

Friday, 3 June 2011
St George's House Annual Lecture
by Sir Tom Stoppard

SIR TOM STOPPARD: Your Royal Highnesses, Mr Dean, ladies and gentlemen, I am deeply aware of the honour done me by St George's House. I arrived knowing that it was indeed a very great honour and when I was shown where I was to stand and shown this hall, my sense of being honoured elevated itself by several degrees and I would like to just mention in passing that I have never stood in front of an audience in surroundings of such beauty and awesome grace. It is a honour to be here, thank you so much for asking me.

But as I do stand here with a page of notes, I might just mention that an agreeable improvement to the system might have been that the lady who types in things does it just before I say them, so I can just read them! I've brought, I don't know, four or five texts which I hope I will get to, and a sense of something I would like to talk about. In order to lay the ground for what I wish to talk about, I want to do two egocentric things first. The first of those is to tell you who I am. A little bit has been mentioned about me just now by the Dean and I would like to add to that.

I was born in 1937. I was born Tomáš Straussler in the Moravian part of Czechoslovakia. My parents and grandparents were born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and my family were secular Jews. By 1939 I was in Singapore having been removed from Czechoslovakia in the face of the looming Second World War and there were a number of places we might have gone to. We were taken to Singapore by my father's employers and that's where we were when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour and when the Japanese army came towards Singapore. My mother and brother and I were then put on a boat, which was supposedly heading for Australia, and we ended up in Bombay.

We were in Bombay, or rather in India, for the rest of the war. As the war proceeded, my father was killed in the Japanese war and, soon after the end of the war, my mother married a British Army officer who brought us to England in 1946.

Now, the point of my telling you this capsule biography may well have struck you. There is a point for me and it is this: that I have had a charmed life. I was whisked away in advance of the Nazis, whisked away in advance of the Japanese arriving in Singapore. I spent a very happy boyhood in India not getting bombed, and finally found myself in England instead of, as might easily have been the case, back in Czechoslovakia just in time to live the next 40 years of my life in a Communist state. A charmed life.

But that was only the overture to my good fortune, because by my early 20s I had written some sort of a play and by my middle 20s, because my needs were very modest, I was able to join that privileged class of citizens who were able to live, to make a living, by following their inclinations, more or less at the hours of their choosing. In other words, by writing a play or two I had become an artist. I'm now going to read you the first of my texts, which constitutes the second egocentric thing I must do now, which is to quote myself. Here is the quotation, with the assurance that it is not actually my plan to treat you to a sort of tasters' menu from my collected works.

"When I was at school on certain afternoons we all had to do what was called Labour - weeding, sweeping, sawing logs for the boiler room, that kind of thing, but if you had a chit

from Matron you were let off to spend the afternoon messing about in the Art Room. Labour or Art. And you've got a chit for life? Where did you get it? What is an artist? For every thousand people there's nine hundred doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good and one lucky bastard who's the artist."

Why are there artists? The first answer is not very interesting. Where there is a demand, there tends to be some kind of a supply. One might as well ask, why are there shoemakers or pastry cooks? But is, "Why are there artists?" really the same kind of question? It's pretty clear why people may want shoes or cakes; it doesn't seem to be clear in the same way why they want art. Art, we feel, involves the emotions, the intellect, the imagination, an aesthetic sense. And I would go further, I would say that in sum it involves being human. I could put that backwards: being human entails art. I could put it more bluntly: human society without art is nonsensical.

Now, you may think that this is a large claim to be made on behalf of the mountains of mediocrity and oceans of bilge which blight our lives under the general heading of "the arts", but that's not really how to think about it. One can't think about art in a piecemeal way. One could spend the rest of this evening picking on examples of art which really don't do anything of the kind. One has to actually go through the thought experiment of extracting from a society every evidence of the artistic impulse. And if we do make that thought experiment, and consider the result, what is there left? What is left is dystopia. So the question, "Why are there artists?" is not the same question as saying, "Why is there ballet, why is there stained glass, why is there sculpture?" It is a deeper question. It is, what is this impulse coming from? Where does it derive itself from? And to seek the origin of it is really as mysterious and problematical as seeking the deepest origins of religion, and may indeed be thought to be tantamount to the same thing. The ancient drawings on the walls of the Lascaux caves could not be truly thought of without anachronism as being, as it were, an aesthetic event: they were evidently for appeasement or apotheosis, a practical gesture of some kind. The convergence of those impulses appears to us now to have been coming from the same place and this is articulated a million times a year unconsciously by artists and indeed by their audiences.

Here is a text, a piece, concerning a Russian nineteenth century critic called Vissarion Belinsky. He was not an artist, and he says so in a moment, but he believed as passionately in the importance of art in a society as anything could be believed, and here is what he says at one point:

"I am not an artist. My play was no good. I am not a poet. A poem can't be written by an act of will. When the rest of us are trying our hardest to be present, a real poet goes absent. We can watch him in the moment of creation, there he sits with the pen in his hand, not moving. When it moves, we've missed it. Where did he go in that moment? The meaning of art lies in the answer to that question. If something true can be understood about art, something will be understood about liberty, too, and science and politics and history -- because everything in the universe is unfolding together with a purpose of which mine is a part. Every work of art is the breath of a single eternal idea. That's it. Forget the rest. Every work of art is the breath of a single eternal idea breathed by God into the inner life of the artist. That's where he went."

Well, that's pretty elevated stuff. It's making elevated claims and yet, elevated as they may

be, they are actually commonplace. They are not always articulated so carefully. I'm also going to mention a Russian poet called Joseph Brodsky who won the Nobel Prize for Literature I think in 1987 and he was exiled from the Soviet Union when he was a young man. He was born in 1940 and by the 60s he was world famous by virtue of being put on trial. A lot of people all over the world rallied to the cause of this young poet on trial. He was on trial because essentially he just dressed wrong and didn't have a job. When he was being interviewed by some policeman or authority in the course of his progress towards the courtroom, his cross-examiner said, "But what makes you a poet?" and Brodsky, rather taken aback said, "Oh, erm, well, I thought -- I think it was God".

This is not necessarily the statement of a theist, because I think, quite rightly - not that there is a right and wrong in this, but quite rightly - we identify, we sense the reality, of some kind of intersection between the known and the unknown and, among many other things, the product of artists. You have to call it something and I think "God" is a good name for it.

When he was given the Nobel Prize, in his speech on that occasion, one of the things Brodsky said was that aesthetics is the mother of ethics. This is really a clue to validation - or at least another way of approaching this rather unarticulated sense that art has got something to do with the supra-immaterial. The idea that art impinges on a moral order - more than that, the idea that art in some ways helps to define our moral order - is a very old idea and was old when it was articulated in English culture comparatively recently, rather more than a century ago, by John Ruskin and William Morris, for whom art was in a kind of fight to the death against the machine. For Brodsky, art was also involved in a fight against the machine but the machine was totalitarianism.

A totalitarian society is and has been in recent history, the updated version of, if you like, a debate which supposedly was first articulated by Plato. He called it the ancient quarrel between the philosopher and the poet. The point of all that was: who actually is supposed to supply the role models for an ideal society? As far as Plato was concerned, the last people to trust were the artists, the poets. The poet was banished from Plato's blueprint Republic. Other artists were allowed in, but they had to know their place in the pecking order. Plato hated the theatre. Well, naturally. There were perhaps 20,000 people in an arena getting their role models in a form which the blueprint didn't really approve of. Not merely theatre, but the oral tradition of Homer which was full of models that encouraged the wrong lessons. Theatre was full of villainy, buffoonery and exaggerated sentiment, and it was a kind of playground for the autonomous, and the idea of Plato's society was that there should be control and constraint.

This has always been foreground to our attempts to define and contribute to the kind of society we would consider to be ideal if not idealistic.

There's something about the question "Why is art?" or "What is art?" which is deeper than I could ever go. I can't, as it were, mentally find my way through to the end of that labyrinth, but I'm aware of things which appear, as it were, at the mouth of Plato's cave.

Perhaps the most moving narrative in art, when one uses the term in the narrower sense of the art which lives in an art gallery or on your wall, is the narrative which arrived at perspective. It took an enormously long time to declare itself. It took from Ptolemy to Copernicus. I want to know what does that mean? - that perspective arrived at the same time as the Copernican cosmos; at the same time as the beginnings of our real

understanding of the solar system. What does that mean? What does it mean that Cubism and Einsteinian physics, relativity, arrived together in the doorway of modernism. What I think it means is that art is not what we get into when we are not doing the day job; art is built in to our DNA.

Plato had no word for artist. "Technites" is a maker, a worker, a craftsman, somebody who makes things, and a poet was a person who made poems rather as a shoemaker made shoes. Virtue, which was the point and objective of the good life, didn't reside in art. Art was rather second best. Making a chair told you more about a chair than picturing a chair. Sitting in a chair told you more about a chair than picturing a chair. Being a painter of a chair was simply to be engaged in some kind of mimicry, which was some kind of second-class virtue.

We think the opposite, don't we? When we think of Van Gogh's chair, that is chairness. We think that a great artist can reveal more of the world than we see merely by looking in our usual, casual way.

Of course, even as a writer who is not the Van Gogh of letters, I like to think that although we have to dismiss most of what passes as art, nevertheless at the point to which it aspires -- Mozart, Shakespeare, Dante -- it comes from the same place and that place is entailed by our being human beings.

I don't know whether one should think of the artist anymore as being a seer. We live in a world where art is the concern of an Arts Council, and we think it's right and proper that local and central government should make sure there is a decent supply of artists. Yet, when we consider as it were the abstracted artist, we don't really think of the generality of artists, we think of the ruffian on the stair, the outsider, the maverick that doesn't fit, who therefore sees further, reaches further, dares further and, with good fortune and God's gift, brings us the summit of our aesthetic experiences.

Now, a text. It's the same speaker as before. It's a conversation between the Dadaist precursor of surrealism, a man called Tristan Tzara, and an English gent in Zurich in 1917. In fact one of the points the English gent makes at some juncture is that to be an artist at all is like living in Switzerland during the world war.

He says: "... and when you see the drawings he made on the walls of the cave, and the fingernail patterns he one day pressed into the clay of the cooking pot, *then* you say, My God, I am of these people! It's not the hunters and the warriors that put you on the first rung of the ladder to consecutive thought [and art]."

The English gent says: "Oh, yes it was. The hunter decorated the pot, the warrior scrawled the antelope on the wall, and the artist came home with the kill. All of a piece. The idea of the artist as a special kind of human being is art's greatest achievement, and it's a fake!"

Well, it is an achievement; a special kind of human being. Not for us the sawing of logs in the boiler room, not for us the manufacture of boilers, not for us the smelting of the iron, the trucking of the trees, the replanting of the trees; for us we are encouraged to express ourselves and to be rewarded and sometimes honoured for doing so, showered with awards, invitations to lecture - with dinner!

This isn't what the utopian vision of Karl Marx was. Marx's vision was that, in the society he hoped we would arrive at, a man would be a baker in the morning, a lawmaker in the afternoon and a poet in the evening. It's not how it has worked out. When Brodsky was being questioned by the judge in court, the judge at one point said, "What have you done for the Motherland?" and he said, "Well I've written my poems".

The Soviet Union was not in every respect a completely different society from the era which preceded it. There is a Russian - evidently - sense of where an artist fits into society and what he is worth and, as I said, the machine which Brodsky was fighting was indeed totalitarianism, but in that system artists were privileged. Brodsky wasn't, because he simply didn't want to be part of the system.

I think that our society, doesn't feel that way about art and artists. When Brodsky was exiled and living in America a woman who had visited him came back to Moscow and found there was an evening in a concert hall devoted to Joseph Brodsky. There was chaos outside the concert hall as people were hunting and begging for the odd spare ticket which might be available. She found herself being pushed on to the stage at some point because she had actually been with Brodsky in America and the audience was asking her, "So how does he live?" and she was saying, "Well, he is okay, he is sick, he smokes, he drinks coffee and there's no sugar in the house", and the audience were saying, "Oh my goodness, are the Americans not giving him sugar?" This is something we don't feel for artists in Anglo Saxon culture, and I think many Anglo Saxon artists would be slightly embarrassed by that. But nevertheless we do take our place in the general scheme of things and, in the general scheme of things, the artist is allowed an existence in which he can say, "Well that's what I do for this country, I paint pictures", or "I dance, I make models, I stain glass, that's what I do". There is a sense of privilege - and it is a privilege to find that artists have, without apology, a place that is made for them and seems to be an acknowledged and almost respected place. That's something which seems to have now emerged as being an unquestioned facet of how we choose to organise ourselves.

I myself am surprised by it almost once a week, perhaps because of the circumstances in which I myself emerged into the adult world. I'm still slightly insecure and puzzled by the way that artists, even somebody like myself, who doesn't presume to have any other expertise, are courted for opinion, like Trigorin in "The Seagull". Trigorin explains how harried his life is, because, as he says:

"I feel, because I am a writer, it's up to me to speak out about people's troubles and their fate and to have something to say about science and the rights of man ... So I speak out about everything. I rush around urged on from every side and people keep getting cross with me, so that I dash this way and that like a fox with the hounds on its trail. Ahead of me I can see science and the rights of man leaving me behind as I chase after them like some yokel missing a train and in the end I feel that landscape is the only thing I know how to write and in everything else I'm a fake. A fake to the marrow of my bones."

I find the last part of Trigorin's speech extremely moving because we all know it, we all recognise that: that the bit of you which is really trying to do your work as honestly as you can is the genuine part. The public part, which insists, because you've written these novels or you've painted these pictures, that you should have some comment on society as a whole, is a role which I think is thrust upon artists and is somewhat very often beyond the

scope of their natural gifts. I wish sometimes that I could be a kind of secret artist myself, because a lot of the public persona - well, "fake" is an unkind word, but the public persona is the response to a courtesy and in fact it's a courtesy, in response to a courtesy to make public pronouncements or to pontificate, or to give a view or an opinion in the world of politics or in the world of journalism.

I don't know that the character in my play was right when he said of the artist that this is art's greatest achievement and a fake. I think art's greatest achievement is actually in the world of gallery art, and it's an extraordinarily interesting one which I think created a revolution perhaps a century ago. What it did was, it changed the conversation between the artist and his public. (Her public also, it goes without saying, but you wouldn't want me to double de-clutch into "his or her" every time I come to a personal pronoun; forgive me.) It changed the relationship, it changed the conversation.

In art, as it had always been understood and which is central to my own sense of what it is. Here is Rembrandt and somebody enjoying his paintings, standing together and there are little speech bubbles over their heads. The conversation for eons was essentially that the artist is saying, "You can't do this. I can," and we have to assent. Even if it is not Rembrandt, we generally have to assent. That's not true anymore. There's another conversation and it's widespread and it goes like this. The chap says, "But I can do this, can't I?" and the artist says, "Yes, you can, but you didn't and I did".

I didn't intend that to be a form of condescension on my part, because it's true and what it is saying is that Plato's idea of "the person who has the skill to make the thing" has evolved or developed into a sense that actually *thought* is what makes art. I can understand - I didn't really wish to understand, but I've come to understand - that the notion of the artist having the thought and the craftsman bodying it forth, possibly in a factory, that's a version of the conversation between artist and public which has become more and more part of our lives. It's not that difficult to speak against it.

Plato wanted us to knuckle under, do what we are told and not go berserk, not present role models outside the constraints of the wise collective society. I think that Shelley's "unacknowledged legislator" - that's what he called the poet - meant that the legislator was not a man with an agenda, but a man in a trance, that one takes the terms of values not from collective wisdom but from the unique and deepest mystery of where art comes from.

When Duchamp exhibited a urinal around about the time of the First World War, with a sign saying it was called "The Fountain", or when Carl Andre, exhibited a stack of bricks in the Tate, this is the statement that was being made, wasn't it, "Yes, you can do this. But you didn't. I did". We are living with that art now and we will continue to live with it, I suppose, for the rest of this century. The text I want to read, and I'm almost out of time, but I want to read it, is this: "I couldn't be an artist anywhere", says the English gent, "I can do none of the things by which is meant art."

Tzara says: "Doing the things by which is meant art is no longer the concern of the proper artist. In fact it is frowned upon. Nowadays an artist is someone who makes art mean the things he does. He may be a poet by drawing words out of a hat. In fact, some of my best poems have been drawn out of my hat which I afterwards exhibited to general acclaim."

The gent says: "But that is simply to change the meaning of the word 'art'.

"I see I have made myself clear", says Tzara.

"So then you are not actually an artist at all?"

"On the contrary, I've just told you I am."

"But", says Henry Carr, "that does not make you an artist. An artist is someone who is gifted in some way that enables him to do something more or less well which can only be done badly or not at all by someone who is much less gifted. If there's any point in using language at all it is that a word is taken to stand for a particular fact or idea, not for other facts or ideas. I might claim to be able to fly, 'Lo, I say, I am flying'."

"But you are not propelling yourself about whilst suspended in the air", someone may reply.

"Oh no", I reply, "that is no longer considered the proper concern by people who fly. In fact nowadays a flier never leaves the ground and doesn't know how'."

"So when you are using the word 'fly' you are using it in a private sense?"

"I've made myself clear'."

The idea that we can, as it were, redefine the whole notion of what stands up as art is a century old, but on the other hand it is still something which is probably under suspicion in this chapel. I think that I myself tend to hold it in suspicion.

I said earlier that it was my good fortune to find myself in England. At the age of eight, I couldn't have said much about it then. But I can now. India prepared me, in a sense, for Cecil Rhodes's famous remark that being an Englishman was like drawing first prize in the lottery of life, and I was well aware by the time I had been at school here for a little while that here we are, with the Magna Carta and the mother of Parliaments, and I became aware of many things - the separation of the judiciary from the legislature, and all these things made me feel I had had a great stroke of good fortune. Furthermore I was very happy, and I think of the time now - not just my childhood, but the time between my arriving here and let's say 1960 - as a kind of lost domain of an England which somehow has been scattered to the winds while other winds are blowing through it.

When I called this talk "The Privilege of Artists" I didn't quite know what I was going to say, but I developed a sense which flows from everybody's thought that to be given a privilege entails owing a duty. I think that artists are privileged and they do have a duty and the duty is to try to keep true to this innermost impulse and not to corrupt it in what has become a rather different kind of England - well, the world has become a rather different kind of world. I don't know whether it was ever thus. I think that the lost domain, which I think about quite a lot, probably was a kind of illusion. Perhaps, human nature being what it is, society was ever thus. But I think that the artist does have a duty and he has a duty which you will probably pick up in something which I put it into the mouth of James Joyce:

"An artist is the magician put among men to gratify – capriciously – their urge for immortality. The temples are built and brought down around him, continuously and contiguously, from Troy to the fields of Flanders. If there is any meaning in any of it, it is in what survives as art, yes even in the celebration of tyrants, yes even in the celebration of nonentities. What now of the Trojan War if it had been passed over by the artist's touch? Dust. A forgotten expedition prompted by Greek merchants looking for new markets. A minor redistribution of broken pots. But it is we who stand enriched, by a tale of heroes, of a golden apple, a wooden horse, a face that launched a thousand ships –"

Although there is a lot of rubbish around, there's also art in our inheritance and indeed in

our present surround, which is as elevating and as moving as standing here in this inexpressibly beautiful place. I think that for myself, it is a lesson I will take away with me, and I go away strengthened by the experience of being here, I thought of it as being a time and a place where I would come at your invitation and, as it were, build up a bit of strength and spend it whilst I was among you. It pleases me greatly that, as I thank you for your attention, my sense is that I have gained strength from being here and trying to formulate my thoughts in this setting.

Thank you so much.