



# IS TOM STOPPARD'S *ARCADIA* THE GREATEST PLAY OF OUR AGE?

What will endure from the plays of the late 20th century? Already, the theatre that caused the greatest fuss at the time – the in-her-face shockers by Mark Ravenhill, Martin McDonagh and friends – look flashy and shallow and strangely dated; only Sarah Kane's psychological slashing seems to have survived from this flashing pack of playwrights. Yet one genre seems to have solidified as the decades pass into bona fide masterpieces, and will perhaps define that period: the play of ideas.

It looks now like the theatre from the 1980s and 1990s that tried to dramatise the great intellectual mudslides and forest fires of its time has thrived better than any other – from Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* to Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* to Terry Johnson's *Insignificance*. Using the old theatrical forms of the comedy or the thriller, they ask the most profound questions – what is human life for, and how it should be lived? Standing above them all, making the case for the entire genre, is perhaps the greatest play of its time: *Arcadia* by Tom Stoppard.

The stale cliché about Stoppard – and about this genre – is that he is a brilliant manipulator of ideas, but with no heart. Yet here – at the core of his best play – is the greatest love story on the British stage for decades. Yes, the characters bond over ideas – but some of the most interesting people in life do just that.

That would be enough to make *Arcadia* a masterpiece – but it is even more than that. The play stirs the most basic and profound questions humans can ask. How should we live with the knowledge that extinction is certain – not just of ourselves, but of our species?

The play suggests that we are forever re-enacting the patterns of the past with mild variations – or, in other words, that the human heart beats to an iterated algorithm. Thomasina's distant relatives echo her lines through time, with a word misplaced. When Thomasina weeps for the destruction of the library of Alexandria and all the lost plays of the Athenians, Septimus says: "You should no more grieve for [them] than for a buckle from your first shoe, or for your lesson book which shall be lost when you are old. We shed as we pick up, like travellers who must carry everything in our arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind. The procession is very long and life is very short. But there is nothing outside the march so nothing can be lost."

The play is both a vindication of this speech, and a repudiation of it. Thomasina's notebooks are picked up again by Hannah – but what about when the march ends? In our time, science suggests a threat to our ability to survive far more imminent than the frozen universe implied in the Second Law of Thermodynamics: our "heat death" could come under a blanket of our own warming gases. *Arcadia* asks, in part, how do you live with the certain knowledge of extinction – not just you, but your species'?

This is an excerpt from an article by Johann Hari published in *The Independent UK* on 22 May 2009.