



Façade of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre. Stoppard saw plays at the Old Vic while working as a theater critic, and the 1948 production of *Hamlet* he saw there had a tremendous effect on him.

was greatly increased.

It was a heady time to have taken an interest in the theater in London, a hub of international theater activity. Plays that would later be categorized as belonging to the Theater of the Absurd, like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which opened in 1955, were being performed and talked about. The Marxist Bertolt Brecht was creating works of what he called The Epic Theater with the Berliner Ensemble, which had a lengthy visit to London. And the movement of "angry young men" was initiated by the 1956 debut of John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*.

In 1960, Stoppard was struck with an urgent desire to begin his career as a writer, and so he quit his job at the newspaper. He completed his first play, *A Walk on the Water*, which was eventually produced for television. Perhaps of greater significance to Stoppard's career, this work brought him to the attention of the agent Kenneth Ewing, who became Stoppard's long-term agent. Stoppard eked out a meager living at this time, reviewing theater for a London magazine called *Scene* and writing unproduced scripts for television plays and one-act plays for BBC Radio.

Ewing, Stoppard's agent, was the catalyst for the work that would catapult Stoppard to fame. In 1963, after seeing a production of *Hamlet*, it was Ewing who mused that there might be potential in a play about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, speculating that the king they travel to see in England might well be another Shakespearean character, King Lear. In 1964 Stoppard received a Ford Foundation grant to live in Berlin and continue to write, and he produced the forerunner to his most famous play, a one-act treatment written in verse called *Rosencrantz and*

*Guildenstern Meet King Lear*. In this play, the Player and Hamlet exchange identities on the ship bound for England, which is captured by pirates. The Player then returns to Denmark to fulfill Hamlet's role for the rest of the play.<sup>3</sup> This work offers a preview of Stoppard's concern with identity as performative and unstable.

Stoppard reworked his play about the two minor characters in *Hamlet*, and in 1966, after having had it rejected by the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal Court Theatre, he sent it to the Oxford Playhouse. In turn, they offered it to university undergraduates looking for something to perform at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which they did, to decidedly mixed reviews. However, a reviewer from *The Observer*, Ronald Bryden, wrote that the play was an "erudite comedy, punning, far-fetched, leaping from depth to dizziness...the most brilliant debut" in some time. This review came to the attention of the influential theater critic Kenneth Tynan, who was then the literary manager for the National Theatre in London. Tynan offered to produce the play at the National Theatre. Receiving rave reviews in London in April of 1967, and then as the first National Theatre production to be transferred to New York, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* paved the way for Stoppard to become one of the most illustrious of modern playwrights.

Beginning in 1960, with the play *Walk on the Water*, Stoppard has an imposing bibliography, with short and long plays, translations of other playwrights like Anton Chekhov and Luigi Pirandello, radio plays, TV plays, screenplays for major films, and one novel. To say that he is prolific would be an understatement. Besides *Rosencrantz*, there are three works that critics regard as his "major" work, each of which defies being contained in a brief abstract. *Jumpers* is a kind of unrestrained murder mystery in which some of the murders are the result of academic, philosophical papers admitting to the existence of a divine being. The title is taken from an acrobatic troupe of radically liberal university dons. *Travesties* imagines, or partly reimagines, a meeting in the neutral Swiss city of Zurich of three wildly disparate thinkers—the Modernist James Joyce, the Dadaist Tristan Tzara, and the Communist leader Vladimir Lenin. As with *Rosencrantz*, stage drama is at the core of this play, which revolves around a production of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* that was in fact produced by Joyce in Zurich in 1918. *Arcadia*, regarded by many as Stoppard's mature masterpiece, shifts between 1809—with the life of a precocious young girl genius who predicts many of the twentieth century's most astonishing mathematical discoveries—and the present (at the time of the first performance, 1993), where a pair of

