar Wilde's play **The Importance of Being Earnest** into his **Rough Crossing**.

Needless to say, many of Stoppard's plays have been launched like satellites out of other plays. In some of his adaptations Tom Stoppard sticks closely to the original scripts as in **Undiscovered Country** by Schnitzler, **On the Razzle** by Nestroy, or **Tango** by Mrozek. In other plays he masterfully interpolates scenes by changing names or characters as well as by putting different words or new actions into their roles. For instance, he nicknamed his play **Walk on the Water** as "The Flowering Death of a Cherry Salesman," thus acknowledging the influence of Robert Bolt and Arthur Miller. From an onomastics point of view it is important to point out that Stoppard even retained names in this adaptation; e.g., Arthur Miller's character named Linda reappears unchanged (Biggsby 8). Stoppard substantiates this belief by declaring that a writer's "first play tends to be the sum of all the plays he has seen before" which he emulates technically and admires ("Ambushes..." 3). Thus he clearly and without any scruples welds the borrowed with the new and by his very own intellectual process creates a new mold embellished with his very own Stoppardian stamp.

While Molnár's three-act farce takes place in a castle on the Italian Riviera where the cast is *en tournée*, Stoppard's two-act version happens on board the *SS Italian Castle* sailing between Southampton and New York. Their contrasting settings – steady land in comparison with frequently stormy sea – characterize the differences between the two versions. Their respective titles best illustrate this point.

After the premiere of **Rough Crossing** in London, Irving Wardle of the *Times* stated that "Stoppard has found a totally compatible source, matching his temperament at every point, except in irrepressible high spirits.... Around [a] slender central device, he weaves an increasingly amazing pattern of verbal

misunderstandings, eccentric character development, showbiz spectacle and sea-going hazards, all of which come to occupy equal importance in the plot" (8). Michael Ratcliffe, the drama critic of the *Observer*, happened not to share the same sentiment and labelled it an "atrocious play." Furthermore, he claimed that in spite of the fact that he admires Stoppard "it still comes as a shock to realize that he, too, can write a thoroughly duff play" (35). As a matter of fact, Ratcliffe did not have a high opinion of Molnár's original play either; he might have been influenced by the play's past history. In spite of Molnár's impressive world-wide fame, this piece never quite captured the London stage.

An onomastic investigation of the three versions reveals that the names are basically adhered to. The main protagonist, the playwright, is called Turai in all versions. Most likely the surname is derived from the toponym "tura" and is adorned with the customary "-i." Stoppard not only retains the surname but also adheres to Sándor, the Hungarian version of Alexander. Here the name literally refers to "the noble defender of man." Stoppard lavishly elaborates on the aristocratic meaning of this appropriate surname and hilariously connects the onoma Turai to an heirloom tray made of silver washed from the Upper Danube. A more scrutinizing examination of "tur" reveals that it is related to "dig up" or to "search" for something. Thus the name and the role of the playwright are welded into a central core around which the play rotates: a playwright who is "searching" for a successful play. Moreover, the Hungarian noun "túra" is equal to the English "tour" and quite appropriately stresses the significance of a cruise excursion. In summary, the protagonist's name and the title of the play are cleverly synchronized here. However, it has to be pointed out that Béla Kálmán, the authority on Hungarian onoma, states that the origin of the name Turai has not been convincingly established yet (142). For Stoppard *Rough Crossing*, the final title adroitly conveying a sense of the emotionally stressful "tour," must have been of great importance since in the concocted farce he throws about substitute titles imbued with the shades of Beckett: *The Cruise of the Dodo* and later *The Cruise of the Emu*.

In the original version the co-author's surname is Gal; Wodehouse changed it to Mansky, while Stoppard retained Gal. "Mansky" obviously alluded to the protagonist's manly characteristics, a point emphasized by the masculine ending "sky." The selection of identical first names (Sándor respectively Alexander) for Turai as well as for Gal emphasizes equality and mutual affinity bound by their profession as co-authors. This ingenious device compels the observance of the notion of "fighting with" but also of "defending" each others' reputations, as is customary among colleagues. By the way, rivalry between two writers is also the theme of *The Real Inspector Hound*, an earlier play written by Stoppard, in which two drama critics are trying to review a play.

Adam, the name of the composer in *Rough Crossing*, appears unchanged in all versions. He is the typical archetype to which every Eve—regardless of how many times she has been renamed during the course of history—is emotionally drawn. Molnár's Adam received the patronym (here as first name) Albert. This mixture of French and Old-High German onoma alludes to a "bright" and "noble" character and designates fittingly his role in the play.

The prima donna, the most important person of the love triangle, has been renamed by each adaptor. Molnár called her Annie Balogh, Wodehouse named her Ilona Szabo, and Stoppard refers to her as Natasha Navrátilova. Anna means "graceful" and it fits her role unobtrusively. However, the somewhat Germanized version of Annie elevates the name's status and thus accentuates the character's prominence as an actress. Balogh means "left handed" in Hungarian and cleverly suggests her double-faced personality. The well known proverbial phrase which advises the shrewd not to let the left hand know what the right hand does can be applied quite fittingly here. The actress more than willingly cooperates in camouflaging the infidelity dialogue which might dangerously vitiate her chances of regaining the composer's attentions.

Szabo was Wodehouse's choice for the surname of the actress, a common Hungarian onoma meaning "tailor," here referring to the notion of cutting but also of fitting pieces together. Ilona is the Hungarian

equivalent of Helen who, since ancient Greece, evokes the praise of loveliness as well as the shame of adultery, being at once goddess and whore. This name obviously suits the role best – thus even Stoppard takes it over and calls the leading female character in the play-within-the-play by the same name.

However, for the first choice, he renames the heroine Natasha Navrátilova. This not only updates the play but immediately adds a bouncing verbal impetus, a dazzling display of overt wit. Natasha denotes the rebirth of the play, a needed reincarnation of a somewhat limping revival. Navrátilova is first of all a contemporary name and is instantaneously associated with the famous tennis player whose games are watched by spell-bound audiences world-wide. Hence, this fashionable name *per se* evokes an image which hardly needs further elaboration. The famous tennis star is known for her rigorous training and for her numerous victories accomplished with relative assurance and ease. The above fits the heroine for **Rough Crossing**, too. She learns the rules of the love game fast, serves her interests well by shifting partners, and in the end, inspires the co-authors to end the play happily. But most of all Natasha Navrátilova gains back her lover without giving him a chance to beat her. Thus the play-within-the-play co-exists as an organic part unobtrusively implemented into a technically well constructed play. The end result is a theatrical masterpiece where parts are sustained by an entangled lever on which the central core of the plot is based. The inserted play becomes the buttress which delicately supports the harmonious structure of the plot. The original play incorporated ingenious wordplay as well as carefully chosen onomastic elements which provided a base that could itself endure for over sixty years and yet inspire Stoppard's contemporary adaptation.

Moreover, Stoppard elaborates in great detail on the correct pronunciation of the name Navrátilova and points out that the readers of the society pages give it an improper accent. This formal pronouncement of the correctly accented vowel gives away Stoppard's Slavic background. Stoppard was born in Zlin, Czechoslovakia, thus is of Czech origin. During World War II his family moved to Singapore, later to India, where his father was killed. His mother then married Kenneth Stoppard, a British Army major. After the war the family settled in Great Britain.

However, from an onomastics point of view, the fashionable Slavic name of the actress is of a much greater importance. Navrátil means to "return" and with the feminine suffix "-ova" emphasizes *via* her Christian name Natasha not only the "rebirth" of the play but also, through the choice of a cleverly matching surname, the "return" to her lover. This is a true double take in which Natasha Navrátilova literally bounces with Stoppardian wit from one lover to another and rejuvenates the somewhat anemic plot.

Perhaps it should be mentioned here that Stoppard uses conscientiously contemporary names in some of his other works, too. For instance, in **'M' is for Moon**, the name of Marilyn Monroe appears and within the frame of the play her beauty but also her loneliness are emphasized as both her striking characteristics. Stoppard is known for the necessity of appropriate naming. He has often said that the names of his characters must be right. For example, "if you're actually writing a play and somebody ought to be called Boot and is called Murgatroyd, it's impossible to continue" (Davidson 312). But so did Molnár! He believed in the lucky number seven and gave some of his plays seven-letter titles: **Marshal, The Wolf, Riviera, Olympia**, and so on (Halász 5:1). The name picked for the heroine of the first version of **Olympia** was Johanna. In spite of the magic seven letters, Molnár found the name insignificant and searched for quite a while before he came across the onoma Olympia which described to his satisfaction the character of an audacious, conceited, but also royal highness. He liked the name to such an extent that it constituted the title of this play of a modern goddess.

The actor, an unattractive character, is in the Stoppardian version called Ivor Fish. Although he was appreciated by the actress as her mentor, eventually as her lover during the early stage of her professional career, now at the peak of her professional accomplishments the stale love affair became a burden. She eagerly wishes to replace this middle-aged actor, a father of four children, an unfaithful husband of a

jealous wife, but most of all a hindrance to her career and happiness. Ivor is the unwanted “fish” caught on her hook. The prospect of marrying Adam, the talented and much younger composer, under whose mentorship her career could blossom again, is a strong motivation she cannot resist. Therefore, the fish must be let go!

In the Molnár version the leading actor is known by the surname Almady. He is described as a “duped buffoon instead of a flamboyant hero” (Györgyey 126). Almady is a common Hungarian name and can be associated with “alma,” meaning apple. The suffix “-y” points to nobility, a typical ending in the genealogy of the privileged Hungarian. Surnames such as Andrásy or Eszterházy (for instance, Haydn’s benefactor) apparently illustrate this onomastic analogy. The Almady family prides itself on being the owner of an estate of apple orchards.

From an onomastics point of view, Almady as a name gains utmost significance when clearly pitted against the cascade of a hilarious French spoof inserted into the play-within-the-play. The owner of a famous French orchard at Simarineux de la Pomme d’pi describes his family tree as follows: My name is Count Maurice du Veyrir de la Grande Contumace Saint Emilion. I have an estate in Pardubien-Grand-Amanoit and additional castles in Challenges-Debicourt de la Romanee and at Rivalieux-Quandamouzieres Sur Vantera-aux Alpes Maritimes. I am also the neighbor of the Marquis Jean Francois Gilette de la Grand Parmentier with whom I am riding from Dovernois Sur Saone to Saint Sulpice de la Grand Parmentiere. He married the daughter of Brigadier-General Pierre Jean Bourmond de la Seconde-Chaumiere-Rambouillet who fell at Grande-Lagruyere Sur Mane and whose family lived in the village of Saint Genevieve of Seine et Oise (Molnár 108-115).

This endless leprello of hilarious combination of French names is rapidly spoken on the Hungarian stage accentuated by a heavy accent, invoking a very effective scene of onomastics. Like Molnár, Stoppard too is known for his long searches for the right name for his characters (Davidson 312). The above spoof of French names undoubtedly testifies to his awareness of the power attributed to literary onomastics.

In order to tie in this outburst of French names, Molnár assigns the authorship of the inserted play to Sardou. It is known that the French dramatist was attacked for plagiarism, but also that he was able to defend himself successfully. A fate ironically and equally ascribed to Molnár as well as to Stoppard!

The Stoppardian version of the play partly does away with the humorous French names and replaces them with Anglo-Saxon variations. This particular scene indicates a strong influence of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Stoppard superimposes Wildian characters and plots into the inserted play of *Rough Crossing*. The handbag, a clue to identity, is replaced here with earrings which assist in untangling the intentional confusion of personalities. Sir Reginald Sackville-Stew (a sparkling allusion to a mix-up of plunder and looting encompassed in this onoma), whose daughter was kidnapped from her pram some twenty-nine years ago, gave emerald earrings to his wife as a parturition gift. This precious jewelry had once been worn by the Empress Josephine and supposedly belonged to Brigadier Jean-Francois Perigord de St. Emilion. Sir Reginald Sackville-Stew has joined the cruise ship *Dodo* under the name of Reggie Robinsod (an obvious reference to Robin Hood, an outlaw who “robbed” people), where his daughter, now named Ilona, as well as the famous jewelry, are discovered. It is disclosed that the earrings have been stolen by the famous jewelry thief Justin Deverell, the “merited thief” (in French “devers” refers to “in one’s possession”). Being “frank” about his dubious repute, Stoppard also addresses him as Frank in obvious imitation of a Wildian onomastic pun: Ernest being earnest. Wilde’s influence on Stoppard is not limited to *Rough Crossing*. It easily can be detected in, for example, *Travesties*, too.

The most colorful name belongs to Dvornicsek, an ostensibly absurd steward. Except for some minor orthographic variations (Molnár’s is spelled as Dvornicsek, in the Wodehouse version it appears in the Germanized variant Dwornitschek), his name is retained by all authors. Here again, we are dealing with a

Slavic onoma. It can be associated with “dvor” meaning “court” which also implies the characteristics of a polite, gallant, that is, courteous person. The professional trait is emphasized by the diminutive “-cek,” a common occurrence in the Czech language.

Dvornicheck indeed is the most typically old-fashioned Molnárian butler ever ready to serve champagne and cognac. His name denotes him most strikingly as the embodiment of his profession. The camouflaged onomastic attribute is even highlighted a bit more when Dvornicheck reveals that he comes from Podmokli. The analysis of this toponym discloses a compound construction. The prefix “pod-” means “under” or “below” and the adjective “mok(li)” refers to “beverage” or to “liquid,” to a faultlessly paired allusion enhancing his profession as a waiter.

The oddity of Dvornicheck as an onoma comes grossly to the surface *via* Turai who constantly forgets his name, and calls him Murphy. A perfect onoma for the inserted semi-detective story, Murphy is also a pejorative referring to a “dumb” person as comparable in slang to a “potato.”

Dvornicheck, not being pleased with this plebeian choice, vigorously reminds Turai that his name in its entirety indeed is of a noble character: Anthony St. John Placido Dvornicheck. Placid, needless to say, is self-explanatory. Indeed, no upheaval can disturb this simple-hearted, homely protagonist. His inability to cope with change is humorously illustrated. For instance, since Dvornicheck was accustomed to serve in castles rather than aboard an Italian liner, he constantly confuses parts of the ship and cannot remember to call things by their new names. He has to be reminded that the top deck is not called the roof of the ship, or that the hatch of the liner is not a trap door.

Mixing of names, playing with words, but particularly making of puns shows again the similarities between Molnár and Stoppard. This striking resemblance of technique can be observed throughout their oeuvres. It would be difficult to determine who surpasses whom. For instance, the choice of Sackville-Stew would testify in Stoppard's favor since this fitting name appears within the scene where the wicked person who stole the jewelry is revealed. On the other hand, Molnár's choice of Dvornicheck as courtier could hardly be excelled.

Technically speaking, the *Játék a kastélyban* can be considered the best play in Molnár's repertoire. Seemingly, it is only a boulevard play with a clichéd love-triangle entanglement. However, because of the cleverly inserted and totally integrated play-within-a-play, the curtain is lifted two-fold on the plot. It exposes, first of all, the basic technical elements of the playwright as a craftsman. Moreover, this practical approach is pitted against a philosophical play-within-a-play, an approximation stating that it is not always truth that makes an individual happy, but what he wants to accept as truth. Thus, the play concludes with an open ending, whereby the question of truth and falsehood remains unresolved. Did the overheard dialogue spoil the plot or was the play enhanced by it? Obviously, both playwrights were challenged by it, and their own interpretations assert its centrality.

Stoppard undoubtedly was intrigued by the inherent possibilities of the principle of ambivalence. Petty jealousies, domestic infidelities, entangled triangles are favorite components of most of his plays. *The Real Thing* should suffice as example. In conclusion, it can be stated that similar building blocks were used in *Rough Crossing* as well as in *The Play's the Thing*. Both plays show the failure of characters, their unhappy experiences, but also their successful self-reassessments. This denouement is supported by carefully chosen names which accurately characterize the protagonists to whom they belong. Dvornicheck remains throughout the play the courteous servant, while Navrátilova bounces back without the slightest mark of blemish. The design of both of the farces is complete; the loose ends are drawn together. A logical solution coupled with a rational explanation concludes the writing of the play as well as the pairing off of the actress with the composer. The anticipated tragedy ends as a pleasant comedy in the original as well as in the adapted version. However, Stoppard's cleverly placed chorus in the final scene points with witty eloquence

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towards the vicious circle of human entanglements. His explicitly stated open ending might even surpass the more clichéd Molnárían finale:

...
This way, that way, up or down,
We could go both ways.
Forwards, backwards, round and round,
...
So where do we go –
When do we go –
Darling I'm so ready to go –
So why don't we go from here? (Stoppard 76)

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