

Arcadia

A Playgoer's Guide

“Tom Stoppard’s richest, most ravishing comedy: a play of wit, intellect, brio and 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.” (*The New York Times*, 1995)

“Stoppard, long known as one of England's most inventive playwrights, weaves these deep ideas seamlessly into scintillating dialogue about seduction and landscape architecture. Scientists tired of being represented either as Faust figures or as clowns should applaud the value of this achievement.” (*Scientific American*, 1997)



Sidley park might have looked a bit like this

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Oscar award winner **Tom Stoppard** was born in 1937 in Czechoslovakia. Shortly after, in 1939, his family fled to Singapore to avoid World War II and the Nazis. After Stoppard’s father died in the Japanese invasion of 1942 the rest of the family moved once more, this time to India. Here, Stoppard attended an American-run school where he learned how to speak English, after which he moved to England. At the age of 17, Stoppard left his studies to become a theatre and film critic for a newspaper in Bristol.

Stoppard’s professional writing career began in 1960, where in the span of five years, he wrote a stage play, developed and sold three short stories, was commissioned to write a novel, had two 15-minute plays on the radio, and wrote five episodes for a television series called *The Dales*. In 1965, Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was approved for the stage by the Royal Shakespeare Company – the first of his many major successes. He continued to build on his mounting reputation by developing a number of plays over the following decade, the most noteworthy being *Jumpers* (1972) and *Travesties* (1974). Stoppard got involved with Amnesty International and human rights issues around 1977, and incorporated some of these issues into his writing. Stoppard’s most recent and laudable achievement was his Oscars for best screenplay and best picture in 1998, for the popular film *Shakespeare in Love*.

Arcadia the play

Arcadia was first performed in London at the Littleton Theatre. It was performed by the Royal National Theatre on April 13, 1993 and directed by Trevor Nunn. The first performance was a complete success and was followed by a successful run at Lincoln Centre's Vivian Beaumont Theatre from March-August 1995; it has been regularly performed since.

Throughout *Arcadia*, Stoppard switches back and forth between the present and the nineteenth century while paralleling the two times through major questions of science, human nature, and history. The play is set in a single room overlooking a garden at an English estate, Sidley Park. In the time frame of the nineteenth century this room is within the residence of Lord and Lady Croom, and is the room in which their teenage daughter, Thomasina, takes lessons from her tutor, Septimus Hodge. Thomasina is a mathematical prodigy who attempts to explain to her tutor the notion of entropy and fractional/chaos theory. Although Septimus recognizes that Thomasina is capable of astonishing things, her talent goes largely unrecognized.



Thomasina at Knox College last year (Sylvie Davidson)

Thomasina's brilliant mathematical discoveries, along with the affairs that were occurring at the same time in Sidley Park, are what draws Bernard Nightingale to Sidley Park about two hundred years later. He is convinced that while this genius was studying, the love affairs going on outside the classroom led Lord Byron into a duel with fellow poet Ezra Chater. Bernard attempts to attribute this duel to Byron's unexplained two year absence from England. Bernard argues continuously with Hannah

Jarvis who is attempting to unravel details of a hermit who lived on the property at this same time. The two debate these ideas within the room that was once Thomasina's study.

Bernard and Hannah manage to figure out the reason for Byron's unaccounted-for time, and just who the hermit was. While doing so they also realize Thomasina's accomplishments and finally give her the recognition that she deserves.

"*Arcadia* uses intellectual argument as a kind of riptide to pull the audience under the playful surface of romance with which the characters in both time frames fill their days and nights." (*The New Yorker*, 1995)

Themes

Science & Math: Established in the 1960's, chaos theory deals with the behaviour of certain nonlinear dynamical systems that (under certain conditions) exhibit the phenomenon known as chaos, most famously characterised by a high sensitivity to initial conditions. Examples for such systems are the atmosphere, plate tectonics, economics, and population growth.

A German physicist named Rudolf Julius Emanuel formulated the second law of thermodynamics in the 1850s. The law states that heat cannot pass from a colder to a hotter body. The idea of entropy, which is a part of the study of thermodynamics, states that everything in the world is destined to cool down until all activity ceases.

Classical geometry and math were Thomasina's main studies.

Gardens: *Arcadia* is set against a garden which comes up every so often in the dialogue. *Arcadia* deals with characters from the past, as well as the future. In the past, we see that Mr. Noakes is trying to get Lady Croom to change her garden into something a little more modern.

Hermitages were very popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. Lakes, Greek styled temples and large lawns were going out of style for gardens. Ruins, rivers, jagged and irregular patterns and a sense of wilderness were becoming more fashionable in gardens. Lady Croom is happy with her garden even though Mr. Noakes wishes it were more gothic. In the end, however, she agrees to let him make the changes.

Some facts about Tortoises

- Tortoises are part of the turtle family but have legs like an elephant.
- Their leathery shell can be up to 2.4 meters long and they can weigh up to 860kg.
- Tortoises and turtles are the only animals with a shell built right into their skeleton.
- In some countries their meat is considered a delicacy and eaten on holidays
- They hatch from their eggs at night, emerge themselves from the sand and are guided to the water by the moonlight
- It takes 30 years for a tortoise to reach adulthood.