

***"It's not the Music, it's the Oxygen:"***

## **The Price of Freedom in Tom Stoppard's *Rock 'n' Roll***

*In Bohemia the situation is essentially different, and far better than in the West, because we live in an atmosphere of complete agreement: the first (official) culture doesn't want us, and we don't want anything to do with the first culture. This eliminates the temptation that for everyone, even the strongest artist, is the seed of destruction: the desire for recognition, success, winning prizes and titles, and last but not least, the material security which follows.*

—Ivan Martin Jirous,  
The Plastic People of the Universe

*When you reach Palodes, take care to proclaim that the great god Pan is dead.*

—Plutarch

Tom Stoppard's epic, sprawling masterpiece *Rock 'n' Roll* encompasses the tempestuous political upheavals of the late 20th century, spanning from 1968 to 1990, from Cambridge to Prague, from the dizzying promise of Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring and crushing disappointment of the subsequent Soviet occupation to the delirium of the Velvet Revolution and the rapid dissolution of the Eastern Bloc. Stoppard's characters wrestle with utopian world politics, the libidinal power of rock music, the rigor of the mind versus the betrayal of the body, the tension between theory and practice, and the numbing siren song of consumerism.

Stoppard tackles these themes and cataclysmic events through the lens of the personal. Jan, a Czech graduate student studying in Cambridge with famous Marxist scholar Max Morrow, rushes back home after Soviet tanks roll into his country. Max struggles with the difficulty of remaining a communist in the face of such brutality while also dealing with his wife Eleanor's breast cancer. Max however, lives in the world of theory and doesn't have to deal directly with the messy realities of repressive regimes. Jan, devoted to his love of rock music, hopes to remain apolitical, rejecting his friend Ferdinand's (a stand-in for Vaclav Havel) repeated attempts to engage him politically. But Jan finds that remaining disengaged is an impossibility in a totalitarian regime. To exist and breathe is to come under scrutiny and, as he is crushed under the weight of the dictatorship, Jan observes finally that "everything is dissident except shutting up and eating shit." He signs his name to the Charter 77, the foundation document of the Velvet Revolution.

The accompanying soundtrack of Pink Floyd and the Rolling Stones highlights the rapturous power of rock music. Rock represents joy and the human spirit that refuses to be crushed. Stoppard's combining rock music and intellectual political debate is thematically important for, as he once observed, "culture is politics." The personal is political, whether it's a man growing his hair long, a woman choosing not to shave her legs, or a band refusing to go commercial. These are political acts, reactions against the status quo. The legendary underground Czech rock band the Plastic People of the Universe, in their choice of music, attire, and attitude represented freedom, subversion, and powerful dissent by refusing all manner of compromise. For this courage they paid dearly, facing imprisonment and decades of harassment.

The play begins with Max's stoned 16-year-old daughter Esme, thinking she sees the Greek god Pan in her garden. It is not Pan, but it is not *not* Pan. It is Syd Barrett the legendary founding member of Pink Floyd. Barrett is a major figure and thematic thread in the play,

representing the inevitable loss of beauty, youth, and idealism. He is Pan, purity itself, unsullied by commercial concerns and unfettered by the constraints of mainstream society. Barrett's tale is tragic. He left the band in 1968 after a breakdown due in part to excessive drug use and a delicate mental state. Stoppard ties Barrett's fate to that of Communism's. Communism in theory is a beautiful idea, one that Max devotes his life to, despite evidence that the theory doesn't always fit the practice. In 1968 there is revolution in the air, globally young people look to Communism as the answer and Syd Barrett is a rock god, a glorious youth in his full beauty. In 1990 Communist ideals are in ashes and Barrett is fat, bald, damaged and diminished, hounded by tabloids and Pink Floyd pilgrims alike.

At the play's conclusion we have freedom. The Soviet Union has crumbled and Czechoslovakia is free from the yoke of a repressive dictatorship. However, this is Tom Stoppard and nothing is quite that simple. In place of the Dionysian fervency of the Plastic People of the Universe playing illegally we get the corporate sponsored Rolling Stones at Strahov. As Jan says, "life has become amazing." But as he and the Czechs enter "new times" and the anarchic libidinal impulses of art now have to contend with the more subtle repressions of a free market, a question unasked until now rears its impolite head: "Who will be rich, who will be famous?"

—Jennifer Madden

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## The Real Thing: Tom Stoppard

*"I really dig words more than I can speak them. There are no words to say how much I love [words]."*

—Tom Stoppard

Audiences expect the philosophically comic and densely cerebral from Tom Stoppard, rightfully considered one of the greatest living playwrights. His plays are known to require deep engagement from audiences but, despite their density of ideas, they are hardly cold intellectual treatises.

*Rock 'n' Roll* is Stoppard's most emotional, autobiographical work to date. Stoppard was born Tomáš Straussler in 1937 in Czechoslovakia and, like the play's protagonist Jan, fled the country with his family to escape the Nazis, eventually landing in England. Stoppard wrote *Rock 'n' Roll* for his good friend and countryman, the dissident playwright and former president of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel. He also wrote it in honor of his own Czech roots. Stoppard avoided the overtly political in his early work stating, "I must stop compromising my plays with this whiff of social application. They must be entirely untouched by any suspicion of usefulness." However he became highly politicized after a visit to the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc in 1977, and his later work examines the uneasy relationship between the individual and the state.



Stoppard has written numerous works for stage, television, film and radio. His other works include: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974), *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977), the trilogy *The Coast of Utopia* (2002), the screenplay for *Brazil* (1985), and the Oscar-winning screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).