



**TOM STOPPARD'S *ARCADIA*:  
IT'S COMPLICATED**

*"It's like a dream of levitation: you're instantaneously aloft, soaring, banking, doing loop-the-loops and then, when you think you're about to plummet to earth, swooping to a gentle touchdown of not easily described sweetness and sorrow. That's the play."*

*-Vincent Canby, NY Times March 31, 1995*

**FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

Frankly, I should have trusted my past experiences with Stoppard, having seen and loved quite good productions of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *The Real Thing*. I was concerned, however, as I began reading *Arcadia* the first time, that Mr. Stoppard may have decided upon an intellectually inaccessible (to the average mind, anyway) path that had been lauded with praise more because it was incomprehensible, and those who critiqued it did not want to seem unintelligent. I had experienced this before, in 1991 at the Dallas Theater Center, when recent Yale School of Drama graduate Richard Hamburger directed John Robin Baitz's *The Substance of Fire* for his "audition" piece as he vied for selection as DTC's new Artistic Director after the untimely death of AD Ken Bryant.

A play about a publishing house that has historically chosen works of intellect and importance over "popular" works for publication, and the subsequent familial riffs that arise when the house is financially strapped, *The Substance of Fire* could have worked. However, playwright Baitz chose to prove his intellectual prowess by dropping the names of author after author, book title after book title, in an ever increasingly obscure web of publication history,

and with such frequency that any dramatic tension was lost. I found the play to be mediocre at best, and Hamburger's production banal. However, in a wave of what I considered to be "emperor's new clothes"-type praise, the play was trumpeted by the Dallas elite, and since many of those elite were on the DTC board, Hamburger was selected as the new Artistic Director, plunging the Dallas Theater Center, and the Dallas theater scene in general, into fifteen years of mediocrity. (As a side note, after realizing Hamburger had driven the finances and reputation of the DTC into the ground, the board of directors finally fired him, then once again tapped the [proven?] reservoir of Yale and hired the equally inept Kevin Moriarty as AD...but that's for another discussion.)

This digression has a point. There is a reason that Tom Stoppard is considered one of the world's preeminent playwrights, and John Robin Baitz is not. Stoppard consistently manages to tackle his chosen dramatic issue(s) with high levels of intelligence, while couching them in an accessible structure, typically comedic, played out by accessible characters. With *Arcadia*, Stoppard has perfected his craft. *Arcadia* is delightfully funny, and intellectually engaging in both a simple, explanatory way, and in a complex theoretical manner that appeals to the average and the enlightened mind alike.

*Arcadia* deals with chaos theory, determinism, Newtonian laws of physics, laws of thermodynamics, fractal geometry, structuralist versus deconstructionist approaches to history, and Romanticism versus Classicism; heady subjects for even the intellectual elite. At first pass, it is easy to understand why critics and academics have latched on to Stoppard's exploration of these topics in *Arcadia* as the play's primary function. However, upon closer examination of the play's text, I propose that Stoppard uses these intellectual pursuits to frame a broader

commentary on the reasoning behind, and the absolute need for, the paradigm shift that has occurred in the last quarter century away from a structured, deterministic view of human existence, toward a chaotic, deconstructed view.

### **Terminology**

*Chaos Theory* - In mechanics and mathematics, the study of apparently random or unpredictable behavior in systems governed by deterministic laws. A more accurate term, “deterministic chaos,” suggests a paradox because it connects two notions that are familiar and commonly regarded as incompatible. The first is that of randomness or unpredictability... it was commonly believed that the world is unpredictable because it is complicated. The second notion is that of deterministic motion, as that of a pendulum or a planet, which has been accepted since the time of Isaac Newton as exemplifying the success of science in rendering predictable that which is initially complex. In recent decades, however, a diversity of systems have been studied that behave unpredictably despite their seeming simplicity and the fact that the forces involved are governed by well-understood physical laws. The common element in these systems is a very high degree of sensitivity to initial conditions and to the way in which they are set in motion. (“Chaos Theory” 1)

*Determinism* - In philosophy, the theory that all events, including moral choices, are completely determined by previously existing causes that preclude free will and the possibility that humans could have acted otherwise. The theory holds that the universe is utterly rational because complete knowledge of any given situation assures that unerring knowledge of its future is also possible. (“Determinism” 1)

*Thermodynamics* - Thermodynamics is the science of the relationship between heat, work, temperature, and energy. In broad terms, thermodynamics deals with the transfer of energy from one place to another and from one form to another. The key concept is that heat is a form of energy corresponding to a definite amount of mechanical work. (“Thermodynamics” 1)

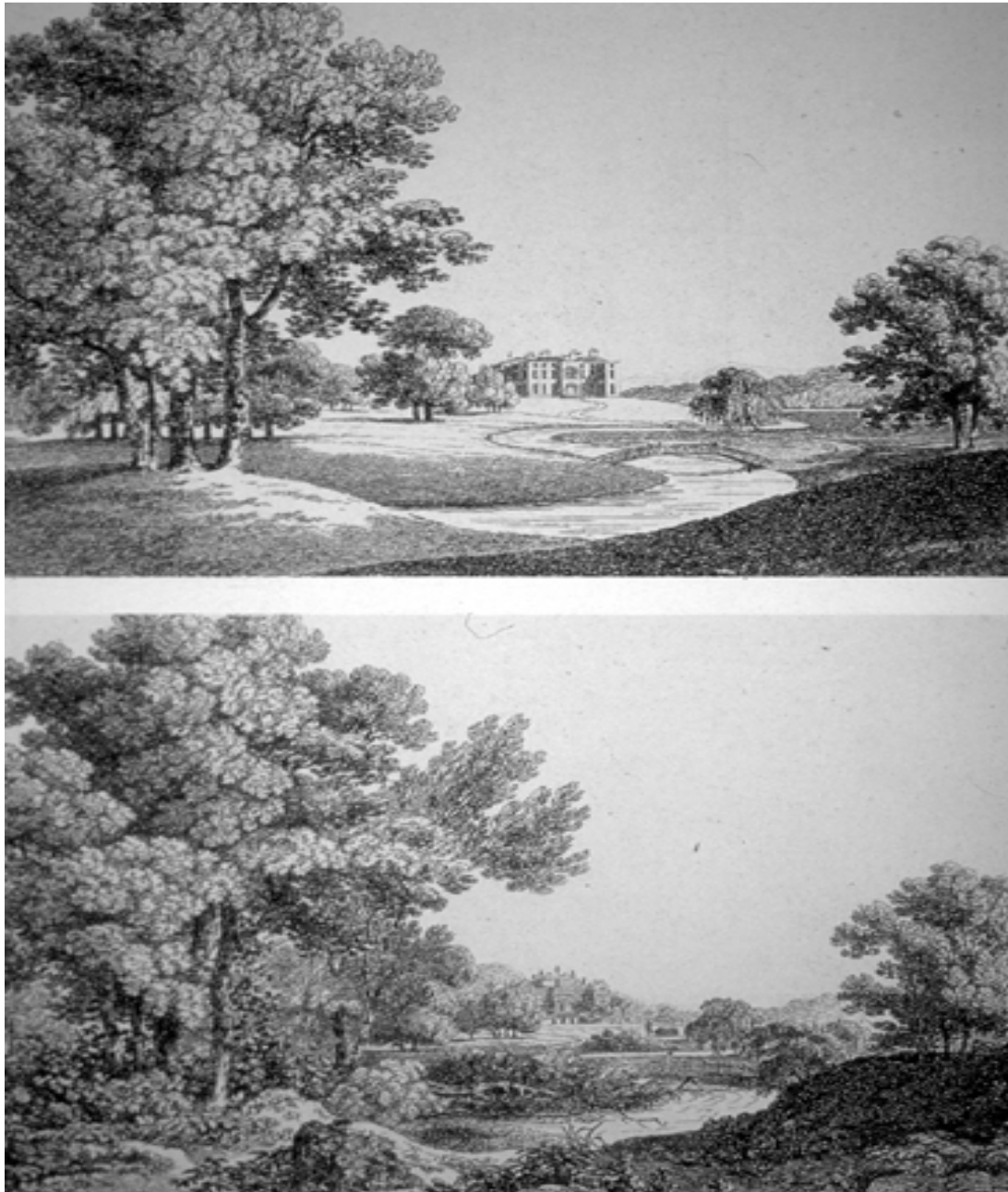
*Fractal Geometry* - A Fractal is a mathematical object or quantity that displays self-similarity on all scales; each is a reduced size copy of the whole. Though its roots trace back to the late 19th century, fractal geometry was formulated in 1975 by French mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot. (“Fractal Geometry” 1)

### **The setting**

*Arcadia* takes place in a room overlooking the garden of the country estate of the Croom family in Derbyshire, England. The action alternates between two time periods: April of 1809 and the present. In the last scene of the play the periods blend together, with characters from both times occupying the stage at the same time. Gardening and landscaping play an important role in the play, both as plot devices and as supporting material for the general question of chaos versus order. The first scene of the play, in 1809, depicts an argument typical to the time period: whether to maintain a good, orderly English garden, or to succumb to the burgeoning fashion of the time and institute a picturesque style garden, with its chaotic, nature-rules approach. Plot-wise, this argument sets up the characters of the present, as they are investigating the history of the estate’s garden and the owner’s 1809 decision to choose fashion over preference.

This background of garden, landscaping and earthiness conjures an interior to the room that should reflect the same, with dark, earthy tones and a sense of being grounded. The

setting does not change at all from past to present, indicating a juxtaposing of things perpetual against the randomness that the theory of chaos by nature imposes. The play's characters also support this juxtaposition, as not only has the estate survived the ravages of time, but the same family has owned it. Brilliant young Thomasina and her flippant brother Augustus occupy the past, while brilliant young Valentine and his flippant sister Chloe occupy the present.



*The orderly English garden (top) converted to a picturesque style where nature rules. ("Picturesque" 1)*

## PRODUCTIONS OF *ARCADIA*

*Arcadia* was first produced on the Lyttleton stage at the National Theatre, South Bank, London on April 13, 1993. Directed by Trevor Nunn, the production received solid reviews (see Appendix A) and shortly after moved to the Haymarket Theater for a two year run. In March of 1995 *Arcadia* was produced on Broadway at the Lincoln Center Theater, also directed by Trevor Nunn, and thus with quite similar production values as the London production. The play received rave reviews, while the production was found somewhat lacking, particularly in the inability of the cast to maintain a sense of ensemble.

Stoppard's writing of *Arcadia* in the late 1980s/early 1990's was not coincidental. From Jaques Derrida questioning the validity of the structuralist approach to language beginning in the late 1960s, to 1987's *Chaos: Making a New Science* by James Gleick, a paradigm shift away from structuralism was firmly taking root, and Stoppard was participating. In fact a 1989 article in *Vanity Fair* magazine mentioned that Stoppard had just finished reading Gleick's book, and felt that chaos theory would seed a new play (Schiff, 212).

While *Arcadia* did not necessarily break new ground for Stoppard in regards to subject matter (he also mused on scientific and intellectual topics in the less successful *Hapgood*, 1988), the play did mark a departure from the literary device of re-processing old, well known texts that Stoppard had employed in many of his best known works: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (Hamlet)*, *The Real Inspector Hound (Mousetrap)*, *Travesties (The Importance of Being Earnest)*, and *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth (Hamlet and Macbeth)* all used this device.

Stoppard also learned from his mistakes in *Hapgood* by making the scientific concepts in *Arcadia* more accessible via a correlation with the more easily understood comparison of Classicism to Romanticism: “Classicism metaphorically corresponds to Newtonian science and Romanticism to deterministic chaos. In the play, these artistic movements are embodied in the landscape gardening of the Croom family home....These gardens, like the scientific paradigms they parallel, offer competing views for what is the ‘true’ nature of the world” (Fleming 197-198).

*Arcadia* was revived in London at the Duke of York’s Theatre on May 27, 2009. Directed by David Leveaux, the production again received positive notices, in fact “it was difficult to find a dissenter amid a raft of four star ratings, and the praise wasn't just limited to the writing” (“Review Roundup” 1). *Arcadia* is currently running on Broadway at the Ethyl Barrymore Theater, having opened March 17, 2011. The production was also directed by David Leveaux and received good reviews, particularly in regards to a longstanding critique that Stoppard’s work, while intellectually engaging, lacks emotion. As New York Times critic Ben Brantley stated, “Though this play finds Mr. Stoppard at his most luxuriantly wordy, it is not hot air of which I speak. Watching David Leveaux’s production I realized more than ever that ‘Arcadia,’ a tale of two centuries in pseudopastoral England, is propelled by genuine, panting passion” (Brantley 1).

Though less than twenty years between major productions, the critical reception of *Arcadia* is indicative of its relevance to today’s audiences, and it is arguable that Stoppard has infused the play with an appeal that will make it universal for a long time to come.

## THE PLAYWRIGHT



*Tom Stoppard (Fleming cover)*

Tom Stoppard “went from a one-time writer of propagandistic radio soap operas to being hailed as one of the finest English-speaking writers of our stage” (Fleming 10). His second full length play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, was produced in 1967 by the National Theatre and was an instant success. Stoppard was not, however, the prototypical overnight success. He spent several years as a reporter, first with the *Western Daily Press* and then for the *Bristol Evening World*, where he wrote articles and reviews about film and theatre. His friendship with a then-relatively unknown Peter O’Toole, and O’Toole’s performances in *Hamlet* and *Look Back in Anger*, spurred Stoppard to “forsake journalism to pursue a career in playwriting” (Fleming 11). This was in July, 1960.

Stoppard met with little initial success as a playwright (one play, *A Walk on the Water*, was optioned but never produced), and he was down to his last dime in 1963 when he wrote a fifteen minute radio play titled *The Dissolution of Dominic Boot*, which was produced by the BBC and launched a brief but important period of writing radio plays. The short format of these plays spawned for Stoppard “three fundamental artistic principles: (1) everything should count, nothing should be arbitrary; (2) plays should have artistic unity, with no unnecessary digressions; and (3) plays should have a point; presenting too many random bits or treating



everything as having the same significance only diminishes the play's intended impact" (Fleming 13).

Stoppard stuck to these principles, and with continued but low-paying employment writing for radio, he was able to work on his theatrical plays. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was optioned, but never produced, by The Royal Shakespeare Company, and ended up in the hands of an amateur company called the Oxford Theatre Group. It was produced at the Edinburgh Festival in the summer of 1966, and was mostly panned, save for one reviewer: "Ronald Brylen, writing in *The Observer*, described the play as an 'erudite comedy, punning, far-fetched, leaping from depth to dizziness....It's the most brilliant debut by a young playwright since John Arden's'" (Fleming 44). As it happened, the Literary Manager for The National Theatre read the review, and requested a copy of the script...and the rest, as they say, is history.

Of Stoppard's nine major theatrical releases, only two – *Indian Ink* and *Hapgood* – have not won one of London's Best New Play awards (Fleming 1). He has also won five Tony awards and an Oscar for *Shakespeare in Love*, which received the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1998. Renowned as "a master of words, ideas and entertainment alike, Stoppard writes history and theory into theater of possibility—drawing 'style from the chaos' of facts and philosophy" (McGerr 54).

Stoppard never attended college, a fact belied by the level of intellect in his plays, which have run the gamut of topics and themes:

Questions about the social responsibilities of the artist, journalist, and politician appear in plays that examine the role and nature of art, the relative merits of a free press, and the injustices and human rights violations of preperestroika

Eastern Bloc politics. He has explored the nature of love and the requirements of intimate human relationships. He has considered the effects of colonialism as seen through a conflict of cultures and aesthetics. Interwoven through many of these plays are the recurrent issues of the nature of personal identity as well as the unreliability or variability of human memory and perspective. Cumulatively, Stoppard's work has been concerned with the social, moral, metaphysical, and personal condition of being human in an uncertain world. (Fleming 2)

*Arcadia* is arguably Stoppard's best play, a culmination of years of exploration into all that comprises human existence.

### **ANALYSIS OF *ARCADIA***

As mentioned previously, a strength of Stoppard's is his ability to couch topics of high intellect within an accessible framework, one that invariably utilizes comedy. Before introducing its thematic elements of order versus chaos, the language of mathematics, etc., Stoppard makes his audience laugh:

THOMASINA: Septimus, what is carnal embrace?

SEPTIMUS: Carnal embrace is the practice of throwing one's arms around a side of beef.

And so begins *Arcadia*. Stoppard keeps his comedic sensibilities intact throughout the play, even when dealing with emotional issues.

Though he uses a familiar comedic framework, *Arcadia's* dramatic structure is less common, and reflects the theory of deterministic chaos at its core: "Deterministic chaos is grounded in nonlinear mathematics, and appropriately Stoppard constructs *Arcadia* in a nonlinear manner—the scenes alternate between the early 1800s and the present" (Fleming 195). This hodgepodge of scenes, three in the past, three in the present, and one (the last)

chaotically mixing past and present, suggests disorder. And yet, similar to systems of chaos in the physical world, “there are a series of bifurcations and even within the chaotic region there are pockets of order; and so overall, this nonlinear play exhibits a fine, underlying structure” (Fleming 195).

Thirteen year old Thomasina’s questions regarding carnal embrace are the result of her overhearing the manservant Jellaby telling the cook that Mrs. Chater, a visiting friend, was seen engaging in carnal embrace in the gazebo. Septimus, Thomasina’s tutor, turns out to be the man with whom Mrs. Chater was carnally embracing, resulting in a challenge to duel issued to Septimus by Mr. Chater, an aspiring poet, for Mrs. Chater’s honor. This cacophony of characters and plot points exemplifies Stoppard’s mastery of intricate plots.

Mixed in with this sexual intrigue are Thomasina’s simple yet brilliant observations about the physical universe and the failings of current mathematical theory to properly describe it. She ventures her own theories to do so more aptly:

THOMASINA: You did not like my discovery?

SEPTIMUS: A fancy is not a discovery.

THOMASINA: A gibe is not a rebuttal...I think it is an excellent discovery. Each week I plot your equations dot for dot,  $x$ s against  $y$ s in all manner of algebraical relation, and every week they draw themselves as commonplace geometry, as if the world of forms were nothing but arcs and angles. God’s truth, Septimus, if there is an equation for a curve like a bell, there must be an equation for one like a bluebell, and if a bluebell, why not a rose? Do we believe nature is written in numbers?

SEPTIMUS: Yes.

THOMASINA: Then why do your equations only describe the shapes of manufacture?

SEPTIMUS: I do not know.

THOMASINA: Armed thus, God could only make a cabinet.

SEPTIMUS: He has mastery of equations which lead into infinities where we cannot follow.

THOMASINA: What a faint-heart! We must work outward from the middle of the maze. We will start with something simple. *(She picks up the apple leaf.)* I will plot this leaf and deduce its equation. You will be famous for being my tutor when Lord Byron is dead and forgotten.

It is here that Stoppard introduces the notion of fractal geometry, and by extension the theory of deterministic chaos. He then links past and present, for while Thomasina “discovers” a new math in 1809, her long-distant cousin Valentine uses the iterative process of fractal geometry in his present studies of population changes in biology.

In the present, Valentine and his sister Chloe play host to Hannah, a historian who is writing a book on the history of the Croom estate’s garden, Sidley Park. Enter Bernard Nightingale, a brash historian desperately searching for that breakthrough that will set him apart and bring him fame, at least among his peers. As Bernard and Hannah discuss their separate endeavors, they realize that each has information and sources that could be helpful to the other, and reluctantly agree to work together.

In this case, two heads are not necessarily better than one, as Stoppard uses their search through primary sources (hand written notes, quartos, game books, Thomasina’s math primers), and the consistently mistaken conclusions to which they arrive as commentary on the structuralist approach to history. The structuralist historian examines the past and, based on his interpretation of the evidence, creates a master historical narrative that, due to the historian’s “expertise,” is to be accepted by laymen as veridical.

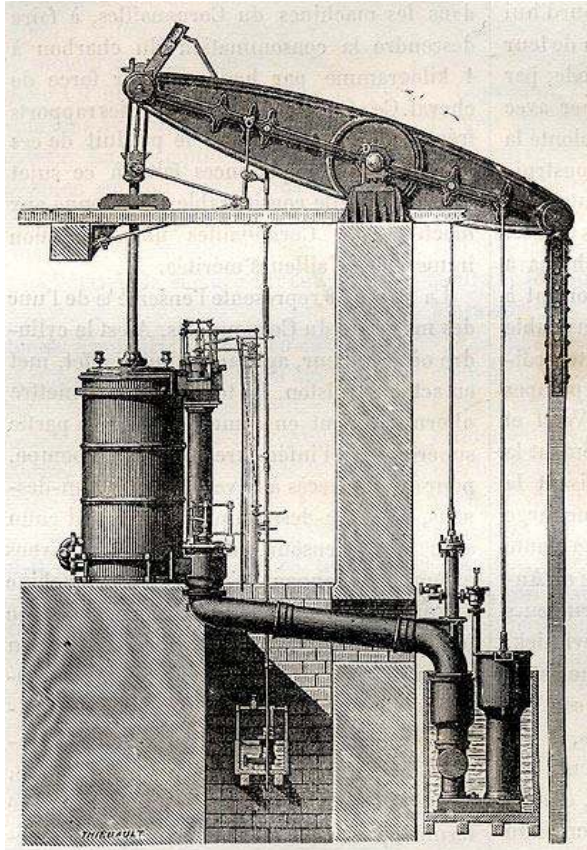
The issue with this approach, as evidenced by Hannah's and most particularly Bernard's misinterpretations, is that humans are humans, and thus subject to human frailties, which in Bernard's case takes the form of a myopic desire to prove that the poet Lord Byron (a college chum of Septimus and present, though never onstage, at Sidley Park in 1809) killed Mr. Chater in a duel over Mrs. Chater. Through his myopia he allows the evidence to lead him only where he wants it to, with complete disregard for other possibilities: "he makes the mistake of starting with a desired conclusion, and only seeks information that will make his line of reasoning sufficiently logical. Bernard's unerring faith in his theory makes the lack of convincing evidence immaterial; he is determined to prove his theory whether it is true or not" (Fleming 202).

Lord Byron's sudden departure from England after Mr. Chater disappears from all record; hand written notes indicating an affair lodged in a copy of Mr. Chater's book of poetry found in Lord Byron's possession; Lord Byron's propensity for such extra-marital dalliances, all lead Bernard to his grand conclusion, the primary source discovery that will cement his place as a master historian. Unfortunately, he is wrong.

The brilliance of Stoppard's structure allows the audience to observe first-hand the egregious mistakes Bernard makes, as each time he posits an interpretation of past events, the actual events themselves play out and his miscalculations are affirmed. As one can imagine, this structure also lends itself to Stoppard's mastery of wit, as the audience delights in the brash Bernard being taken down a peg.

Thomasina's brilliance seems to know no bounds, for even while toiling over hand-written iterations of the algorithm that she is convinced will produce the apple leaf, she identifies the second law of thermodynamics by simply observing the huff-and-puff of the

steam engine employed to dig up the garden for its conversion from classic order to romantic picturesque:



*Trevethick's 1800 High-Powered Steam Engine*

SEPTIMUS: Why does it mean Mr. Noake's engine pays eleven pence in the shilling? Where does he say it?

THOMASINA: Nowhere. I noticed it by the way. I cannot remember now.

SEPTIMUS: Nor is he interested in determinism-

THOMASINA: Oh....yes. Newton's equations go forwards and backwards, they do not care which way. But the heat equation cares very much, it goes only one way. That is the reason Mr. Noake's engine cannot give the power to drive Mr. Noake's engine.

As Thomasina's discoveries mount, the audience cannot help but wonder, if this thirteen year old girl was talking thermodynamics and fractal geometry in 1809, why did these physical and mathematical concepts not emerge until much later? This is where Stoppard makes his finest point regarding deterministic chaos and the human condition. As Hannah digs for evidence that will disprove Bernard's Lord Byron theory, she happens upon a simple, universe altering bit of information: Thomasina died in a fire the night before her seventeenth birthday. This sent Septimus, who was beginning to understand the depth of his love for Thomasina, into seclusion as a hermit in the newly picturesque garden. There he lived the rest of his days

attempting to complete Thomasina's iterative algorithm to form the apple leaf, resulting in millions of equations scribbled on reams of paper which, uncomprehended, were burned upon his death.

Deterministic chaos relies upon variations that "are partly due to 'the butterfly effect,' a term that means dynamic systems have a sensitive dependence on initial conditions; minor alterations in input (for example, rounding .506127 to .506) can cause major variations in outcome" (Fleming 193). Stoppard uses the butterfly effect to both exemplify the presence of deterministic chaos in the world, and to show that the human condition, love and joy and heartbreak, are not immune to the laws of nature.

From an emotional standpoint, the death of brilliant, delightful Thomasina could never be considered a "minor alteration," particularly to those who knew and loved her. But on the grand scale of the universe, her death indeed reflected just such a minor offset in initial conditions, the result being that the highly complicated mathematical theories she found so simply observable would remain buried in nature for another 180 years.

Stoppard uses multiple opposites, first to illustrate the senselessness of attempting to place regimented order on such an unordered system (a task the structuralists attempted for centuries), then to show that nature already provides a system of order, ironically in its opposite of chaos. Thus, "by the end of the play all the major dichotomies— classical /romantic, Newtonian/chaotic, order/disorder, intuition/logic, heart/mind— have interpenetrated each other, showing that the coexistence and interdependency of these seeming opposites is fundamental to the way the world, life, and humans operate" (Fleming 206).

## INTERPRETATION OF *ARCADIA*

*“Einstein refused to believe in the reality of quantum mechanics. Yet it seems that the uncertainty principle is a fundamental feature of the universe we live in. A successful unified theory must, therefore, necessarily incorporate this principle.”*

*-Stephen Hawking, Briefer History of Time*

Much of the study of *Arcadia* has centered on Stoppard’s inclusion of high-intellect subject matter such as chaos theory, fractal geometry and thermodynamics in a witty, poignant examination of relationships and history. While the studies acknowledge that it was a stroke of genius for Stoppard to compare love and life to these physical forces of nature, few have broadened their scope to include the impetus for such an inclusion. While any interpretive analysis of *Arcadia* would do well to concentrate on chaos theory, fractal geometry, thermodynamics, and history, and how these disparate aspects of science relate to the spiritual and emotional choices we make as humans, equally important is an examination of the state of the scientific and academic worlds which yielded these major changes in thought. For it is the impetus behind these changes, and Stoppard’s understanding of why these changes took place, that lend *Arcadia* a sense of universality.

When Stoppard wrote *Arcadia* in the early 1990s, a poststructuralist world view was taking a firm hold on thought, particularly in science, linguistics, and history. Mathematics and physics led the charge against structuralism, first in theorizing, then proving that the world exists not in the state of stability structuralism imposed on it, but in a much more constant state of flux. Newtonian equations were helpful (and got things started), but only for part of the story. Words became meaningless outside of a context as semiotics overtook linguistics as the most comprehensive system of achieving meaning. And as it so happened, these deep



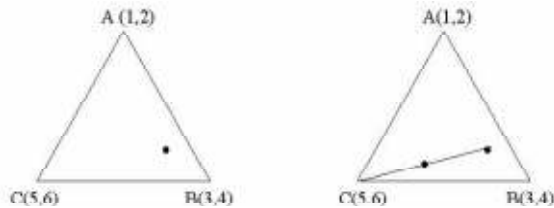
changes in how humans interact with and understand the world and beyond took hold just as Tom Stoppard began to write.

One might suggest that Stoppard chose these burgeoning areas of scientific and sociological study as backdrops for his plays because they provided new, undisturbed ground from which to explore the human condition. But to do so relegates them to supporting-character status, and certainly in *Arcadia* they play a leading role. More likely is that Stoppard recognized a melding of the theories and ideology behind chaos, fractals, poststructuralism, and deconstructionism with the day-to-day aspects of human life, and set about constructing in *Arcadia* a narrative that both introduces the notion of such a meld, and illustrates the power such a means of examining the human condition can hold in determining the potential for human progress.

Structuralism was a response to the innate human need to examine life, to determine and neatly categorize its structure so as to be able to create a system of prediction for the future, with the intent of making life as stable as possible...change and spontaneity are not always palpable to most people. Unfortunately, the more science and sociology attempted to pack human existence neatly into a box, the more life showed its true nature: that uncertainty, as Hawking notes, is perhaps the one true constant in nature, and thus all attempts to create a unified theory that explains nature's mechanics must incorporate, and perhaps use as its basis, an uncertainty principle (Hawking 178-179).

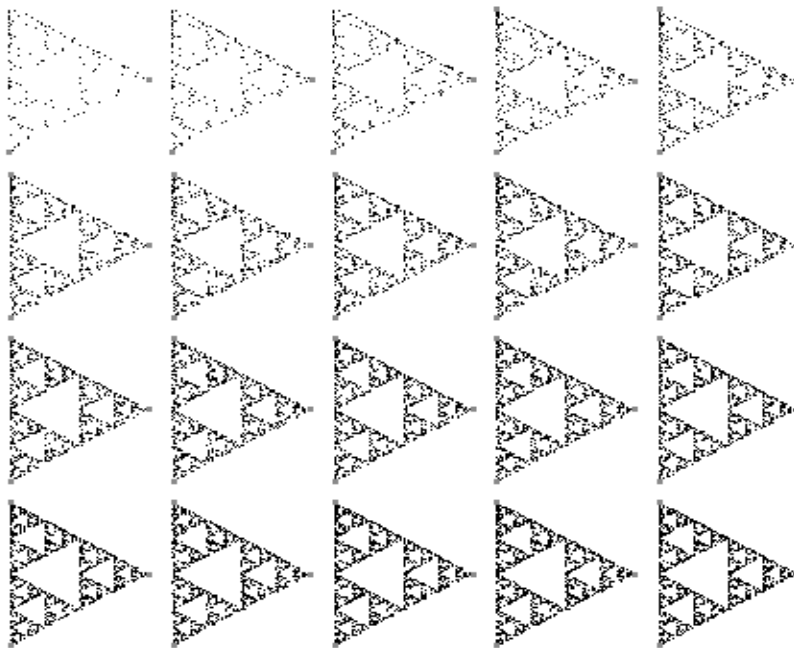
Science has found that uncertainty, ironically, behaves regularly within certain physical and mathematical parameters, and thereby scientists created the theory of chaos, and more specifically deterministic chaos, to explain this chaotic regularity. Upon reading James Gleick's

book *Chaos: Making a New Science*, Stoppard realized that deterministic chaos not only describes well the actions of nature in the physical world, but also the actions of humans in their physical, psychological, and spiritual worlds.



*The beginnings of the fractal geometry iteration process...*

*and the deterministic chaos result of the process:*



Stoppard also recognized a movement away from the structuralist approach to sociological and anthropological studies. While physics and mathematics struggled with the “neatness” of Newtonian equations in explaining an untidy natural world, sociology, linguistics and history struggled with the structuralist approach to the study of the human condition and its history that had come to dominate the academic landscape. With Jaques Derrida’s self-

termed “deconstruction” of philosophy, new modes of thought took root that challenged the structuralist approach, a phenomenon that influenced Stoppard.

In *Arcadia*, Stoppard’s innovative narrative technique of pitting the past as it unfurls against present historians attempting to decipher the progression of past events was clearly influenced by Derrida’s explanation of deconstruction: “Deconstructive analysis deprives the present of its prestige and exposes it to something *tout autre*, ‘wholly other,’ beyond what is foreseeable from the present, beyond the horizon of the ‘same’” (Caputo 42). Bernard in *Arcadia* personifies the prestigious present attempting to “foresee” history by finding primary sources and piecing together a narrative that *might* be what actually happened, but is declared by the expert (Bernard) as veridical, mainly because to do so will feed his prestige.

This constructed approach to history and the poststructuralist’s need to find a better way is described well by MIT’s Director of Comparative Media Studies, William Urrichio:

On the one hand, history refers to the past as a set of lived occurrences. In this sense it has the status of event, of a now gone but infinitely complex reality. On the other hand, the term “history” refers to the *representation* of the past, a snapshot of that vast and multidimensional complexity. In this sense, history is inherently partial, deforming, delimiting, and grounded in a “presentist” point of view. No imaginable set of “historical” representations can do justice to the fullness of “history” as past. Although tacitly acknowledged by most historical practitioners, the limits and inherent subjectivity of history as written tend to be bracketed off from discussion, allowing historians to get on with their jobs. But the poststructuralists made their mark by embracing (and indeed, celebrating) precisely this long-suppressed representational uncertainty. In a double move, they challenged the established explanatory master narratives that dominated the field, and at the same time asserted the need for boldly and articulately

partial histories, histories embedded in a clearly defined point of view. (Urrichio 332)

The plot twists and turns taking place in the past of *Arcadia* make it perfectly understandable that Bernard and Hannah, the historians in the present, make mistakes. One might argue that Stoppard's treatment of Bernard as a pompous, somewhat (if not completely, depending on the actor's interpretation) unlikable person is a statement about structuralist historians in general. However, Stoppard's commentary is not on the ineptitude of structuralist historians, but on the inherent probability of historical inaccuracies in a system that places such emphasis on applying historical details based on a broad examination of primary sources, with no acknowledgement of the limitations and subjectivity of the historian.

*Arcadia*, like life both human and natural, is complicated and chaotic. It has been hailed as the master work of a masterful writer because it is a sublime stew of emotion, science, history and gardening that sparks the mind and touches the heart. Mostly, however, it deserves such accolades because Stoppard took a timely look at major changes in intellectual thought and philosophy, and made them accessible and understandable to us all...for this it will live on.

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From The Times, London:

## Arcadia, Lyttelton, April 14, 1993

### Ideas meet their comic match

Benedict Nightingale

This is Tom Stoppard's first stage play since the quark-and-dagger comedy *Hapgood* in 1988, and it may sound even more daunting to those not of scientific bent. *Hapgood* involved quantum theory, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and the world of double agents, and left the impression of a Le Carre novel rewritten by Stephen Hawking in collaboration with Groucho Marx. *Arcadia*'s subjects vary from Newton to Byron, iterated algorithms to landscape gardens; and its creative team would seem to include the founding fathers of chaos theory and Oscar Wilde.

But don't be intimidated. Stoppard makes plenty of concessions to those of us who do not carry computers above our necks. Trevor Nunn's lucid production opens with a joke that left last night's audience chortling "Septimus, what is carnal embrace?", "The practice of throwing one's arms round a side of beef" and seldom relaxes its comic grip or its narrative tension. Any man on the Clapham omnibus reading this review should instantly hijack the vehicle and drive it to the National's box-office.

The carnal questioner is the precocious Thomasina Coverly (Emma Fielding), Septimus (Rufus Sewell) is her tutor, and the two of them are launched on a maths lesson in her family's ancestral home, Sidley Park. The time is 1809, but not only 1809. Mark Thompson's set, a great, curved room with country estate undulating beyond, remains unchanged while the action cuts to the 1990s and the characters become later Coverlys and later scholars. In successive scenes and, in the last act, simultaneous ones we watch a don called Bernard Nightingale (Bill Nighy) in hot pursuit of "the discovery of the century", a sensational explanation for Byron's hasty exit from England in 1809 itself.

This is terrific fun, because (like so many of that name) B. Nightingale gets everything spectacularly wrong. Let me not reveal too much of a play always pulling slyly satisfactory surprises; but his theory is that Byron killed a poet whose wife he had bedded in a duel at Sidley Park. But we can descry the facts of the case, which are funnier in both senses of the word.

Stoppard has always delighted in arcane analogies and incongruous congruities; and there are lots of those here. Everywhere Newtonian order is breaking down: in scholarship, where illogic rules; in Sidley Park's grounds, where one Culpability Noakes is reducing Capability Brown's classical elegance to romantic muddle; in human relationships, where "the action of bodies in heat", alias sex, is causing chaos; and, not least, in maths. Thomasina doodles, but she doodles the Second Law of Thermodynamics, among other subversive things.

The play is Stoppard's tribute to the complexity, unpredictability and inscrutability of the world pet themes since *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and he pays it with style and

cunning. Structurally, *Arcadia* is brilliant. A reference to a rice pudding or the glimpse of a tortoise turns out to have unlooked-for significance half an evening later. And if some of the patterns and parallels are a bit forced, the piece comes as close as any to fulfilling his creative aim, "the perfect marriage of ideas and high comedy". Our intellectual author has even concocted a touching ending which, again, I better not disclose.

Apart from Fielding, Sewell and Nighy (less Nightingale than predatory popinjay) Nunn's cast includes Harriet Walter as Thomasina's mother, a Lady Bracknell with sex appeal, and Felicity Kendal, all brusque charm as Bernard's cannier rival. If only they were not doomed to inhabit a theatre where finely tuned lines have to be bawled out, like Satie in Wembley Stadium. But it would be greedy to expect everything.

From The New York Times:

## **THEATER REVIEW: ARCADIA; Stoppard's Comedy Of 1809 And Now**

By VINCENT CANBY

Published: March 31, 1995

THERE'S no doubt about it. "Arcadia" is Tom Stoppard's richest, most ravishing comedy to date, a play of wit, intellect, language, brio and, new for him, emotion. It's like a dream of levitation: you're instantaneously aloft, soaring, banking, doing loop-the-loops and then, when you think you're about to plummet to earth, swooping to a gentle touchdown of not easily described sweetness and sorrow.

That's the play.

Trevor Nunn's Lincoln Center Theater production, which opened last night in the Beaumont, is a reasonable American facsimile of those he staged in London, first at the Royal National in 1993, then at the Haymarket in the West End transfer last year. The Beaumont production looks gorgeous and is true to the letter and spirit of the Stoppard words, but it should be better.

"Arcadia" demands something more than a reasonable facsimile if American audiences are to be consistently beguiled by this most ambitious of English comedies. It's a complicated piece, played in two time frames (1809 and the present) by two sets of characters. They share the same great country house, Sidley Park, and occasionally the same stage props, including a tortoise that's named Plautus in 1809 and Lightning today.

Mr. Stoppard's theatrical conceits are exhilarating; his interests are diverse but interlocking, always riveting and sometimes brazenly deep-dish, which is part of the fun. Among his concerns here: first love, Newtonian physics, hustling pedants, landscape gardening, sexual infidelity, class, the mathematics of deterministic chaos, manners and the absolute end of the universe when, one character observes, "We're all going to wind up at room temperature."

Mr. Stoppard pushes the audience to the edge of delicious bewilderment, then he suddenly pulls back to make all as clear as need be. The playwright is a daredevil pilot who's steady at the controls.

At the center of "Arcadia" is a mystery that is the consuming passion of a contemporary literary don, Bernard Nightingale (Victor Garber): did Lord Byron, while visiting Lord and Lady Croom at Sidley Park in 1809, fight a duel in which he killed a grossly untalented poet, Ezra Chater, over the honor of Chater's wife? And was that the reason for Byron's hasty, heretofore unexplained departure from England for the Continent?

Bernard is hungry for acceptance in academe, and even hungrier for the celebrity that comes with publication and the inevitable talk-show appearances. He's a loose cannon, a dangerously quick-minded, noisily self-centered man who doesn't care whom he insults or makes passes at. Chief among his victims: Hannah Jarvis (Blair Brown), a best-selling author and landscape historian; Valentine Coverly (Robert Sean Leonard), an Oxford student of scientific mind, and his sister Chloe (Haviland Morris), two children of the present Lord and Lady Croom.

In the course of his research, Bernard becomes convinced he has made "the most sensational literary discovery of this century." He has, of course, got it all wrong. "Arcadia" crosscuts between the present-day shenanigans at Sidley Park and the events that took place there nearly 200 years earlier. These involve poor Ezra Chater (Paul Giamatti), though only in a helplessly funny subsidiary role. Byron himself remains off-stage.

The more important players in the 1809 mystery are Septimus Hodge (Billy Crudup), a randy young man and part-time literary critic who is the tutor of 13-year-old Thomasina Coverly (Jennifer Dundas); Lady Croom (Lisa Banes), Thomasina's mother, who has never put off a man who had the good taste to presume on her virtue, and a celebrated landscape architect, Richard Noakes (Peter Maloney). Noakes is transforming Sidley Park's grounds from their comparatively natural look to a picturesque style that Hannah Jarvis in 1995 calls "the Gothic novel as landscape."

Hannah, too, becomes intent on solving a mystery: the identity of the hermit whom the earlier Crooms installed in their picturesque hermitage, built by Noakes as he was making mountains on land that had always been flat, and constructing ruins where no castle had ever existed.

The principal Stoppard characters are often driven, not always self-aware, very intelligent and furiously articulate, which is not to say they mean everything that comes



out of their mouths. Bernard's vitriol is both hilarious and mean. Of scientists, he says to Valentine: "I'd push the whole lot of you over a cliff myself. Except the one in the wheelchair; I think I'd lose the sympathy vote."

The play's most affecting characters are Thomasina and Septimus, who affectionately regards his pupil as the child she is. Thomasina, who doesn't yet know what "carnal embrace" means, doodles away in her notebook, apparently to stumble onto today's new, nonlinear mathematics. She has the gift, sometimes possessed by the young, to conceive abstract concepts beyond the comprehension of those whose minds have been made soggy with received wisdom. She is also in love with Septimus, which has melancholy consequences.

As Bernard continues his investigations, it's clear to the audience, if not to him, that both Thomasina and Septimus are part of the mystery whose solution he so thoroughly muddles.

At the beginning of "Arcadia," the two time frames are presented in separate, usually alternating scenes. As the play progresses, the times begin to merge, at first when the present-day characters are seen in 1809 costumes for a fancy dress ball. Further along, the characters from each section occupy the stage at the same time.

As Thomasina, Septimus and Lady Croom, and Bernard, Hannah and Valentine play around and through one another, they create the contrapuntal effect of a piece of music. It's tricky but hugely effective. The two stories come together in a way to give dramatic dimension to some of the more esoteric notions that have been bandied about earlier.

Not all the actors are well cast. They work doggedly to achieve an ensemble performance that always eludes them. Mr. Garber and Ms. Brown are the most successful; they have the technique. Mr. Crudup also fares well.

In fact, everyone has good moments, but they're not at the same time. Ms. Dundas is much more effective as Thomasina at 13 than she is at 17. Mr. Leonard's Valentine is perfectly O.K. until he has to explain "the new geometry of irregular forms" to Hannah. The words overwhelm him and us. Though it isn't Mr. Stoppard's most felicitous scene, it doesn't seem to be staged to help the actor.

At the preview performance I attended, another problem appeared to be some actors' difficulty in projecting unfamiliar English accents to carry throughout the large Beaumont space. As a result, the performance was frequently edgy and blurred. If the actors were using body mikes, they weren't working efficiently. The words could be heard, though not always understood.

There are real difficulties with this production, but also great pleasures, not the least of which are Mark Thompson's sets and costumes. Mostly, though, there are Mr. Stoppard's grandly eclectic obsessions and his singular gifts as a playwright. Attend to them. *ARCADIA* By Tom Stoppard; directed by Trevor Nunn; sets and costumes by Mark Thompson; lighting by Paul Pyant; original music, Jeremy Sams. Presented by

Lincoln Center Theater. At the Vivian Beaumont Theater, 150 West 65th Street, Lincoln Center. WITH: Blair Brown (Hannah Jarvis), Victor Garber (Bernard Nightingale), Robert Sean Leonard (Valentine Coverly), Billy Crudup (Septimus Hodge) Jennifer Dundas (Thomasina Coverly), Paul Giamatti (Ezra Chater), Peter Maloney (Richard Noakes), Lisa Banes (Lady Croom) and Haviland Morris (Chloe Coverly).

From The New York Times:

*THEATER REVIEW | 'ARCADIA'*

## The 180-Year Itch, Metaphysically Speaking



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

"Arcadia," with Lia Williams and Billy Crudup as literary rivals and collaborators in the revival of the Tom Stoppard play, directed by David Leveaux, at the Ethel Barrymore Theater. [More Photos »](#)

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#)

*Published: March 17, 2011*

A suspicion lingers in the heart of the constant theatergoer that if you are too clever, then you must be made of ice. This prejudice has misguidedly dogged, among others, that greatest of songwriters, [Stephen Sondheim](#), like a peevish, affection-starved beagle. But it has never clung to anyone more tenaciously and erroneously than it does to the playwright [Tom Stoppard](#).



[Excerpt: 'Arcadia'](#)



CLOSE VIDEO



*Sara Krulwich/The New York Times*

Tom Riley as a tutor and Bel Powley as his pupil in Tom Stoppard's "Arcadia." [More Photos »](#)

So I encourage you to feel the heat rising from the stage of the Ethel Barrymore Theater, where a half-terrific revival of Mr. Stoppard's entirely terrific "[Arcadia](#)" opened on Thursday night. Though this play finds [Mr. Stoppard](#) at his most luxuriantly wordy, it is not hot air of which I speak. Watching [David Leveaux](#)'s production I realized more than ever that "Arcadia," a tale of two centuries in pseudopastoral England, is propelled by genuine, panting passion.

And not just physical passion. This may be a work that begins with the question, posed by a 13-year-old girl in 1809, of just what "a carnal embrace" is. But good old lust is only one complicating element within the deeper impulse that animates both the characters in "Arcadia" and the play itself.

That is the unquenchable human urge to acquire knowledge, whether carnal, mathematical, historical or metaphysical. It is the itch to discover what lurks beneath concealing clothes and clouds and dusty layers of accumulated years. Success in these quests is irrelevant, since full and true knowledge of anything is impossible. As one character says toward the play's end, in a declaration that soars, "It's the wanting to know that makes us matter." Though I have seen and read "Arcadia" many times since it was first staged in London in 1993, Mr. Leveaux's interpretation brings out the irresistible force of "wanting to know" better than any version in my experience. This is by no means a perfect production. Several central roles are slightly miscast. Worse, some of the performances from the Anglo-American cast are pitched to the point of incoherence in those nasal passages where upper-class twangs are thought to dwell.

Yet if this "Arcadia" lacks the uniform surface sparkle it had when I saw it (with a different cast) in London in [2009](#), it has acquired something more important: an emotional depth, viscerally rooted, to support its intellectual shimmer. This conviction comes across — with gusto and delicacy — via four performers who embody two almost-couples of two different eras.

That would be Tom Riley and Bel Powley, portraying an early-19th-century tutor and his aristocratic pupil, and Lia Williams and [Billy Crudup](#), in the late 20th century, as literary rivals and occasional collaborators. (For the record, though I said "gusto and delicacy," the delicate part really applies only to Mr. Riley and Ms. Williams.)

Sharing the same set — a room in the stately Derbyshire country home, Sidley Park (designed with ideal simplicity by Hildegard Bechtler) — these four actors exude a thrilling energy that flows across the centuries and reminds us that intellectual and erotic magnetism are not mutually exclusive. Their characters all clearly belong to an ages-crossing, Breugel-like march of humanity. But they are also as vividly individual as the subjects of portraits by [Gainsborough](#) or, in Mr. Crudup's case, by a sharp social caricaturist like [George Cruickshank](#). (The pitch-perfect costumes are by Gregory Gale.)

Quickly summing up the plot of "Arcadia" is as doomed an undertaking as solving the riddles of the universe before breakfast. When the play opens, in 1809, Sidley Park, the demesne of the worldly Lady Croom ([Margaret Colin](#)), is undergoing a relandscaping that will change its look from classical to Gothic. Subsequent alternating (and eventually overlapping) scenes take place some 180 years later, when Hannah Jarvis (Ms. Williams), a best-selling author, arrives to research a book on "the nervous breakdown of the Romantic imagination."

Also in 20th-century Sidley is Bernard Nightingale (Mr. Crudup), a self-promoting academic looking for clues to a previously unknown chapter in the life of Lord Byron. The evidence that Bernard and Hannah gather (and misinterpret) — papers, drawings, workbooks — is mostly material we see being shaped in the 19th-century scenes, as Thomasina Coverly (Ms. Powley), Lady Croom’s daughter, pursues her studies with her tutor, Septimus Hodge (Mr. Riley).

Yes, Lord Byron is (or has been) a guest at Sidley, though we never see him. (He bears roughly the same relation to “Arcadia” that Hamlet did to Mr. Stoppard’s “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.”) Septimus, it turns out, went to school with the poet and shares some of his panache if little of his genius.

If there is another genius in the house, it’s Thomasina, who has bold and prescient notions about the potential of calculus. Her notebook of equations, along with newly exhumed letters and a book of poetry, become a matter of rapt speculation by Hannah and Bernard and by Valentine Coverly ([Raúl Esparza](#)), Thomasina’s latter-day relative and a mathematical whiz himself.

Running through both centuries are threads of sexual interest and intrigue that embrace 18th-century characters played by David Turner, Glenn Fleshler, Byron Jennings, Edward James Hyland and Noah Robbins, and 20th-century characters, portrayed by Grace Gummer and Mr. Robbins again. (In both cases he’s a young Coverly on the edge of manhood.)

I didn’t entirely believe in the usually splendid Ms. Colin, though she does well by Lady Croom’s Lady Bracknell-like social pronouncements, or the talented Mr. Esparza, who falls back on old tricks of looking adorably petulant. Ms. Gummer is strangely wooden as an erotically frisky young aristo. And many of the cast members are guilty of swallowing their lines, which admittedly are mouthfuls. Unless an emergency diction coach is brought in, I suggest you read “Arcadia” before seeing it this time.

But see it you should, in part to experience the ingenuity and seamlessness of Mr. Stoppard’s time-traveling craftsmanship, but also to feel the empathic imagination brought to characters you may wind up realizing you never fully grasped before. For instance, I’ve never much cared for Hannah, who usually registers as a sort of brisk intellectual Girl Guide. But in a wonderfully sensitive performance, Ms. Williams (seen on Broadway in [David Hare’s “Skylight”](#)) poignantly conveys the self-reflective sadness in a life that has emphasized thought over feeling.

Mr. Crudup, who played the role of Septimus in the 1995 Broadway production, has, despite his leading-man looks, traditionally preferred (and flourished in) at least slightly grotesque parts (including the [Elephant Man](#)). And he makes a scenery-chewing meal of Bernard's smarmy aggressiveness. (If you've spent any time on a college campus of late, you've met this Bernard.)

Ms. Powley, though not always intelligible, enchantingly captures the ardor of a brilliant young mind that finds the joke (and the poetry) in Fermat's last theorem and the tragedy in the fire that destroyed the library at ancient Alexandria. And Mr. Riley (like Ms. Williams and Ms. Powley, from the British stage) is superb as the bright young man who is not Lord Byron (nor was he meant to be) but who recognizes — and bows before — real genius.

Although many truly witty, intellectually detailed considerations of languages and landscapes and thermodynamics are developed, they wouldn't be much more than parlor games without the sensual, mutually appreciative energy that these performers exchange. In this "Arcadia" "wanting to know" gloriously becomes a full-blown, red-blooded appetite.