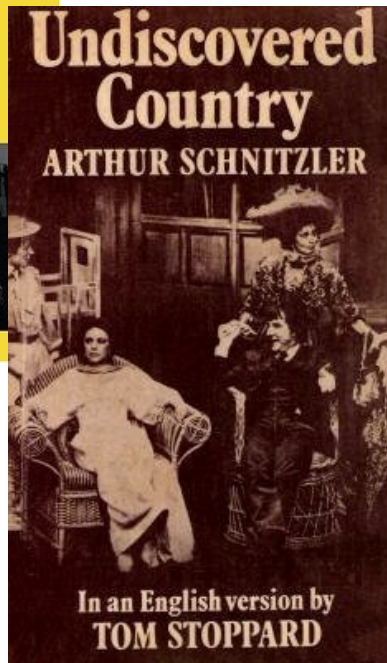


Tom Stoppard / Arthur Schnitzler

UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

Arthur Schnitzler
Das weite Land

Reclam



A Playgoer's Companion



Tom Stoppard

British playwright Sir Tom Stoppard (knighted in 1997) has written prolifically for TV, radio, film and stage, finding prominence with plays such as *Arcadia*, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. He co-wrote the screenplays for *Brazil* and *Shakespeare in Love* and has won one Academy Award and four Tony Awards. Themes of human rights, censorship and political freedom pervade his work along with exploration of

linguistics and philosophy. Stoppard has been a key playwright of the National Theatre and is one of the most internationally performed dramatists of his generation.

“Stoppardian” has become a term describing works using wit and comedy while addressing philosophical concepts. Critic Dennis Kennedy notes, “It established several characteristics of Stoppard’s dramaturgy: his word-playing intellectuality, audacious, paradoxical, and self-conscious theatricality, and preference for reworking pre-existing narratives... Stoppard’s plays have been sometimes dismissed as pieces of clever showmanship, lacking in substance, social commitment, or emotional weight. Stoppard himself went so far as to declare “I must stop compromising my plays with this whiff of social application. They must be entirely untouched by any suspicion of usefulness.” Later, Stoppard produced increasingly socially engaged work like *The Coast of Utopia* and *Rock ‘n’ Roll*, with themes of censorship, rights abuses, and state repression.

He acknowledges that he started off “as a language nerd”, primarily enjoying linguistic and ideological playfulness, feeling early in his career that journalism was far better suited for presaging political change, than playwriting. He has commented that he loves the medium of theatre for how “adjustable” it is at every point, how unfrozen it is, continuously growing and developing through each rehearsal, free from the text. [Adapted from *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance* and wikipedia]

The play

Undiscovered Country was first produced at the Olivier Theatre in London in 1979. The play is an adaptation of *Das Weite Land* by the Austrian playwright Arthur Schnitzler, which focuses on 1890s Viennese society, demonstrating the effects of upper class codes of behavior on human relationships. The main character is a self-made businessman named Friedrich Hofreiter who manages to be both charming and chauvinistic. Stoppard's alterations to the play consist of adding humor while lessening the melodrama. The title of the play is a reference to the concept of death as the "undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns" in *Hamlet*. [adapted from doollee.com and wikipedia]

Arthur Schnitzler

Arthur Schnitzler's works were often controversial, both for their frank description of sexuality (Sigmund Freud, in a letter to Schnitzler, confessed "I have gained the impression that you have learned through intuition — though actually as a result of sensitive introspection — everything that I have had to unearth by laborious work on other persons") and for their strong stand against anti-Semitism.

Schnitzler was branded as a pornographer after the release of his play *Reigen*, in which ten pairs of characters are shown before and after the sexual act, leading and ending with a prostitute. In response to an interviewer who asked Schnitzler what he thought about the critical view that his works all seemed to treat the same subjects, he replied, "I write of love and death. What other subjects are there?" Despite his seriousness of purpose, he frequently approaches bedroom farce in his plays. His works were called "Jewish filth" by Adolf Hitler and banned by the Nazis in Austria and Germany, and burned along with those of Einstein, Kafka, and others. [adapted from wikipedia]



Overview

Undiscovered Country begins after the suicide of a young musician, who has been rejected as a lover by Friedrich's wife. Instead of embracing her for her discretion, Friedrich reprimands her for her coldness. In response, his wife plunges into an affair with a handsome young lieutenant, which forces Friedrich to defend what he wryly refers to as his travestied honor.

According to the Samuel French Web site, the play "portrays upper class characters of Vienna in the 1890s and exposes the destructive nature of their relationships. It deals with suicide, love, lust, jealousy, conquest and murder in a unique and intriguing way, as intricate affairs and devastating effects are just a scratch beneath the surface. This play offers an insightful psychological analysis of human behaviour and the social values of the period."

"... a kaleidoscopic study of hedonism in turn-of-the-century Vienna. This is a city in which infidelity and tennis are favorite sports, psychoanalysis is dismissed as a mere local pastime, and tact is considered a third-rate virtue". – Mel Gussow, *The New York Times*

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