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Rifts in Time and Space: Playing with Time in Barker, Stoppard, and Churchill

Jay M. King
THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF THEATRE

RIFTS IN TIME AND SPACE:
PLAYING WITH TIME IN BARKER, STOPPARD, AND CHURCHILL

By

JAY M. KING

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Jay M. King defended on April 1, 2004.

Carrie Sandahl  
Professor Directing Thesis

Mary Karen Dahl  
Committee Member

Laura Edmondson  
Committee Member

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.
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ABSTRACT

Space has long been a subject of theatrical theory, but rarely do scholars examine time. More specifically, what happens when playwrights break the conventional rules of time and space to present impossibilities on the stage, such as severe anachronism and non-linear storytelling? This thesis examines six plays by three contemporary British playwrights who play with time: The Castle and The Bite of the Night by Howard Barker, Arcadia and The Invention of Love by Tom Stoppard, and Traps and Top Girls by Caryl Churchill. The rifts in time and space presented by these authors create meanings that no other method could accomplish. Generally speaking, disturbances in time have the potential to disrupt the audience, taking them out of the play and encouraging them to create their own meanings. Specifically, the timeplay of each play reinforces the themes of each piece and raises certain ideological questions. Barker questions the accuracy of memory and the cultural construction of history. Stoppard discusses the impossibility of knowing the past and explores the connections between science and human action. Churchill questions the notion of progress in relation to social issues. Furthermore, each playwright plays with time in a slightly different way, using anachronism or non-linear storytelling, presenting the disruptions as real or as theatrical artifice. Combining these three playwrights and these six plays creates a puzzle that can be split in a multitude of ways, where each new point of view creates a new meaning.
INTRODUCTION
SPACE, TIME, AND THOUGHT

“For it is your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there, jumping o’er time.”
—Henry V (Prologue 27–28)

Throughout history, humans have held two distinct views of time. The first view holds that time is rigid and inflexible; it is linear, unidirectional, and constant. Our observations of the pendulum and the hourglass tell us this is true, as do our rational minds. Our bodies sense the passing of time as constant and remind our minds of this fact when we fail to eat or sleep. For Americans and Northern Europeans, our culture further regulates our sense and use of time within a strict discipline. We are monochronic, according to Edward T. Hall, living under the tyranny of the clock (13). Events start on the minute, and tardiness is reprimanded. Time is money. Time waits for no man.

But there is another part of our minds that knows otherwise, and this part supports the second viewpoint, that time is flexible, mutable, even fluid. Modern science tells us that the rate of time literally does change based on a traveler’s speed and proximity to mass. It is further true that our perception of time’s passage changes with several variables. The human mind is imperfect; so is memory, and so are our perceptions. The staff meeting starts on time, but it seems to last for days. We look back on years of a habitual life and see them as but a few weeks. The polychronic, Hall’s antithesis to the monochronic, does not feel the same urgency as the American businessman. Additionally, our temporal perception changes as we progress from the eternal present of infancy to the dynamic time of youth to the conventional, regulated time of adulthood, while brain damage and some mental illnesses can utterly destroy a person’s time sense (Akhundov 23–24; Damasio 69–70). Does the human mind, then, have the power to alter
time? Can thought twist the actual ribbon of the time continuum as well as our perceptions of it? Of course not; that is an impossibility. But what about when the impossible happens?

On the stage and in other media, writers play with time in a way that we cannot in our regular lives. Whereas scientists still debate the possibility of time travel, a playwright can make it happen as fast as an actor can say “day and night.” Time has always been at issue in the theatre. From Aristotle onward, critics and theoreticians have debated whether stage time should adhere to complete verisimilitude, matching real time exactly, or whether it is appropriate to condense or skip over time, and if so, by how much. Playwrights themselves have taken the liberty to condense time, expand it, distort it, focus on single moments, or skim over centuries. However, the majority of drama still presents stage time in a way that emulates real time, insomuch as most plays seek to imitate nature. But what happens when a playwright breaks the conventional rules of time and space in a way that directly contradicts everything in our actual experience? What happens when a play sheds the rules of reality and linear progress and gives thought the power to disrupt time and space? What happens when playwrights present us with the impossible?

**Description**

In an effort to explore all of these questions, this thesis will examine six plays by three contemporary British playwrights, each of whom plays with time in a distinctive way. The plays in question are *The Castle* and *The Bite of the Night* by Howard Barker, *Arcadia* and *The Invention of Love* by Tom Stoppard, and *Traps* and *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill. I will compare and contrast these plays and playwrights, examining their different methods of disrupting time and space and the different results they create. My major goal is to discover how timeplay is essential to the workings and meanings of these six plays. What does the disruption of time do that no other method can accomplish?

Each playwright disrupts time using different methods. Barker uses severe anachronism in a manner that both radically disrupts his narrative and draws striking lines from the fictional past to the present day. Stoppard employs non-linear story telling and overlapping realities, creating a stereoscopic vision of time across the real space of the stage. Churchill uses both
anachronism and non-linear story-telling, turning her plays into “impossible objects,” possible on the stage and nowhere else. In a sense, all six of these plays are impossible objects; they present realities that only the theatre can bring into existence.

Furthermore, these structural disruptions complement a discourse on time and space that runs through each narrative. Barker questions the accuracy of memory and the cultural construction of history. Stoppard discusses the impossibility of knowing the past and explores the connections between science and human action. Churchill questions the notion of progress in relation to social issues. By not only telling us about these issues, but by showing us visually and viscerally through the onstage disruptions of time and space, these plays create resonances that operate at multiple levels. In each case, timeplay is essential to the operation of the play, such that if these techniques were removed, the meaning of the work would diminish.

If timeplay is essential to meaning, then how does it create meaning? Is timeplay inherently disruptive, or can it create essential meanings without jarring the audience? Is there a difference between impossibilities that are offered as real and those that are presented through the frame of theatrical artifice? Arcadia and Top Girls, for example, formally separate their flashbacks through the traditional theatrical device of scene breaks, implicitly asking the audience to accept the jumps in time as “part of the show,” but not necessarily as impossible events. The Invention of Love and Traps, however, provide no buffers for their radical shifts in time and space. The temporal disruptions therefore become real; they are acknowledged by the characters and accepted as part of their reality. Barker’s temporal interruptions are ambiguous; they might be real, or they might not be. This uncertainty puts a maximum amount of pressure on the audience to interpret events for themselves. How do these methods create distinct meanings within the world of each play?

Finally, I will search for the threads that bind these plays together through time and space. While it would be easy to treat time capriciously, given the power of theatrical speech to move us effortlessly across the ages, none of these authors do so. In fact, it is a consistency across these works that the power to break the laws of physics stems always from human will. In Barker’s works, this force takes the form of desire: sexual, emotional, or intellectual. In Stoppard, the force is attraction, again romantic or sexual. In Churchill’s Traps, events are manipulated through telepathy, and in Top Girls, will evokes the play’s key anachronism. On the stage then, space and time and thought are not all the separate things that they appear to be;
human will has acquired the power to break the laws of the physical universe and create its own reality of impossibilities.

**Methodology**

My methodology throughout this project will primarily involve close readings of the texts in combination with reviews and criticism of the plays where appropriate. These readings will focus on the particular timeplay of each piece, rather than on each work as a whole, and therefore the readings will be asymmetrical. I will frame these readings within a discussion of theatrical and scientific theory. By combining the theatrical theories of Adolph Appia and Sarah Bryant-Bertail with a brief review of relativity, I can show how time and space are inextricably linked. By examining spacetime, rather than just time, I can deepen my investigation of the spatial and temporal disturbances of each play. Secondly, I will use Michel Foucault’s principle of discipline (specifically time as an enforceable and punishable discipline) and some recent determinations by cognitive science (specifically Lakoff and Johnson’s review of the embodied mind) to show how the disturbance of time is inherently disruptive to the human mind. I will go over each of these theories in detail below. Lastly, I will draw on Barker’s *theatre of catastrophe*, which is the term he applies to his own work. Exploring the theatre of catastrophe will be most useful in illuminating his own plays, but it sheds light on the other works, as well. I will examine the theatre of catastrophe in chapter one.

**Review of Literature**

**Other Works**

These six plays are of course not the only nor even the first dramatic works to play with time and space; many others employ striking spatiotemporal techniques that I do not have time to examine thoroughly in this thesis. Strindberg’s *A Dream Play*, from 1902, takes on the fluidity of thought as the dreamer pulls the audience with him on his night journey. Erwin Piscator’s 1929 production of *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Schwejk* used a conveyor belt and projected
images to create the sensation of movement, while Schwejk, on the conveyor belt, went nowhere, physically or thematically. This was highly innovative play with time, space, and movement. Arthur Arent’s living newspaper, *One-Third of a Nation*, literally took the audience back and forth through time. An “audience member,” Mr. Buttonkooper, becomes swept up in the play’s genealogy of New York’s housing development, traveling back in time to 1850 and later bringing his guide from 1850 back with him to the present, 1938. Marsha Norman’s 1983 ‘*Night Mother*’ goes in the opposite direction, adhering to complete verisimilitude of time. The play begins at eight o’clock in the evening, presumably at the same time the performance begins, and the action proceeds continuously until the play’s tragic end. More recently, Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive* uses time in a much more complex way; she tells her story using two interweaving timelines, one running forward and the other running backwards. Several British playwrights have written works that play with time and space, in addition to the three principal ones examined here. Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal* is chronologically fractured, moving backwards and forwards and backwards and forward again. Michael Frayn’s *Copenhagen* takes place almost in a dream space, in which two dead characters reconstruct past events, sometimes acting them out and sometimes narrating them. Timberlake Wertenbaker, in *The Love of the Nightingale*, uses a chorus that speaks both in the time of the play, ancient Greece, and from the perspective of the modern audience. The six plays examined here, however, differ from all of these.

The combination of Barker, Stoppard, and Churchill is especially fruitful because of the array of similarities, contrasts, and connections they present. The six plays were written between 1977 and 1997, making them relatively contemporaneous. They all break the physical rules of time and space, and yet they all have unique voices. Barker primarily uses anachronism and abrupt disturbances of the plot. Stoppard uses non-linear story-telling but weaves his timelines together with a fluid grace. Churchill uses anachronism and non-linear story-telling both disruptively and pervasively. Stoppard and Churchill both have one play in which spatiotemporal disturbances are treated as real and another where the timeplay is strictly segregated through theatrical artifice. Barker, in contrast, blurs the line between functional and fictional. Yet each play uses structure to reinforce ideas and themes, and in each, it is the power of thought that breaks through time and space. In some of these plays, the use of time is easily understood and has led to commercial and critical success, while in others the opposite is true. Combining these
three playwrights and these six plays creates a puzzle that can be split in a multitude of ways, and like an impossible object, each point of view creates a new meaning.

**Specific Criticism of Barker, Stoppard, and Churchill**

These three well-known playwrights have drawn much critical commentary, and for the most part, these plays have all been examined in depth elsewhere; however, most of the existing criticism either avoids or hits beside the question of time. As all of these plays are complex and treat a multitude of issues, criticism has illuminated several major themes in each work without directly addressing timeplay. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, no work has made a comparative examination of timeplay across a spectrum of plays.

Barker is probably the least popular and least discussed playwright of this trio. Two major works, by David Ian Rabey and Charles Lamb, examine *The Castle* in depth. Each presents a slightly different interpretation of Barker’s moments of severe anachronism, but neither addresses his timeplay as a primary topic. Lamb reads the play through the viewpoint of desire, while Rabey examines Barker’s feminism and social issues. Similarly, popular reviews have focused more on the play’s treatment of the battle of the sexes or the arms race. The complexity of *The Bite of the Night* presents a much richer field for investigation; however, the timeplay itself frequently becomes lost among the play’s profuse disruptions.

Stoppard’s *Arcadia* has elicited a great deal of criticism and secondary scholarship, much of which focuses on one of the play’s peripheral issues, such as Byron, chaos theory, or landscape gardening. The play’s final scene—the convergence of the two timelines within the single space of the stage—is frequently praised in both scholarship and popular reviews. Jim Hunter provides the best examination of the simultaneity of the final scene, and he also explores other aspects of Stoppard’s timeplay, such as the doubling of Gus and Augustus. Jeffery Kramer’s article, “Research, Time, Loss,” does an excellent job of connecting sex, heat, and science within the text. Stoppard’s more recent play, *The Invention of Love*, written in 1997, has a much smaller body of criticism. What material does exist focuses on the literary aspects of Houseman or on Stoppard’s evocation of Oscar Wilde, leaving the play open to new discussions about its temporal structure.

Like *The Invention of Love*, Churchill’s *Traps* is still open ground for scholarship. It has been rarely produced and still more rarely studied, although Alisa Solomon sums up Churchill’s
timeplay nicely when she says that the play “places in doubt the absolute and natural stability of the most basic categories of human thought—space and time” (55). Out of all of these plays, Top Girls seems to be the most transparent. Churchill’s remarkable opening scene always elicits comments from scholars, and even reviewers for the popular press tend to draw parallels between the anachronistic dinner party and the play’s overall themes. Janet Brown and Joseph Marohl have each written particularly insightful essays, unpacking Churchill’s feminist, socialist, and humanist themes through the lens of her timeplay. Strikingly though, each critic draws a slightly different but valid parallel, thereby creating layers of meaning.

**Time, Space, and Spacetime**

Before examining these plays specifically, I would like to begin this investigation with a look at time, both in theatre and in science. Time and space have been the subjects of human thought for as far back as anyone can reconstruct. In the creation myths of many cultures, including Greek, Hindu, and Zoroastrian, time and space exist prior to the creation of the earth, sky, and other elements (Akhundov 1). Humans began keeping track of time as long as 20,000 years ago, by methods no more complex than marking notches on a stick; whereas today, atomic clocks keep time accurate to one billionth of a second (Stix 38; Andrewes 85). In more recent history, the nature of time and space has been debated unendingly by philosophers and scientists alike. Thinkers from Aristotle and St. Augustine to modern physicists have asked if time even exists; as St. Augustine put it: “How then, can these two kinds of time, the past and the future be, when the past no longer is and the future as yet does not be?” (qtd. in Stix 39). Other physicists argue that all time exists simultaneously and that the present is no different than any other point in time (Davies 41–42). No one can actually say what time is. As cognitive scientists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson point out, there is no known method of measuring time in itself, only methods of measuring “successive iterations of a type of event,” such as the motion of a pendulum or the decay of certain atoms (138). For all of our science and philosophy, time remains a fundamental mystery. Despite these limitations, or perhaps because of them, people—including theatre people—have always attempted to define time.
Stage Time

Tom says in *The Glass Menagerie* that “time is the longest distance between two places”; he was more right than he knew. Conventionally, we think of time and space as two separate entities; indeed, in our daily lives we move freely through space, yet we are trapped within the flow of time. However, this distinction may not be accurate. According to theatrical theory, physical science, and even cognitive science, time and space are each defined by the other, while movement provides the link between them. Adolph Appia describes the relationship most succinctly: “In space, units of time are expressed by a succession of forms, hence by movement. In time, space is expressed by a succession of words and sounds, that it is to say, by varying time-durations prescribing the extent of movement” (7–8). In other words, time is defined by movement across space, and space is defined by movement across time.

Sarah Bryant-Bertail makes a similar appraisal of theatrical time and space in her examination of time in epic theatre:

Theatrical space is not just the set, the fictional locale, or the theatre building but the way in which these present themselves through time, interrelating rhythmically with each other and with the dialogue, sound, and light to create a spatiality. Likewise, theatrical time is not just a series of connected units—minutes, hours, acts, and scenes—but the process by which temporal dimensions and rhythms are revealed through spatial images. (7)

Like Appia, Bryant-Bertail connects time and space by movement through the other. Her analysis, while somewhat theoretical, refers strongly to the actual practice of staging a play. Similarly, Walther Volbach notes that theatre folk have always understood the practical connections between time and space on the stage. For example, he describes how the timing for an entire scene can be upset by the awkwardness of too long of a cross, another example of time connected to space through movement (139). He also describes, as anyone involved in theatre understands, how staging a play in too small or too large a space or at an ill-chosen tempo can have radically detrimental effects upon the performance (139). So both theory and practice reveal the unbreakable link between space and time on the stage.

The Answers of Science

Modern physics makes literal what Appia and Bryant-Bertail speak of more metaphorically. Through the modern age, time and space were primarily seen as distinct and
absolute. That is the view of the universe that Aristotle settled on, and it was reinforced by Newton, who described time and space thusly:

Absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself and from its own nature always flows equably without relation to anything external and by another name is called duration. . . . Absolute space, in its own nature, without relation to anything external, remains always similar and immovable. (qtd. in Akhundov 112)

Newton’s very terms describe time and space as separate, irreconcilable phenomena; however, today’s science tells us that this is not the case. Einstein’s theory of general relativity posits that space and time are not distinct entities at all, but that they are a combined, single unit: spacetime. Spacetime is usually described as an interwoven fabric that is shaped by gravity, like a rubber sheet stretched by the periodic appearance of billiard balls. Furthermore, according to relativity, the key to measuring time and space is movement. Time actually slows down the faster you travel. From the traveler’s point of view, the rate of time is constant, but to two different travelers, their individual rates of time will differ based on their relative speeds. The mathematics of relativity are not as important as the fact that our best scientific knowledge describes space and time as literally the same thing, even if we separate them in our everyday lives.²

Cognitive Science: The Metaphor of Time

Science, though, only takes us so far. As anthropologist Kevin K. Birth says, “There’s often a disjunction between how a culture views the mythology of time and how they think about time in their daily lives. We don’t think of Stephen Hawking’s theories as we go about our daily lives” (qtd. in Ezzell 75). Cognitive scientists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have delved deeply into the methods by which we think of time. They argue that human reason operates primarily through metaphor, and that those metaphors are derived from the brain’s embodiment within the human form, or as they say, “from the everyday embodied experience of functioning in the world” (151). Regarding time specifically, they argue that “most of our understanding of time is a metaphorical version of our understanding of motion in space” (139). The present is here. The future is in front of us. The past is behind us. These metaphors are based upon the physiology of human beings and are nearly universal: We look in the direction of motion; we move towards objects that are in front of us; we encounter those objects sequentially as we move towards them. Ergo, the future is in front of us, and we move to meet it, or it moves to meet us.
According to Lakoff and Johnson, the moving time image, as a person standing in a flowing river of time, or the moving subject image, as a person moving across a landscape of stable time, are two primary metaphors we use as human beings. They cannot say for certain if these metaphors are universal, but they do have evidence that they “are common in the world’s languages,” and they certainly permeate the English language (150). Some other time metaphors, such as “time is money,” are culturally based and are not as widespread. Lakoff and Johnson also contend that these time-as-motion metaphors are so pervasive, so fundamental to our conceptualizations of time, “that we cannot think (much less talk) about time without” them (166). So no matter what science tells us, and no matter what the reality of the universe might be, we cannot help but think of time in terms of motion through space. (Lakoff and Johnson 137–169)

So theatrical theory, physical science, and cognitive science all support the overall concept that time and space and thought are not the separate and stable things that they appear to be. This becomes significant for this thesis, as a violation in time becomes a corresponding violation in space, and vice versa. In fact, it might be more accurate use the term spacetime to describe what we see on the stage, rather than time and space, especially if we follow the line of thought put forward by Appia and Bryant-Bertail. Having established this, I turn back now to the focus of this investigation: rifts in the spacetime of the stage.

The Disruption of Time

In a sense, Lakoff and Johnson’s descriptions of time are more applicable than Einstein’s because they describe human thought that is based on our day-to-day operation in the world, whereas the effects of relativity only become noticeable outside of the range of human existence (e.g., near the speed of light). Lakoff and Johnson describe two tenets of our perception of time: “[1.] Time is directional and irreversible because events are directional and irreversible; events cannot unhappen. [2.] Time is continuous because we experience events as continuous” (138). However, it is these basic properties of time—continuity, directionality, and irreversibility—that Barker, Stoppard, and Churchill break within their plays. Their violations of time create disruptions that, I will argue, work at both a physiological and a sociological level.
Embodied Time

As Edward T. Hall says, “Life on earth evolved in response to the cycles of day and night and the ebb and flow of the tides. As humans evolved, a multiplicity of internal biological clocks also developed” (13). In the brain, for instance, an electrical impulse fires forty times a second, possibly synchronizing the functions of the brain and other bodily rhythms (Lakoff and Johnson 138). We also know that our bodies operate on a circadian rhythm based upon many factors, including the cycle of daylight and darkness and when we eat (Wright 62). Studies have shown that this rhythm operates at a cellular level, that, as science-writer Karen Wright puts it, we are “hard-wired” for it (62). Radical shifts in our time zones, literally, as we travel cross-country, or figuratively, as we shift sleep patterns, can create severe physiological reactions as our bodies work to readjust. This is what jet lag is all about, and this is why shift workers, whose work and sleep patterns change frequently, have an increased occurrence of stress-related illnesses and sleep disorders (Wright 63).

Watching a play—even one with radical dislocations in time and space—is not the same thing as flying cross-country over night or shifting from day- to graveyard shift. However, in the theatre, there is always a certain amount of empathy that occurs between audience and actors. To some extent, the audience experiences the events on stage as if they were the characters. Lakoff and Johnson would call this a type of “empathetic projection”; Bruce McConachie calls it “imaginative projection” onto characters/actors (281; 582). Peter Parshall describes a specific type of empathy that he calls kinesthetic sympathy, the idea that audience members physically react to on-stage physical events. For example, “During the final dueling scene in Hamlet, we know the tip of Laertes’ sword is poisoned, and we may tense our muscles or shift our bodies, trying to avoid the fatal scratch” (358). I would argue that audience members experience time on stage in the same way, that a visceral disruption of time on the stage could have a correspondingly visceral disruption in an audience member, a type of temporal sympathy, in the same category, though not on the same scale, as the physiological disturbances created by jet lag.

Secondly, as I have already noted, Lakoff and Johnson contend that human reason and consciousness “is shaped crucially by the peculiarities of our human bodies [...] and by the specifics of our everyday functioning in the world” (4). Our conceptualizations of time, space, and movement are dictated by the way we move through our everyday lives; specifically, we experience time as continuous and irreversible. Barker, Stoppard, and Churchill present jarring
interruptions in time and space that go against anything that we could possibly experience in our real lives. To some extent, that is the nature of theatre, but at the same time, their temporal interruptions attack a fundamental method by which we perceive the world. These plays are not in imitation of nature, and their temporal discrepancies create mental hiccoughs as they go against the expected.

Some theatrical theorists have picked up this point about the disruptive nature of time on the stage. Bert States argues that all plays create disruptions in time and space simply by setting the scene: “The dramatist assigns his play to a scene […] without troubling to think how radically he has shifted the ground and conditions of our perception of the world. In a stroke he has altered our customary orientation to time and space” (48). Walter Benjamin contends that “a clock that is working will always be a disturbance on the stage. There it cannot be permitted its function of measuring time. Even in a naturalistic play, astronomical time would clash with theatrical time.” To some extent, States and Benjamin agree with certain renaissance theorists, such as Castelvetro and Scaliger, who insisted that stage time should correspond exactly to real time, because to do otherwise would confuse the audience (Castelvetro 141, Scaliger 142). The point of this exploration is that the timeplay of this trio of playwrights does confuse, does disrupt, and does radically shift the groundwork on which the audience is used to standing.

The Discipline of Time

In addition to physiological perceptions of time, which are universal so far as human biology is universal, the human experience of time is also very much culture based. As touched upon earlier, famed anthropologist Edward T. Hall divided the world into monochronics and polychronics, cultures which abide strictly by the clock and cultures that do not. Northern Europeans and Americans—the target audiences of Barker, Stoppard, and Churchill—are monochronic. Monochronic time is scheduled, departmentalized, and linear. Although monochronic time feels natural to those who operate by it, Hall asserts that it is a learned behavior:

Monochronic time is an artifact of the industrial revolution in England; factory life required the labor force to be on hand and in place at an appointed hour. In spite of the fact that it is learned, monochronic time now appears to be natural and
logical because the great majority of Americans grew up in monochronic systems with whistles and bells counting off the hours. (14)

American and English cultures have conditioned their populaces to police their own time. Hall adds that, “it is hard not to respond emotionally when the rules of your own time system are violated. [...] An intellectual understanding of the problem [is not] much help” (22). To Hall, time is culture based, and violations or collisions of time systems provoke unconscious—and frequently distressing—emotional reactions.

Furthermore, time is one of the primary categories of what Michel Foucault calls the disciplines. Discipline, to Foucault, is not just a type of punishment, but a kind of enforcement of order and regulation that developed among specific state institutions—the school, the prison system, the military—during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Discipline is the method by which the state exerts power through individual bodies; it categorizes and labels individuals who fail to conform to the smallest norm, and such deviants experience an entire range of punishments, from physical abuse to public shame. As Foucault explains, “The workshop, the school, the army were subject to a whole micropenalty of time (lateness, absences, interruptions of tasks), of activity [...], of behavior [...], of speech [...], of the body [...], of sexuality [...].” (178). The very first item on this list is time, not in the metaphysical sense, but in the mundane sense that tardiness will be punished. One must perform the correct activity at the correct time.

This sense of discipline persists today: in the workplace, in the school system, and even in the theatre; late spectators miss the show, or are seated inconveniently. Lakoff and Johnson cite an article in which a large American company wanted to pass legislation allowing the criminal prosecution of “time theft” in the workplace, defined as “leaving work early or late, extended lunch hours, excessive personal phone calls, conducting personal business during company hours, unwarranted sick days, and nonstop chitchat at the proverbial water cooler” (165). Americans and Northern Europeans—the specific target audience of our trio of playwrights—are culturally conditioned to respect the clock under threat of punishment. By breaking not only the schedule, but the clock itself, Barker, Stoppard, and Churchill are disturbing deeply ingrained cultural expectations shared by their audiences. The visceral disturbances caused by physiological reactions to time are reinforced by a learned cultural response that equates the mismanagement of time with negative feedback (punishment). Disruptions in spacetime, therefore, attack the audience at multiple levels.
Anachronism

One of the specific violations of time, or spacetime, that Barker, Stoppard, and Churchill use in their plays is anachronism. Anachronism refers to something that is out of time. In drama, the term usually refers to the incident of a modern artifact or cultural practice appearing in a play set in the past, but the reverse is also possible. Jonas Barish, in his study of Shakespearean anachronism, explains that “audience recognition of anachronism is very much a sometime thing, dependent on the nature of the specific instance and on how adroitly the playwright works it into his discourse” and that it “presuppose[s] a certain degree of familiarity on the part of the spectators with the basic historic materials” (33, 30).

A sense of anachronism, then, depends on the audience’s ability to recognize the errors, and much of that depends upon the audience’s own ideological outlook. Medieval thought, to the best of our knowledge, did not distinguish between the past and the present. According to John Burke, “Medieval men lacked a sense of the ‘differentness’ of the past. They saw it in terms of the present; they projected themselves back on the men of the past” (6). This is evident in medieval art, in which Caesar, Alexander the Great, and even Moses are depicted as knights in contemporary armor (Burke 2). A dramatic example would come from The Second Shepard’s Play, in which the characters frequently swear by “Christ,” the “rood,” or the “cross,” even though the play itself is set on the eve of the nativity.

A real sense of anachronism did not develop until the time of the Renaissance, which finally began to distinguish between history and poetry. Much of this stemmed from the realization that the past was different from the present. Pundits started to criticize playwrights for gross mistakes, such as equipping Greek soldiers with pistols (Rackin 104–105). Shakespeare himself is replete with anachronisms, although Barish points out that modern audiences and even modern critical scholars overlook many of his collusions, such as his use of Roman gods in Greek settings (31–32). I would further argue that discrete instances of anachronism would not have been read as such because the expectations of realism did not yet exist. Theatrical conventions of Shakespeare’s time, which included a bare stage, street clothes for costuming, and interactions with the audience, created an expectation more for open imagination than for verisimilitude and historical accuracy. So to indiscriminately assign a sense of anachronism to pre-realistic drama would itself be somewhat anachronistic.
Noticed anachronism, however, disrupts the illusion of reality that most plays since the 19th century have attempted to create. Anachronistic mistakes, such as the sports watch worn by the medieval knight, take the audience out of the scene, reminding them of the artifice of the theatre. Accidental disruptions in space, such as the prop that flies into the audience or the actor who reaches through the “glass” window, create a similar disruptive effect. In my own experience, I have seen how such accidents can upset and distract the actors, taking them out of character. Sympathetic audiences will laugh with the actors and let these moments slide, but such incidents break the illusion of verisimilitude on both sides of the stage.

Intentional use of anachronism can disrupt audiences even more powerfully. Shakespearean scholar Phyllis Rackin describes the effect:

> Any invocation of the present in a history play tends to create radical dislocations: it invades the time frame of the audience and the effect is no less striking than that of a character stepping off the stage to invade the audience’s space or addressing them directly to invade their psychological space. (106)

The purpose of such jarring use of anachronism is usually to draw connections to the time of the performance. Barish, Rackin, and others have pointed out several instances where Shakespeare draws attention to anachronism in much the same way that he frequently draws attention to theatrical artifice. The technique of highlighting anachronism, according to Barish, “conveys[s] wisdom that the playwright is unmistakably eager for us to acquire” (36). For example, while Elizabethan audiences probably would have overlooked the fact that Troilus gives Cressida his sleeve in Troilus and Cressida (anachronistic because Greeks did not have sleeves, whereas members of Shakespeare’s audience did), they could not have helped but notice when Troilus, Cressida, and Pandarus prophesy exactly how their own names would be interpreted at the time of the play’s performance: “Let all constant men be Troiluses, all false women Cressids, and all brokers-between panders!” (3.2.206). It is as if the characters see forward in time to their own fates. The speech has the double effect of adding irony to the narrative and of reminding the spectators they know how the story will end. The anachronistic moment forces the spectators to reevaluate their interpretation of the play from their future perspective.

To summarize, an anachronistic event depends upon the audience’s ability to read the incident as out of place. When playwrights blatantly include anachronistic moments, the purpose is frequently to comment upon similarities between the past and the present. Furthermore, as
Rackin suggests, the invocation of the present in a history play breaks through the “fourth wall” of time, shattering the illusion of verisimilitude as much as a flying prop. Such disruptions force audience members to reevaluate the play from another perspective, usually an objective, future perspective rather than an internal, “in-the-moment” point of view. Because every new perspective carries the potential for a new interpretation, the overall effect of intentional anachronism is to create a multiplicity of meaning by creating multiple points of view.

All three playwrights do not use all of these methods of temporal disruption simultaneously, but neither is each method exclusive of all of the others. The physiological and cultural responses overlap and interweave as Barker, Stoppard, and Churchill present different stimuli, altering the spacetime of their plays by changing its direction and its continuity, undoing events and jumping over time with the power of thought.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1: Barker’s Catastrophic Disruptions

*The Castle* is set in medieval England, yet it contains several elements of anachronism: a 1960s-style feminist commune, an appearance from a group of soldiers who discuss half-tracks and machine guns, and a fly-by from a pair of jets. Barker uses severe anachronism along with disturbances in space to create gaps—fissures of meaning—which the audience must fill themselves. The disruptions in time follow an entire discourse on time and space within the play and reinforce the disruptions in the social order created by the conflict between the women of the commune and their returning husbands.

*The Bite of the Night* also uses anachronism, but in a much more pervasive manner than the abrupt interruptions of *The Castle*. *Bite* is set in either an ancient Troy filled with references to twentieth-century life, or else it is a modern Troy complete with Helen and Homer. Indeed, the presence of Helen and Homer together is itself anachronistic. The anachronism of the setting creates an atmosphere of disturbance and discord, which again parallels the major actions of the play, which involve a series of emotional and physical atrocities. Both plays present us with impossibilities that the audience must reconcile to create their own meaning, or layers of
meaning. Barker’s theatre of catastrophe—the point of which is to cast off logic and coherency—informs much of the working of these plays.

**Chapter 2: Stoppard and the Shape of Time**

*Arcadia* employs two alternating timelines that are set in the same space. In the final scene, the two timelines overlap; both stories occupy the same space simultaneously. The structure ties into a complex discourse about the nature of time and science, notably the theories of entropy, uncertainty, and the second law of thermodynamics, and how sex effectively trumps science’s ability to predict events. No rule of time is actually violated or even truncated; the trick of the play lies in the juxtaposition and overlap of the two worlds.

*The Invention of Love* is actually a dream play, and as such Stoppard breaks all manner of physical rules in regards to time and space. The story is mostly linear, but it also loops, doubles back, and jumps forward, all within the frame of the dream and from the perspective of the dreamer, real-life poet Alfred E. Houseman. Unlike Barker’s violent interjection of soldiers and jets, the disruption of the timeline here ceases to be disturbing as soon as the technique becomes predictable, although the plot itself certainly remains unpredictable. Like *Arcadia*, love and sex interrupt the flow of the dream, drawing Houseman irresistibly back to key moments in his life.

**Chapter 3: Churchill’s Impossible Objects**

Churchill describes *Traps* as an “impossible object, or a painting by Escher, where the objects can exist like that on paper, but would be impossible in life” (*Traps* v). Indeed, the events of the play are entirely contradictory and illogical: A character who is dead reappears without comment. A woman has a baby, then is pregnant with no baby, then is thinking about becoming pregnant. Multiple possibilities of existence succeed each other, overlap, and occur simultaneously. The impossibility of the stage events is emphasized by references to real-life enigmas, such as jigsaw puzzles and Mobius strips. The radical nature of these disruptions creates the potential for an extreme amount of disturbance in the audience.

*Top Girls* employs both anachronism and non-linear story-telling, although in a much more formal and controlled manner than either Barker or Stoppard. The most striking element is the opening scene, which involves a dinner party between historical figures from several different epochs. The actors from the dinner party return in later scenes, double-cast as modern-
day women. Both the content of the opening scene and the double-casting creates resonances between the modern-day characters and their historical counterparts. The timeplay in *Top Girls* appears particularly lucid, generating a number of insightful and valid meanings in both reviews and scholarship.
CHAPTER 1
BARKER’S CATOSTROPHIC DISRUPTIONS

“The play for an age of fracture is itself fractured, and hard to hold as a broken bottle is hard to hold. It is without a message. (Who trusts the message-giver any more?) But not without meaning. It is the audience who constructs the meaning.”

—Howard Barker, program notes for The Bite of the Night

The theatre of Howard Barker is nothing if not disruptive, and much of that has to do with his radically unconventional approach to spacetime in his plays. Two of his most characteristic plays are The Castle, first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1985, and The Bite of the Night, performed by the RSC in 1988. These two plays are complementary in that they both depend upon severe interruptions in the spacetimes of their stories, but they also show an evolution in Barker’s methods in just the three years that separate them. Despite certain oblique interludes, the stories of both of these plays progress linearly; the major temporal distortion in each is anachronism. As I argued earlier, anachronism disrupts time, which creates multiple perspectives, which then generate multiple interpretations and meaning. I would extend this process of meaning making to apply to disruptions of all sorts. Each disruption opens a gap in meaning and presents the audience with choices of how to interpret the play’s events. By making choices—by filling in the gaps—each spectator creates his or her own meaning. Or, a spectator may not necessarily chose one interpretation, but rather may look through several perspectives simultaneously, thereby creating layers of meaning. Disruptions open fissures of possibility. Disturbances in spacetime are even more irregular events and therefore create wider gaps, which then become opportunities to generate more meaning. Barker says as much in his discussion of the theatre of catastrophe, the term Barker applies to his own works and that he describes in depth in his manifesto, Arguments for a Theatre.
The Theatre of Catastrophe

Barker’s descriptions of the theatre of catastrophe are filled with words like rupture, loss, fracture, disassociation, pain, and ambiguity, words that exactly describe the spacetime of his works. Barker explains that “What I was groping towards in plays of that period [...] was an emphatic disassociation, a rupture, between stage and reality, in effect a license to lie, which had, indeed, long existed in the history of the theatre but which had been revoked” (95–96). Barker creates these ruptures and disassociations by ignoring the traditional rules of realism in favor of producing “moments of loss,” which “involve the breaking of the narrative thread, the sudden suspension of the story, the interruption of the obliquely related interlude, and a number of devices designed to complicate and to overwhelm the audience’s habitual method of seeing” (53). One of the major goals of catastrophic theatre is to overthrow the tyranny of a single interpretation, which Barker sees as the inevitable and unfortunate product of the theatres of education and entertainment, and instead to create drama that forces spectators to create their own meaning. He assumes “that the play is not a lecture and therefore owes no duty of lucidity or total coherence” (55).

Superficially, Barker’s theatre of catastrophe sounds identical to epic theatre; however, while their methods are similar, their goals are actually quite different. Epic theatre typically creates a Hegelian dialectic that leads the viewer to a specific conclusion, narrowing down meaning in an effort to comment upon a specific time and place. Barker, however, attempts to create an open-endedness of interpretation, pointing the viewer not in one direction, but in many. This difference will become more apparent as the discussion progresses. Secondly, Brecht and his followers attempted to produce an intellectual reaction by eschewing sympathetic connections to the characters. In contrast, Barker tries to provoke visceral reactions in what he calls moments of pain and beauty, the cathartic moments of tragedy that depend upon empathy with the characters. I will argue later that his spatiotemporal disruptions help provoke these visceral reactions.

The fact that The Castle and The Bite of the Night adhere to Barker’s own theory, a theory that many times simply describes the plays that he has already written, is unremarkable in itself. However, the tenets of catastrophic theatre firmly establish Barker’s intention to challenge his spectators’ normal method of viewing a play with a radically unconventional approach.
Barker’s theory emphasizes that there is no one correct interpretation of these plays and that the very point of his dramaturgy is to disturb the audience. I will take this a step further and show how Barker’s disruptions in spacetime work both within and without the narrative of the play to reinforce and multiply his own efforts to compel the audience to produce their own meaning.

The Castle: Nexus of Disruption

In The Castle, a group of crusading knights return home only to find that the women who remained behind have transformed their English estate into a 1960s-style commune dedicated to nature, fertility, and female sexuality. Stucley, the lord, rejected by his wife upon returning, becomes obsessed with building a castle and in re-transforming his domain into the male-centered culture it once was. His overhaul of society includes the fashioning of a new, phallocentric religion: the church of Christ the Lover. Opposed to the castle’s construction are Ann, Stucley’s wife, and her female lover, Skinner, a witch. Skinner seduces and kills the castle foreman, which leads to a trial in which Stucley punishes her by ordering the dead foreman’s corpse tied to her body. The castle itself continues to grow to ridiculous proportions until its very presence provokes an attack from a neighboring superpower: the Fortress. Ann, pregnant with the castle engineer’s child, kills herself in protest over the castle’s growth, precipitating a mass suicide by other pregnant women who throw themselves from the castle’s walls. Stucley is assassinated by his own retainer, and the survivors make plans to dismantle the castle and create a more balanced society.

The style of the play leans towards the theatrical, but retains realistic elements. The action proceeds chronologically, divided between several scenes. One speech in the play could possibly be addressed directly to the audience, but it could also be delivered as a soliloquy. Otherwise, the characters remain within the world of the stage. The language, while in prose, is certainly theatrically heightened, in what Benedict Nightingale calls, “Barkerese, that weird mix of the overblown and the demotic, rococo and kitchen sink” (“Barker”). The play is certainly theatrical in that the events that take place, while possible, are extreme and stretch between the ridiculous and the grotesque. However, even this theatricality is further punctuated by moments of disruption.
The Castle is filled with disruptions, all of which are predicated to some degree on both will and anachronism. Some disruptions are narrative, taking place within the story of the play. Some are theatrical, in that the artifice of the theatre intrudes upon the action of the story. The most powerful disruptions arise from two key moments of severe anachronism, which disrupt both the narrative and the theatrical frame. The severe anachronisms rip through the story of the play and take the spectators out of the action, making them think about what they are seeing. To some extent, all of the play’s disruptions do this, but the moments of severe anachronism, by invading the time-space of the audience and by contradicting our everyday experience of time in the world (per Lakoff and Johnson), add a visceral kick. The impossibility of these moments capitalizes on the nature of timeplay to work on a kinesthetic level. All of these disruptions fit into a discourse on time and space that runs throughout the play.

Escalating Disturbances

The simplest disruptions in the play are those that occur within the narrative; that is, they are part of the story of the play, and they are recognized and responded to by the characters. Barker presents us with a entire community that is disrupted, pulled out of time and out of joint. The play opens with the jarring contradiction between what the crusaders expect to come home to and what they actually find, and reciprocally, the women’s community is disrupted and ultimately destroyed by the returning men. The women’s self-empowerment is itself one of the fundamental anachronisms of the play. Either the women’s commune is a reflection of modern, “liberated” women, or it is a revival of ancient, female-centered societies. Skinner suggests that the case is perhaps the latter: “And went up this hill, standing together naked like the old female pack” (203), although many reviewers of the original production connected the play to Greenham Common, where, starting in 1981, a group of women lived communally in protest of nuclear weapons being stored on the site. Either way, the women’s assertive behavior is out of sync with the medieval setting; the conflict between the expectations of one time and the behavior of another sparks a violent battle of the sexes that results in murder on both sides.

In addition to this major disturbance, the narrative is rent all along the way with disturbances in the play’s world and in what we would normally expect from reality. The castle itself is one of the major sources of disruption, physically, as it cuts into the landscape, and metaphorically, as it intrudes into the personal lives of the characters. Stucley bases his new
religion, the Church of Christ the Lover, on the theory that castrated monks had censored an affair between Christ and Mary Magdalene. He then crowns the priest of his new church with a carpenter’s bag, no miter being available. Stucley’s punishment of Skinner—strapping a corpse to her body—is grotesque and cruel, and reviewers of the original production commented more on this image than any other.\(^5\) Ann’s suicide precipitates a cascade of pregnant women before a crowd of idle onlookers:

SOLDIER ONE: Raining women!

SOLDIER TWO: Mind yer ‘eads! (244)

All of these events are extraordinary and potentially distressing, but these disturbances are all fully explained within the context of the story.

In addition to the disturbances within the story, the play contains incidents in which the theatrical artifice—those conventions of stage practice that are normally ignored by the audience—intrudes directly into the narrative. Specifically, the castle breaks through the fabric of the theatrical illusion and simply appears on the stage. At the very moment when Krak finishes reading the blueprints for the castle, “Stucley’s long stare is interrupted by a racket of construction as a massive framework for a spandrel [an arch] descends slowly to the floor” (213). In the original production, Jim Hiley observed that “the Pit arena suddenly fills with oppressive noise and a forest of ladders,” what he calls a “devastating image” (1016). The artifice of the set change, something that would normally take place off stage and in the dark, instead noisily bursts into the stage space, interrupting the characters and their entire world.

This is a moment in which Barker creates a gap in meaning that the audience must fill. Charles Lamb suggests that the castle is “summoned out of nowhere in response to a profound impulse of the human mind,” as if Stucley or Krak ripped it out of the sky with sheer will (96). A second possibility is that we have jumped forward in time by several weeks. Either way, the castle’s appearance literally breaks through the spacetime of the play, upsetting the audience’s embodied sense of time and space—not to mention its regular habits of viewing a play—because of the castle’s abnormal entrance. The interruption raises several questions: Was the castle summoned out of will? Did we jump forward in time? Or is this only a theatrical conceit, a convenient scene change without the blackout? Barker introduces these questions, but he answers none of them, leaving it up to the audience to fill in the gaps with their own meaning. How the characters respond would tell us much, but the text does not specify how they react;
therefore, production choices also come into play. The appearance of the castle, by interrupting the narrative, the theatrical framework, and the spacetime of the play, disrupts the audience at several levels, forcing spectators into a thinking mode.

Anachronism: Radical Eruptions

The most disturbing moments in the play are two incidents of severe anachronism, which add the element of the impossible to what are also narrative and theatrical intrusions. To establish anachronism, one must first have a frame of reference. Not surprisingly, Barker remains deliberately ambiguous about the exact time and place of The Castle. What we generally think of as the major English crusades took place between approximately 1100 and 1300 CE, although some crusades took place as late as the 1660s. One assumes, however, that the play is set during the middle ages; the presence of the castle itself suggests this.

The first anachronism is the use of modern language, which Barker uses rather strikingly from the very first moment of the play:

BATTER: [...] You are looking on my meadow. On my meadow which—(He stares in disbelief) No cunt has mown! [...]  
STUCLEY: Oh, the faithless bastards...

BATTER: Fallow, every fucking thing! (199; author’s emphasis)

The use of modern English in a play set at least a hundred years before Chaucer is of course a concession to modern audiences who would find any authentic use of language utterly incomprehensible. However, the use of contemporary slang is not absolutely necessary for a translation from time to time; Caryl Churchill’s Vinegar Tom and Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, both historical plays, each employ a type of language that, even if theatrically heightened, at least says, “let’s pretend that we are in the past.” Barker’s language brings the characters straight into the spectators’ laps. Some productions have emphasized this aspect by dressing the returning crusaders in Hawaiian shirts and sunglasses, further blurring the edges of time that Barker begins (Erstein). The language becomes quickly unnoticed though, as we are obviously asked to accept it as part of the theatrical framework.

The play contains several instances of what probably passes for unnoticed anachronism. Skinner discusses geometry with a level of education probably inaccessible to a medieval ploughman’s wife, even if she is a witch. She also makes a very modern joke about her fashion
predicament: “Fashion of the rotted male, exclusive garment, everybody’s wearing it not to copy” (239). Stucley makes several references to a typical modern English childhood, which Lamb notes is “strictly prochronistic” in the context (88). These incidents are equivalent to the appearance of Troilus’ sleeve; even if they are alien to the medieval world, they are familiar to the world of the audience and so go unnoticed. Where Barker does disrupt his audience is in two moments of intentional anachronism.

Towards the end of the first act, Skinner is left alone on stage. A group of soldiers enter: “In the silence the sound of a metallic movement. Armoured figures appear from different directions. They congregate, are motionless” (228) Barker does not specify what type of armor, if it is medieval plate or modern flack jackets, nor does he say if “metallic movement” refers to knights or tanks; therefore, production choices come into play here. As a group, the soldiers take an oath: “We do vowe no peace shall be on earth, no ear of wheat standen, no sheep with bowel in, no hutte unburn, no chylde with blood in, until such tyme we have our aims all maken wholehearted and compleate!” (228). Notably, this is the only instance when Barker uses any sense of an archaic language. After the oath, the soldiers proceed through a stylized, poetic, highly rhythmic account of the slaughter of a village. Their weapons progress from a “Double-headed axe” to a “Two-handed sword” to an “Eighty millimeter gun.” They also refer to “tracers,” “half-tracks,” and “spent cases”—all elements of modern warfare (229). Rabey describes the event as “a kaleidoscopic litany of authoritarian male bloodlust and carnage, scrambled across and uniting various historical periods, building to an orgasmic or fever pitch of intoxication,” certainly a disturbing and upsetting moment (163). Barker gives no indication in the script that the soldiers actually leave the stage, again leaving it to the production to decide what to do with them for the dozen lines that remain until the act break.

The intrusion of the soldiers is the most disruptive moment in the entire play. They break into the fabric of the narrative with no precedent, no immediate explanation, and no ready interpretive framework. The stylized manner of their litany of violence contrasts sharply with the language of the other scenes. We do not know if they are real or imaginary, if they are part of the narrative or only a theatrical imposition. More importantly, the soldiers are radically anachronistic, perhaps as far as nine hundred years out of time. The anachronism, through the dialog and through potential costuming and sound design choices, cannot help but be noticed. The soldiers have possibly traveled backwards through time, and through the progressive dialogue, they travel
forward again, breaking time’s continuity and directionality. Because this event is impossible in human experience, because it goes beyond stage improbability and breaks physical laws that are ingrained in our bodies and minds, this intrusion creates the possibility of giving the audience a visceral shock. Through the tendency to sympathize kinesthetically with events on stage, the interruption of the soldiers would have the potential to work on the gut and the hindbrain as much or more than on the thinking mind, creating an uneasiness, a sense of wrongness, a double-take. This disturbance would perhaps last only for a moment, and perhaps only on the scale of a hiccough, but it would perhaps be enough to jar a spectator into self-consciousness, into actively thinking about the play, the events, and his or her own body and environment in an attempt to reconcile these radical discrepancies.

Barker does give us a logical out for the appearance of the soldiers: the audience knows that Skinner, who alone witnesses the event, is a witch with the power to see the future. Rabey attributes the event summarily to “her supernatural foresight” (163). However, many questions remain unanswered. Did she physically summon the soldiers into her space, or has the play moved into expressionism? There are no immediate cues that say, “this is the projection of a vision”; the soldiers simply appear, invading the spacetime of the stage. Nor is this a typical, coherent vision as one might expect from a glimpse of the future. So even if Skinner’s powers do account for the event, that explanation is not immediately forthcoming, so visceral reactions will come first.

So what is the point of this anachronistic disturbance? First of all, as Rackin suggests, the leap from past into present invades the timeframe of the audience, confronting the spectators with a play that is suddenly both then and now. This fulfills the primary function of anachronism, using the past to comment on the present of the performance. In this particular case, as the play explores the battle of the sexes and a medieval arms races, most reviewers of the original production connected the play to Greenham Common and the Cold War. However, Barker does something else in the scene besides connecting two points in time. In their litany, the soldiers progress through several ages of time, proceeding from the archaic language of the oath to the weapons of modern warfare, as Rabey says, “scrambled across and uniting various historical periods,” and dragging the audience with them along the way (163). Barker seems to be operating on a larger scale, commenting on humanity as a whole. There is no one era or one
particular atrocity he brings to light in this litany of violence, but rather it is the violent nature of human beings (or at least their violent tendencies) that he showcases.

The second moment of overt, intentional anachronism occurs at the very end of the play:

KRAK: Demolition needs a drawing too... (Pause)
SKINNER: Demolition? What’s that? (A roar as jets streak low. Out of the silence, SKINNER strains in recollection.) There was no government... does anyone remember... there was none... there was none... there was none...! (249)

Like the sudden appearance of the soldiers, the passing of the jets raises many questions. First, are we to believe that jets are passing over the medieval castle? Do the characters hear them? Is this another one of Skinner’s visions? Are they only a theatrical metaphor, a metatheatrical comment made by sound effect? Again, the blatant anachronism demands an immediate reevaluation of what is going on in the scene.

In one sense, the jets could be a response to Skinner’s immediate question about demolition. The jets, and the bombs they bring with them, could be a symbol of the chaotic destruction of modern warfare in contrast to Krak’s insistence that demolition needs a drawing, i.e., needs order. Rabey comments only that “the noise of a modern jet impels urgency,” while Lamb notes that “the jets emphasize the essential contemporaneity of the play” (170; 133). The jets certainly fulfill the traditional use of anachronism to comment on the present. They do not just pass overhead; they streak towards the future, to our present, as if drawing a line between them and us. More so than the soldiers, the jets become a pointing finger, saying that the play as a whole applies to our time, as well. Lakoff and Johnson would call this an application of the moving subject metaphor, where the jets pass over a stable landscape of time. Simultaneously, Skinner asks if we can remember our past, if we can remember a time when there was no need for castles or jets or government. She stands at the center of a space that looks forward to our future and backwards at our past. The jets connect us through time and space.

Gazing Through Space and Time

The moments of anachronism cannot be fully explained until they are put in the context of the discourse on time and space that runs throughout the play. Skinner is a self-proclaimed witch, although the extent of her powers remains ambiguous. “It is the pain of witches to see to the very end of things,” she says (219). This statement frames the play’s discourse on time,
which mostly involves Skinner’s apparent ability to see into the future. Skinner makes several predictions, some of which are fulfilled in the course of the play and some of which we, by virtue of our position in the present, know will come to pass. Her first prediction regards the castle, which she addresses to Ann: “And things we have not dreamed of yet will come of it. […] even the little middle of your heart which you think is your safe and actual self will be—transformed by it. I don’t know how but even the way you plait your hair will be determined by it” (219). Exactly so, Ann changes her hair after taking Krak, the engineer, as her new lover. More importantly, the fulfillment of one part of the prophecy implies fruition of the other, that the castle has invaded and distorted their most intimate spaces.

Skinner delivers her most poignant prophecy during her trial in another address to Ann: This floor, laid over flowers we once lay on, this cruel floor will become the site of giggling picnics, clots of children wandering with music in their ears and not one will think, not one, A Woman Writhed Here Once. The problem is to divest yourself of temporality, is that what you do? (236)

“Writhed” is a double-play on Ann and Skinner’s love-making on the former hill and the fact that Skinner was recently tortured in the castle dungeon. The prediction of “giggling picnics” and “clots of children” is a projection perhaps to our own time. Like Troilus and Cressida making references to Elizabethan customs, Skinner evokes the presence of the audience, in fact drawing them into the scene by referring to their own experiences. Her vision also draws a thread through time via three distinct states of the same space: the hill that once was, the castle floor that now stands, and the picnic grounds that it will become. Past, present, and future are represented by changes in the space, connecting space and time through movement. Skinner’s call to “divest yourself of temporality” is partially a call to the spectators to use their imaginations to see the continuity of space through time. It is perhaps also an explanation of her ability to see the future, as if a witch divests herself of temporality simply by concentration.

However, Barker creates enough ambiguity about Skinner’s powers to generate many questions. Her magic failed to stop the men from returning from the Crusades, and her powers do nothing to hinder the growth of the castle. Only a few lines after Skinner’s initial assertion that “it is the pain of witches to see to the very end of things,” she says, “I do not know how we will win! It is not a failing not to know the end at the beginning” (220). By questioning Skinner’s powers, Barker does several things at once. He forces the spectators to question, not so much
their suspension of disbelief, but whether magic exists within the world of the play. Is Skinner really magical, is she simply strongly intuitive, or is she deluding herself? By presenting conflicting evidence on the point, Barker keeps the audience guessing at the very rules of the game, keeping their minds alert and forcing them to constantly question the larger reality of the on-stage world. This intentional ambiguity is complementary to Barker’s use of timeplay, and both methods fulfill the goal of catastrophic theatre, which is to encourage spectators to create their own individual meanings.

The play’s gaze through the fabric of time looks not only forwards, but backwards, as well. In addition to her prescience, Skinner seems to possess the ability to look into memory; however, just as no one else can see into her future, no one can remember their past. She asks after the castle was built, “Does anyone remember what this place was once? They don’t, they really don’t, the children say the castle has been here a thousand years” (240). Similarly, she claims that none of the future picnickers will be able to recall the flowered hill. Even though Skinner is only questioning memory, she is again breaking the physical rules of time, which is directional and irreversible. Humans can no more see into yesterday than they can see into tomorrow. While this ability of Skinner’s seems less remarkable because we all have a memory that looks into the past, this type of hindsight is really as striking as a prophecy of the future. This slight impossibility, the fact that the door to the past is as closed as the door to the future, makes her questions about the past slightly disturbing in a way sticks in our memories.

Complimentary to Skinner’s discourse on time is Ann’s discourse on space. The two, like spacetime, go hand in hand. The topic of space is introduced very early on, when Ann attempts to persuade Stucley not to stay on the estate:

ANN: Go on.
STUCLEY: To where?
ANN: The horizon.
STUCLEY: I own the horizon.
ANN: Cross it, then. (208)

The horizon is the limit of visible space; in a sense, to cross the horizon is to move as far away as one possibly can. Lamb interprets Ann’s statement as hopeful: “she believes that it is always possible ‘to pass on,’ to begin again somewhere else” (92). However, from the traveler’s point of view, the horizon can never be crossed. The play evokes a bit of relativity here with the emphasis
on the traveler’s perspective, and Krak upholds this view. When Ann seeks a “barren place” with “Nothing to draw the conqueror” to harm her unborn child, Krak replies, “No such place. [...] All places will be conquered” (239). To him there is only one space, one eventuality. Ann, in her final speech delivered to Krak and Stucley, comes to recognize this: “There is nowhere except where you are. Correct. Thank you. If it happens somewhere it will happen everywhere. There is nowhere except where you are. Thank you for the truth. (Pause. She kneels, pulls out a knife.) Bring it down. All this. (She threatens her belly.)” (244). Ann’s final statement proclaims that all space is the same, and this is true in the sense that all space is connected. She abstracts her concept of a universal space to apply to a universal morality, implying that if a wrong happens to one person it also happens to everyone. Ann’s actions prove this law; her personal act of suicide provokes a universal response in the suicides of the other women, as if they are all connected psychically through the fabric of spacetime.

Both discourses tie back into the key moments of anachronism. Skinner has the ability to see all moments, future and past. If the anachronism of the soldiers is taken as one of her visions, then it becomes a picture of the war machine of the castle marching from her time through the next thousand years. Given this prediction, Skinner decides to stop the growth of the castle any way she can; her very next action after the vision is to murder Holiday, the foreman. The anachronism of the litany adds a potential visceral kick to the scene, increasing the likelihood that the audience is paying attention and thinking in this key moment. Unfortunately, Skinner’s tactic fails (although her ordeal with Holiday’s body puts her in a situation to lead the new culture after the castle collapses). With what is really a very similar power, Ann sees all spaces and visualizes the castle spreading death across all the lands. In order to stop it, Ann kills herself, and her tactic succeeds. This takes us to the second major anachronism, the passing of the jets connecting their time and ours, implicitly asking about whatever war machine exists in our own time and what we, as audience members, are willing to do to stop it. The jets overlap with Skinner’s line, “There was no government... does anyone remember... there was none... there was none... there was none...!” (249). Skinner, looking into the past now, questions the necessity of the entire system: Was there any time in which the castle—the war machine—did not exist, could not exist? In addition to addressing the characters on stage, she also asks us, the audience, if we remember. How far back do our own memories stretch? Will we even remember the events in this play after we have left the theatre?
In *The Bite of the Night*, Barker uses many of the same disruptive elements he introduced in *The Castle*, but he takes them to an even greater extreme. Barker himself describes the plot of the play thusly: “a classics teacher at a defunct university [Savage], having driven his father to suicide and his son into vagrancy, takes his favoured pupil Hogbin on a reluctant tour of the Eleven Troys of antiquity, engaging with Helen in a succession of political systems each of which reduces her physically until she is no more than a voice in a chair” (83). This sounds straight-forward enough, but the text itself is not quite as clear. The exact time and place of the play remain ambiguous throughout; it is unclear if Savage really has traveled back in time or if his own university town itself has been overrun by Greeks. Each of the Troys that follows this first conquered city takes on a theme designated arbitrarily, such as Laughing Troy, dedicated to frivolity; Mum’s Troy, dedicated to infants; or Fragrant Troy, dedicated to soap and washing. Helen becomes the scapegoat for every dissatisfaction, and she has first her arms and then her legs amputated at Savage’s command. Savage himself swings back and forth with power, at one time granted god-like authority over the people of Laughing Troy and at another forced to copulate with his estranged wife in public upon a bed of twigs and flint. The play ends with Savage first burying the dismembered Helen alive, then strangling her daughter, then attempting to kill himself. He cannot complete the task, but apparently discovers the self-knowledge he has longed for throughout the play.

The style of the play is extremely theatrical. The play begins with two prologues delivered directly to the audience, and acts two and three also begin with prologues. The prologues themselves are somewhat metatheatrical; the first two advise the spectators on how they should watch the play, while the second two relate the play to modern acts of war and revolution. Several characters, in addition to the prologues, speak directly to the audience. Certain events, such as Helen’s dismemberment, would require theatrical effects and a significant amount of suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience. However, even the theatrical form of the play is disrupted by Barker’s timeplay.
Anachronism: Pervasive Discrepancies

Like *The Castle, The Bite of the Night* is full of anachronisms; however, rather than startling the audience with a few radical interruptions, *Bite* uses anachronism pervasively. Barker added the following to his description of the play’s story:

> The ahistory of this journey is obvious, the collapsing of time and narrative signaling to the audience that I must forsake its conventional expectations of meaning, and the interventions of scenes of interlude which bear only obliquely on the main action, encouraging it to suspend its urge to organize the material until the conclusion of the performance. (83–84)

Indeed, it remains unclear throughout the play exactly when or where the characters are. Barker claims that Savage and Hogbin travel *back* to antiquity; however, if this is true, it is an antiquity filled with modern artifacts. Epson, one of the Greek soldiers, discusses trench warfare, weapon pits, and tanks. He holds Hogbin at bay with a firearm (the type is unspecified, but *firearm* is mentioned explicitly [14]). Helen refers to tainted water and nuclear fall-out. Helen’s daughter, Gay, makes references to plastic surgery. If the story does take place in the past, then Barker is using a medieval sense of time, ascribing every type of modern technology and behavior to the land of “antiquity.”

A second choice is that the play takes place in a modern times. Barker gives the setting of act one, scene one as “The ruins of a University.” Creusa, Savage’s wife, opens the play with the line “Lost in Troy,” and describes this ruined university as a place overrun by soldiers and rape gangs (5). Helen says that she saw Savage attempting to rescue books as the university was sacked. These lines imply that it is Savage’s modern university town that has been sacked by modern Greeks. But if this is true, the characters are still ruled by an archaic type of martial law. After the fall of First Troy, Shade, a soldier, wants to take his captured woman and a mirror and go home; while modern warfare could be said to contain similar examples of pillage and exploitation, Shade’s cavalier request for spoils is rather antiquated. The proceeding Troys are all governed by absolute dictatorships; the center of power shifts, but in no case is there any “government by the people” in the modern sense, nor is there any appeal to a governing outside of the city-state. So the Eleven Troys do not fit into the modern world, either.

By lining the narrative with these anachronisms, Barker gives his spectators no fixed point on which they can hold; nothing and no one are where or when they are supposed to be. In
light of Lakoff and Johnson’s assertions that the mind is embodied in space (and I would add, in time), these little anachronisms have the potential to constantly nudge the spectators out of balance. The world of The Castle was consistent, if bizarre. One reason why the moments of severe anachronism in The Castle are so striking is that they contrast with the rest of the play. Here, nothing, not even the flow of time or the regularity of space, are stable. This technique certainly fulfills Barker’s avowed goal of forcing the audience to suspend judgment until the play is over; there is no stability within the play which would allow a spectator to form a coherent picture. Two outcomes arise from this dramaturgy. In the first, the steady stream of minor disturbances could keep spectators alert, provoking them into thinking about and experiencing the play actively in every moment. In the second, the constant bombardment of contradictory information could leave the audience confused, disoriented, and frustrated. The play actually evokes both reactions from different people, as I will discuss later.

There actually is a way to reconcile the conflicting information presented by the pervasive anachronisms. Instead of creating a situation in which the setting must be either an ancient Troy or a modern university, Barker has created a neither/nor situation: The play is neither in the past nor in the present; consequently, it is both, simultaneously. Savage’s university town has been overrun by ancient Greeks who also carry firearms. The pervasive anachronisms then become a result of this collision. There is a substantial amount of evidence that supports this interpretation. The play proper opens with Creusa’s line, “Lost in Troy,” and she proceeds through a list of occupations: “Turks in Smyrna / Romans in Carthage / Scots in Calais / Swedes in Dresden / Goths in Buda / Japs in Nankin / Russians in Brandenburg” (5). It is a litany of sacked cities throughout time. Troy becomes the primal sacked city, an archetype. All sacked cities could be called Troys, and Troy becomes a metaphorical representation of all sacked cities. The particular Troy being staged could exist not only in two time periods, but in several. Creusa’s historical cross-section is similar to the litany of violence uttered by the anachronistic soldiers of The Castle; both speeches pull the audience through the centuries, giving their respective plays a sense of timelessness and universality. Likewise, the act two prologue compares Troy, Sarajevo, and Hiroshima, while the act three prologue lists revolutionary historical personalities: Stalin, Lenin, Robespierre, Gorky, Brecht. Within the narrative, Creusa tells Helen, “I think you are the enemy of all Troys no matter whose” (56).
Homer’s alleged third epic is called “The Heroic Life of the Citizens of Sacked Cities,” or “The Ruinad,” at title that could easily be substituted for this play (34).

As Barker intends, this explanation for the play’s anachronisms cannot really be seen until one has examined the play as a whole; each individual moment of anachronism would still be as provocative (or as confusing). Furthermore, he complicates the issue with the use of two oblique interludes that punctuate the ends of the first and second acts. These scenes take place in what Rabey calls “a different historical plane” (221). In the first, two Muslim cartographers are picnicking with a European servant. The sense of the scene is that it takes place in the present day, and indeed, Islam did not exist at the time of the original Troy. However, Gay, Helen’s daughter, appears in the scene with a group of soldiers and has the cartographers executed. So if the picnic is in the present, then Gay has traveled through time and space to get there. In the second interlude, Schliemann, an archeologist, is going through the remains of an ancient Troy, which contains artifacts that were used in the previous scene. His servants happen to be the two cartographers from the first interlude, although now they do not speak English. In reality, Heinrich Schliemann was the first archeologist to excavate what we now believe is the site of the real Troy, a city whose origins probably began 4,000 years ago.

With these interludes, Barker piles disruption upon disruption, shifting time and space in a manner that is truly disorienting. Just as the spectators think they might have things figured out, even amidst the confusion of the persistent anachronisms, Barker shifts the groundwork, keeping them off-balance. Both interludes frame the main plot of the play as something that took place in the ancient past, further confusing the issue of when exactly the play takes place. And yet Gay appears in the first interlude, and a real historical figure (although a heavily caricatured of one) appears in the second, which raises more questions about the rules of the game and further destabilizes the on-stage world. Like the severe anachronisms of The Castle, the disruptive power of the interludes works as much on a physical level as it does on an intellectual one; the minor anachronisms contradict the way we experience time in our daily lives, and the interludes further contradict how we experience time within the play. If we empathize kinesthetically with the performance, the interludes thus become a double attack upon our senses. As cited above, Barker’s intention is to forestall the formation of any meaning, and he accomplishes this by calling the very basics of the stage world—its time and place—into doubt.
The final scene of the play is actually another interlude similar to the radically dislocated incidents described above. As the last citizens leave Troy, Savage finds himself standing alone, when the cartographers from the first interlude enter, happily alive, setting up a picnic as they did when we first saw them. “This is a picnic place!” repeats Asafir, reminiscent of Skinner’s projection from The Castle (90). A moment later, Schliemann enters, conducting a tour of what is—from his point of view—an ancient, ruined university. All three major times and spaces of the play have collapsed upon one another, coalescing in this final moment as Savage’s personal world also collapses. Even after all of the other disruptions, Barker manages to upset the play’s world once again with the unexpected collision of these three realities. He breaks all the rules of time here, its continuity, directionality, and irreversibility, throwing the audience for one last loop, if they have not become totally inured to the play’s disruptions. In the final line of the play, Schliemann turns to Savage and asks, “Are you on the tour?” (90). Savage himself has become an artifact to be examined by scholars of the future. This final moment is confusing because we do not know if we are in ancient Troy, Schliemann’s dig in 1902, or some time and place in the future. What is clear is that Savage himself is lost and disjointed, an anachronism in his own time, or in whatever time this is. Like Skinner, he stands in the middle of a continuum, in a space that looks forwards and backwards through time.

Disruption and Discourse

The discourse on time and space in The Bite of the Night is not as explicit as that in The Castle, partially because of Barker’s vow to remove a message from the play. However, the play’s major actions and specific speeches still point towards certain conclusions. As a whole, the play questions the artificial and arbitrary construction of history, culture, and desire.

History and the formation of history is naturally a major theme in a play that explores the evolution of Troy. The play asks how history is formed, both in the moment of the act and as it is recorded for posterity. Our knowledge of Troy, for example, comes from an amalgamation of historical, mythical, and literary accounts. The opening conversation between Savage and Hogbin frames this debate. Hogbin claims that “the seduction of Helen is a metaphor for the commercial success of the tribes of Asia Minor and the subsequent collapse of the Peloponnesian carrying trade” (8). Savage replies bluntly, “No. It was cunt” (8). Already the play presents two totally contradictory versions of Helen of Troy. Barker exacerbates this dichotomy as the play
continues. MacLuby argues, “The pruning of Helen may have been—this is the nature of political situations—spontaneous. [...] What do you think History is, deliberation? On the other hand it may have been the outcome of long and acrimonious debate within the ruling circle. What do you think History is, spasms?” (28) MacLuby presents two valid, but completely contradictory views of history. Appropriately, the play itself, via all of its timeplay, is a contradictory presentation of history. Baker also summons Homer onto the scene, whom Helen describes as her creator. Homer describes her creation as an arbitrary literary decision: “No one admires Helen. It is not admiration Helen wants. If I had made her admirable, who would know her name?” (63). The recorders of history, the play says, have as much or more to do with how we remember it than the actual events.

The construction and (literal) deconstruction of Helen dovetails into the historical theme. The prologue to act two argues that Helen was no more the cause of the sack of Troy than Sarajevo was the cause of the first world war; however, to the invading Greek soldiers, Helen is the cause, the justification, and the reward. One of the soldiers rages when he discovers that the actual Helen does not uphold the picture-perfect image he created of her: “This was the cause of ten years’ bleeding and now look ‘er, bare legs and filthy back—It makes a pig of everyone who raged for ten years at the gates if she’s to be a slut with unwashed legs” (30). Helen must be perfect in order to justify the war, and the soldiers will paint her so, no matter what her actual behavior. And no matter how badly she is mutilated, she remains Helen of Troy, inspiring awe and desire in those around her. The play asks how much of that desire is genuine and how much is artificially constructed. As the war fades and the various Troys develop, the populace still blames Helen for any general dissatisfaction. “The hate must go somewhere,” Gay explains, “The hatred must. If only we had Helen! She could be the object but now it’s the state!” (87). It is a short step to extrapolate the construction of Helen to scapegoatism and political expediency of all sorts.

Throughout, will and thought are extremely powerful in the on-stage world. At several points, Savage causes events to occur simply by desiring for them to happen. He wishes to be rid of his son, and MacLuby appears to take him away. He silently wishes to kill Helen, and Mac-Luby hands him a spade with which to bury her. He calls for suppliants across an empty stage, and a crowd appears. None of these events are magical; it just always happens that someone conveniently responds to Savage’s expressed desires. This behavior of the on-stage universe
suggests that this is no real world at all, but merely an imaginary landscape where Savage meets his own demons. If the entire play is a tour through “psychic essence,” as Rabey calls it, then that explains all of the play’s anachronisms and time travel (212). However, the play is not nearly so clear as to be to say with any certainty that “it’s all a dream”; the world is real enough to the people who inhabit it.

Of course, there is no correct answer to any of these questions. Barker revels in ambiguity; “if a scene might mean two things,” he says, “it should not be reduced to one” (46). His point is to force the audience to think about what they are seeing and create their own meanings. Each digression, each juxtaposition of timeframes, each shattering of expectation forces the spectators to re-evaluate the scene before them as it is happening. It is a work-out for the mind. As Barker suggests, spectators—or even readers—cannot reach any conclusion until after the end of the play because each possibility is contradicted by other evidence. The key to accomplishing this ambiguity is the constant disruption of the spacetime of the play. To be sure, the play is filled with many mundane, but equally disturbing, interruptions: Fladder’s tongue is ripped out, Helen is mutilated, Hogbin is melted down into soap, Helen suffocates her baby using her own breasts. Rabey compares the play to *Titus Andronicus* or *King Lear*, where every worst possibility is brought to fruition. But the play is more then just a series of atrocities; one is horrified, but never lost in *Titus Andronicus*. Here, the audience is kept constantly off-balance by the pervasive anachronisms and the oblique interludes, which attack the audience intellectually, through their seeming randomness, and viscerally, through their opposition to embodied time. Barker says of his work in general that “the audience participate in the struggle to make sense of the journey, which becomes their journey also. Consequently, what is achieved by them is achieved individually and not collectively. There is no official interpretation” (46). The point is to force the audience to fill in the blanks, and this type of meaning making would not be possible without the play in time.

**The Role of Desire**

As discussed in the introduction, human thought or will is the power that breaks through time and space in each of the six plays examined here. In Barker’s plays, will manifests itself as
desire. Desire—usually sexual, but sometimes intellectual—is a major theme that runs through all of Barker’s works. Lamb calls The Castle a type of theatre of seduction and argues that the entire play revolves around desire: Stucley and Skinner for Ann, Ann for Krak, and Krak for revenge. Specifically in The Castle, sexual desire and indomitable human will are the literal elements that rip through the fabric of spacetime to bring the play’s disparate events together. Just after the men return, Skinner goes on a harangue demanding why their husbands did not die in the Crusade, “an ant could pass through a bonfire easier!” she cries (204). She realizes, though, that it is Ann, or rather Stucley’s desire for Ann, that kept them alive: “You drew him. [...] With your underneath. [...] Down there called to him across the spaces!” (204). The castle itself was brought into existence by sheer will, and it was Ann’s single act of will that tore it apart. Very possibly it is Skinner’s will—her visions as a witch—that provoke the two key anachronisms.

The Bite of the Night is replete with images of desire. Helen, Savage, Creausa, and Hogbin discuss it explicitly. The characters are all driven by their desires for each other, and the most powerful person is the one who can withhold an object of desire from someone else. An implicit question of the play is “at what point does Helen of Troy become undesirable?” Helen herself asks in her pruning, “What joint or knuckle, what pared-down, shredded, particle would serve to be the point at which you would say stop, Essential Helen?” (48, 2.3). Is there a smallest part that can be loved? Does sexual desire exist in the body at all, or is it something else, a matter of charisma and personality? Even reduced to a torso on a plank, Helen is still the most forceful character on stage and apparently still seduces the teenage boys of Troy. But the aspect that drives the plot (such as it is) and instigates Savage’s initial rupture in spacetime is Savage’s unquenchable desire for knowledge. Barker subtitles the play “An Education,” and it is Savage’s Faustian quest that ties the piece together. “Knowledge!” Savage shouts over and over again, as justification for his own crimes or in response to the question, “What do you want?” (31). One of the strongest images in the play is Savage’s description of knowledge as a suite of rooms:

And to enter each room you must leave with the woman at the door some priceless thing, which feels part of yourself and your identity, so that it feels like ripping skin [...] and at each successive door the piles are less because few stagger such long distances, until there comes a door at which there like a small, white rage stained as a dishcloth, which may be sanity. (19)
In his lust for knowledge, Savage is willing to sacrifice more, experience more than even Faust in his quest to enter his final room. His desire pulls him back and forth across the ages.

**Critical Reactions**

Does the theory work in practice? Do these disruptions create noticeable reactions in a real audience? The answer is: sometimes. *The Castle* is the more frequently produced of the two plays, and it has actually had several runs in the United States. Initial reviews commented upon the play’s successful combination of “contemporary and historical time” particularly regarding the final moment with the jets (Wardle). Almost all of the critics who reviewed the initial production linked it to nuclear escalation or the Greenham Common protests. Those who criticized the play found it confusing and disjointed; Francis King complained that “as always, Mr. Barker is trying to say a number of things simultaneously and says none of them with much coherence” (1017). So the anachronisms did work, both to contemporize the piece and to disrupt the audience; however, to some, both the anachronistic and the mundane disruptions proved to be too overwhelming to create any solid meaning. Or, as Michael Coveney so descriptively puts it, “the story line heaves and shatters under episodes of theatrical and symbolic elephantitis” (1019).

Of the six plays reviewed here, *The Bite of the Night* is probably the least successful in terms of popularity and critical acclaim. Theatre goers avoided it; popular critics lambasted it. The RSC put a warning label into the program apologizing for the running time, which clocked in at just over five hours (Barker *Arguments* 84). Reviewers of the original production called it “impenetrably difficult” (Billington 1193), an “exercise in misanthropy” (Shulman 1196), and “an enormously frustrating experience, a desperate attempt to make sense of its contradictions, which rarely succeeds in Barker’s avowed aim of freeing the imagination” (Edwards 1198). Many critics walked out at the second intermission. Several of the original reviews expressed anger—at Barker, the production team, anyone—perhaps suggesting that Barker’s constant disruptions did work at a visceral level, evoking powerful emotional responses from his audience.

A survey of the initial reviews further reveals an interesting phenomenon of which Barker would approve. Of the sixteen critics who reviewed the first production, four praised the
production, nine blasted it, and three perhaps appreciated the play while not really liking it. Yet many of the reviewers, even some of those who otherwise panned the production, offered explanations of the play’s theme. No two answers were exactly alike, but all of the explanations were valid. One said that we never learn from the past because we do not understand it (Conway 1198). Another said the play asks, “What is knowledge? and how it transmitted?” (Dunn 1197). A third said the theme was a proof that history is made of convenient mythologies (Billington 1193). The variety of these interpretations would seem to fulfill Barker’s goal to create individual meaning, even among those critics who did not really enjoy it. Secondly, Barker claims that although the play was not popularly successful, a stalwart group of spectators returned for second and third viewings (90). To a select few, then, Barker’s discordant style was eminently successful.
CHAPTER 2
STOPPARD AND THE SHAPE OF TIME

SEPTIMUS: When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone, on an empty shore.
THOMASINA: Then we will dance.
—Arcadia

“Love is a piece of ice held fast in the fist.”
—Sophocles, The Loves of Achilles

As we have seen, Barker’s primary method of timeplay is anachronism; his plays proceed linearly, but he interrupts the narrative with abrupt moments of characters and objects out of time. The plays of Tom Stoppard are much more harmonious, but his timeplay is no less essential to the meaning of his works. Both Arcadia, first performed in 1993, and The Invention of Love, which premiered in 1997, employ non-linear story-telling. Rather than being told from start to finish, the stories of these plays jump back and forth through time, showing glimpses of the beginning, middle, and end, but not in that order. The structures of these pieces—their very shapes—reinforce the plays’ themes and create meaning of their own. Whereas Barker’s timeplay creates gaps that the audience must fill with their own meanings, Stoppard tends to work with layers. Stoppard’s incidents of temporal disruption work like a good pun; there is a primary meaning that is obvious and a secondary (or even tertiary) meaning that is subtle. The audience will take away as much meaning as layers they can uncover; the spectators must still work hard, but in a different way from Barker’s audience. In Stoppard’s most striking moments, he forces the audience to see from two perspectives simultaneously—literally, from two different time periods—thereby creating a stereoscopic view of time and more layers of meaning.
Arcadia: Temporal Palimpsest

Story and Structure

The play opens in the year 1809, in a room in a stately English country house, where Septimus Hodge, age twenty-two, tutors Thomasina Coverly, age thirteen. We quickly learn that Thomasina is a dangerously precocious child, who demonstrates both emotional insight and a visionary talent for mathematics. Septimus, meanwhile, has recently had an affair with Mrs. Chater and is called to account by her husband, who demands a duel. Lord Byron also happens to be at the estate (though he remains off-stage); he seduces first Lady Croom and then the aforementioned Mrs. Chater. Jealous, Lady Croom evicts Byron and the Chaters from the estate, leaving the duel between Septimus and Chater un-fought. These events alternate with scenes set in the present, where two researchers, Hannah Jarvis and Bernard Nightingale, attempt to reconstruct the world of 1809. Hannah is researching the estate garden’s transformation from an Arcadian paradise into a picturesque Gothic landscape, while Bernard mistakenly believes that Byron shot and killed Chater in a duel that never actually happened. The action in both times takes place in the same room. Throughout the play is a discussion of mathematics, determinism, sex, and death. In the past, Thomasina hits upon a theory of heat that predicts the eventual decay of the universe, a theory that Valentine, in the present, explains as the second law of thermodynamics. In the final scene, the two timelines overlap; characters from both past and present occupy the stage at the same time, walking past each other, talking through each other, but never interacting. In the present we learn that Thomasina died in a fire and that Septimus went mad because of it. In the past, we watch Septimus and Thomasina (now sixteen) dancing together on the eve of her death, oblivious to their dooms; simultaneously in the present, we watch Hannah dancing with young Gus Coverly, their futures unknown to them and to us.

Stylistically, Arcadia is played with typical fourth-wall realism. No one addresses the audience or speaks in soliloquy. The modern characters use colloquial language, while those in 1809 speak more formally, giving a sense that they are in the past. Period costuming also differentiates between the two worlds. Nothing—at least initially—goes beyond the expectations of late-twentieth century realism.

Internally, the progress in each timeline is perfectly linear; the non-linear aspect of the play comes from the alternation of the two, the jumping back and forth between times (See Table
Scenes one, three, and six take place on successive days in 1809, while scenes two, four, and five take place over about three weeks “in the present day,” with a brief lighting change to 1809 at the end of scene four (15). Until scene seven, the final scene, the two time periods are kept entirely distinct. The script is marked by formal scene separations, and in performance, the scenes would need to be divided by blackouts or other lighting changes to set props and rotate actors. Stoppard assumes this separation when he writes directions such as “The lights come up on the same room,” at the beginning of scene two (15).

Table 1: *Arcadia* Scene Breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene 1</th>
<th>April 10, 1809</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scene 2</td>
<td>Present (1993)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scene 3</td>
<td>April 11, 1809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 4</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 5</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene 6</td>
<td>April 12, 1809</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scene 7a</td>
<td>Present: Regency Party Day</td>
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<td></td>
<td>June 1812</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scene 7b</td>
<td>Present: Regency Party Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June 1812: The Following Week</td>
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Scene seven is the exception to this pattern, or rather, it is the culmination of the pattern. It opens with Valentine, Chloë, and Gus, characters from the present, putting on period costumes for the long-awaited fancy-dress ball that will take place that evening. Already, it seems as if they have traveled backwards in time. A few minutes later, Thomasina and Augustus, from the past, “burst in” to the room, while the characters from the present remain on the stage (77). Neither group acknowledges the other; they are each in their own times, but they share the space of the stage. The dialog overlaps slightly, but for the most part, one group finds a reason to remain silent while the other group speaks, thus dividing scene seven into several mini-scenes; the formal separation of timelines has begun to collapse. There is a major transition in the middle of the scene from day to night (described as 7a and 7b in the table). Again, characters from both
times appear; for those in the present, it is later that evening, while for those in the past, a week has gone by. The separation of worlds totally collapses at this point, as dialog from past and present interweave line-by-line. Septimus and Thomasina dance to the music from the garden party, while Hannah and Gus waltz awkwardly in Regency dress.

The motion of the play is opposite that of nature. In life, we move freely through space, but in time, we are moved with the current. The play, on the other hand, remains fixed in space (the single set) and yet moves freely through time. The structure of the play reverses the way we normally experience the world, but the formal separations between scenes mitigate any disturbances this motion might cause. Stoppard still reminds us of this movement through certain visual elements; Noakes, the landscape architect, has prepared a prospectus of the garden with before and after images that both he and Hannah flip through: before and after, future and past. *Time* is the element in play, rather than space, which the final scene, with its overlap, poignantly demonstrates. And yet, no physical law is actually broken (with one significant exception, to be discussed later); the movement is all theatrical conceit, a cheat. Somehow, as Hannah flips the garden book in the same way that Stoppard flips scenes, we realize that we are getting away with something.

This is where Foucault’s disciplines come into play. The disciplines, and monochronic culture in general, enforce a strict regulation of time with the threat of punishment. In this play, however, we escape this regulation, and yet no laws of time or physics are actually broken. The movement is a cheat made possible by the magic of the stage. It is as if we have skipped our lesson and will not be punished for it. This sense of “getting away with something” increases as the impossibility of the stage events increase, becoming most powerful with the overlap of timeframes in scene seven. By transcending the rules, this cheat of time can create a sense of freedom, delight, or wonder. Some critics hit on this when they call Stoppard’s structure “exhilarating” (Lahr 112) or “brilliant” (“Arcadia” [Nightingale] 407). Barker’s anachronisms, which are short, abrupt, and confusing, do not provide this same sense of escape; they interrupt the narrative and then disappear. A phenomenon cannot really be disruptive if it takes place over twenty-five minutes, which is the length of scene seven. Even in the long *Bite of the Night*, Barker constantly shifts ground, keeping his audience unbalanced, but Stoppard allows his audience to become comfortable with his timeplay. The alternation of timelines, which extends even into the final scene, creates a predictable pattern. And yet, the simultaneity of scene seven
remains incredibly powerful, because the impossibility of the overlap still works on our embodied sense of time, and Stoppard still has disruptive moments, when he breaks his own pattern. I will discuss these moments later on. In the meantime, it is important to note that the alternating format creates significant meanings throughout the play, in particular through the juxtaposition of scenes and the discrete revelation of information. The overall significance of this shape is probably best explained in conjunction with a discussion of the play’s major themes.

**Heat, Sex, and Time**

All of the play’s major themes are tied up in a discussion of heat, which operates as a quadruple metaphor. First of all, the play includes an elaborate discussion of physical heat. What Thomasina describes in her mathematics primer in 1809 is a description of the second law of thermodynamics. Secondly, heat is used as a metaphor for physical passion. As Septimus describes the amorous Mrs. Chater, “her chief renown is for a readiness that keeps her in a state of tropical humidity as would grow orchids in her drawers in January” (7). One need not look too far for the relationship between heat and sex; Lakoff and Johnson list *Affection Is Warmth* as a primary metaphor (50). Coinciding with physical heat and sexual heat is the idea of heat as chaos or disorder. Valentine discusses heat as entropy (discussion below), while both Lady Croom and Chloë come to the conclusion that sexual energy, more than anything else, disrupts the ordered Newtonian universe. Finally, heat—especially fire—is used throughout as a symbol of destruction and loss. The library at Alexandria, the letter from Byron, Septimus’s papers, and even Thomasina are destroyed by fire; heat consumes knowledge, love, and souls.

So what does heat have to do with time? This is where the second law of thermodynamics comes into play. The second law states, in plain terms, that heat will normally travel only from hot bodies to cooler ones. As Valentine explains to Hannah, a cup of tea sitting in a room will never warm up; it will only cool down until it reaches room temperature. Heat moves in one direction only: from hot to cold, from order to disorder, and this behavior of heat, in part, is *what makes time irreversible*. Entropy—the tendency of systems to increase in disorder—applies to processes other than heat transfer, such as the mixing of ink and water, or a desk that grows cluttered over the school year. Science-writer James Gleick explains that “The mixing [of ink and water] never reverses itself, even if you wait till the end of the universe, which is why the
Second Law is so often said to be the part of physics that makes time a one-way street” (257). 

Thomasina and Septimus paraphrase Gleick’s argument:

THOMASINA: When you stir your rice pudding, Septimus, the spoonful of jam spreads itself round making red trails like the picture of a meteor in my astronomical atlas. But if you stir backward, the jam will not come together again. Indeed, the pudding does not notice and continues to turn pink just like before. Do you think this is odd? […] You cannot stir things apart.

SEPTIMUS: No more you can, time must needs run backward, and since it will not, we must stir our way onward mixing as we go, disorder out of disorder into disorder until pink is complete, unchanging and unchangeable, we are done with it forever. This is known as free will or self-determination.

The content of the play asserts time’s irreversibility, a quality that is predicated on the behavior of heat, which doubles as a metaphor for human behavior. In contrast, the play’s very structure, by flipping back and forth through time, cheats this irreversibility. Foucault’s disciplines come back here; the content of the play drives home the lesson that time is irreversible, while the structure emphasizes the fact that we are cheating that lesson. By explaining the rule, Stoppard makes sure that we know he is breaking it, and by breaking it, he emphasizes the fact that the characters, like us in our daily lives, cannot. Both we and they are inextricably bound up in the flow of time, and this doubly reinforced message takes us into the next major theme: the uncertainty of knowing the future or the past.

**Determinism, Prediction, Uncertainty, and Chaos**

The debate between determinism and free will, prediction and uncertainty run through the play from its earliest moments. Once again, Thomasina asks the question in 1809: “if you were really, really good at algebra you could write the formula for all the future,” and Valentine answers it in the present day: “We can’t even predict the next drip from a dripping tap when it gets irregular. […] the smallest variation blows prediction apart, and the weather is unpredictable the same way, will always be unpredictable” (5; 48). Mathematically, a recent branch of science called chaos theory, which is predicated on entropy and the second law of thermodynamics, explains the unpredictability that Valentine is talking about. Romantically speaking, and within the world of the play, it is the heat of sexual attraction—“people fancying people who aren’t
supposed to be in that part of the plan”—that blows prediction apart (73). At the same time, all of these factors—entropy, chaos, sex—also make the past unknown. It is primarily this indeterminacy that the shape of the play illustrates.

The main plot of the present-day timeline involves Bernard’s quest to prove that Byron shot Chater in a duel over Mrs. Chater. Every visit into the past lets the audience know that he is dead wrong. In addition to Bernard’s major mistake, he and the others make several smaller misjudgments regarding the painting of the hermit, added as a joke by Thomasina; the Byron book reviews, actually written by Septimus; and the painting of Byron and Caroline Lamb, mistakenly believed not to be of them. Bernard’s great blunder is a case of leaping to conclusions; the smaller mistakes are inaccuracies that reflect the uncertainty of examining the past. Other incidents, such as the burning of the library of Alexandria, discussed in depth by Thomasina and Septimus, represent cases of real loss; the plays of Aeschylus are irrecoverable. “You’d have to be there,” is the refrain Bernard uses as a defense and an attack, but we cannot have been there, nor can we unstir the jam from the pudding nor reverse the flow of time. What we are left with is an unavoidable uncertainty, and the structure of the play, the juxtaposition of past and present, investigators with investigated, shows us this in every scene.

The audience watching Arcadia is in a position similar to Skinner standing on top of her hill, looking to the past and the future, frustrated by the blindness of those around her. She has stepped outside of time. As audience members, we have also stepped out of time in regards to the play; John Lahr comments that the alternation between past and present “provides the audience with the exhilarating illusion of omniscience. We become cosmic detectives” (112). Unfortunately, in real life, we are all as blind as Bernard (though some people, like Hannah, are better scientists). Once again, the structure of the play, by putting us in a superior position but allowing us to experience the limited view of each time period, reinforces this phenomenon in a way that no other method could. But the greatest strength of Stoppard’s timeplay lies not in the juxtaposition, but in the overlap.

Simultaneity and Stereoscopic Time

The most striking moments of Arcadia come not from the juxtaposition of timelines, but from their intersection. Primarily, this occurs in scene seven. The stereoscopic view that
Stoppard creates by mixing past and present works on several levels, visceral, intellectual, and emotional, allowing the audience to take away as much meaning as layers they perceive.

The stereoscopic view of time begins when we see Valentine and Chloë in Regency dress, and it comes to fruition when Thomasina and Augustus burst into the room. This creates the temporary illusion that the characters are traveling through time, invading each other’s worlds, which in a sense, they have been doing all along. The researchers have fixed their gaze upon the past, while Thomasina’s mathematical genius has allowed her to glimpse the future. But what we have now is the actual overlap of bodies in space, or more specifically, bodies from different times moving through the same space simultaneously. This is not some trick of film; the bodies are real, and they are moving through a space that is real. Their presence is also in total contradiction to every experience of time in our daily lives; our embodied, visceral sense of time screams that this is unreal. As Hunter describes, Stoppard’s dramaturgy, with the “bursting in” of Thomasina and Augustus onto the scene, suggests that Stoppard is intentionally playing to a visceral reaction: “Suddenly we are being asked to accept simultaneity. There is no time to brood on this, because in another typically Stoppardian reversal of cliché, the past is not some misty fade-in but a noisy intrusion” (196). Visceral reactions, whatever they are, will come first.

So what are those reactions? Hunter calls the final scene “electrifying” and “hair-raising” (200; 196). Anne Barton describes it as “haunting” and “magical,” while Tim Appelo calls it “spectral” (30; 613). These descriptions point to a hindbrain reaction, and indeed, Hunter relates the scene to a ghost story (196). Our embodied minds know that this is an impossible event, thus provoking these chilling reactions. However, at the same time, we understand that the two groups of characters do not perceive each other, that the laws of physics remain intact. This creates more and more a sense that we are “getting away with something,” in terms of breaking the discipline of time. This combination of effects—the visceral reaction to the bodies in space combined with the sense that it is allowed—gives the scene its stunning impact. The result is an increasing sense of wonder, a joyous celebration of the magic of theatre.

To be sure, the overlapping timelines work on many levels, including an intellectual level that can appreciate the visual metaphor. Hannah, Bernard, and Valentine are insufferably close to the objects of their study and yet, as the cliché goes, they are infinitely far apart. The scene is complicated by the fact that characters from different times seem to respond to one another. Septimus asks a question about Thomasina’s equations that Valentine responds to, although
Valentine is actually speaking to Hannah. Chloë bursts into the room, seeming to cause Lady Croom to complain of a disturbance, when really she is complaining about Noakes’ steam engine. Septimus and Hannah, each pouring over a copy of Thomasina’s lesson book (the same book, though one older), simultaneously “turn the pages doubled by time” (78). The physical proximity creates a constant kinesthetic suspense as the characters skirt closer and closer, physically and verbally: Will the characters really see each other? And on a more theatrical level, what would the characters do if the actors accidentally crossed the barrier? Reviewers of the original production frequently commented on the skill with which director Trevor Nunn kept the groups of actors apart. These interactions and near interactions can evoke physical chills, intellectual appreciation, emotional sympathy, or a comprehensive awe.

The epitome of Stoppard’s stereoscopic vision is the double-role of Augustus, the 15-year-old brother of Thomasina in 1809, and Gus, Augustus’s direct descendant in the present, played by the same actor (the only one who is double-cast). The audience does not meet Augustus until scene seven, when the barriers between worlds break down, although Gus has been on and off stage from scene two. Hunter says of them that “Teasingly, with a faint shiver of the paranormal, they link the two periods of the play, and prepare for the simultaneity of the great final scene” (190). Indeed, Augustus takes Thomasina’s portrait of Septimus and Plautus, and 180 years later, Gus gives that same portrait to Hannah. Stoppard provides one moment, at the very end of the play, when the audience might—and probably would—mistake Gus for Augustus, thus creating one more instance of surprise and temporal disorientation. Gus and Augustus embody the duality of the two time periods, but they simultaneously act as an element of continuity.

The duality of Gus and Augustus and the simultaneity of the entire last scene should not entirely surprise us (even though it does, of course), because in fact Stoppard has been overlapping timelines throughout the entire play—with props. The first actor to be double-cast is not Gus and Augustus, but Plautus and Lightning, the tortoise that plays a role in both time periods. Likewise, the apple that Gus brings on in scene two becomes an object for Thomasina’s drawing lesson in scene three. Props in general play a very important role in this play; each major artifact exists in two versions, one new in 1809, and one old, in the present. As Stoppard tells us in his stage direction, “where an object from one scene would be an anachronism in another (say a coffee mug) it is simply deemed to have become invisible” (15). From the
beginning, the audience has had a double-view of time as they watch the various props collect on
the set’s central table. The duality of objects both prepares the audience for the more significant
duality of the end of the play, and it also sets up the play’s only real impossibility.

*Arcadia* breaks the laws of reality only once, and that transgression occurs via the sharing
of props from one time period to the other. In the final moments of the play, Hannah drinks from
Septimus’s wine glass (93). We know both the decanter of wine and the glass belong in the past,
because we saw Septimus use them just a minute before. The moment is subtle, to be sure; if the
audience is not paying attention, they will miss it. It is not as if Septimus stops and wonders
where his wine glass went. But Stoppard does call our attention back to the glass a few moments
later, indicating that Hannah “pours herself more wine” (96). Up to this point, the props have
remained entirely distinct; as Stoppard indicated in his stage direction, any anachronistic item
becomes invisible. It is precisely this firm rule that makes Hannah’s breaking of it so remarkable,
and breaking the physical rules of time compounds the impact of the moment by disrupting our
embodied sense of time. It is as if the fabric of spacetime has become increasingly sheer
throughout the evening, and Hannah has finally reached through it. There are physic reverbera-
tions in this moment. Hannah has spent the entire play searching for the Sidley Hermit—
Septimus; all her thoughts and energies have been bent on him, reaching through time, until
finally she is able to reach through time in a slightly different way. Additionally, Hannah is in
many ways Septimus’s future counterpart. After Thomasina’s death, Septimus spends the rest of
his life as a hermit, alone, desperately seeking the end of Thomasina’s equations, which can
never be found. Throughout the play, Hannah has shown herself to be austere, aloof, focused
only her research. She tells Chloë: “I don’t want to dress up and I don’t want a dancing partner,
least of all Mr. Nightingale. I don’t dance” (33). Hunter asks, “will she too be an unattached
hermit-like researcher all of her days?” (198). All of this comes across in one simple moment of
Hannah picking up a prop, and it takes the audience directly into the play’s very final moment,
the double waltz between Hannah and Gus and Thomasina and Septimus.

The double waltz at play’s end is both the emotional and structural climax of the play.
Emotionally, it is an incredibly poignant evocation of pity and fear. We should pity Thomasina
and Septimus, knowing their doom, and we should fear for Hannah and Gus and their unknown
future. Additionally, we should fear for ourselves and our own unknown futures. In real life,
scientists believe they have proved Thomasina and Valentine’s thesis, that the universe will
expand forever, dispensing heat until everything, as Valentine says, is at room temperature (as opposed to collapsing again in a potential big crunch). But on a more personal scale, the double vision of the dancing couples and their fates—one determined, one unknown—is a visceral reminder of our own unknown fates and the possibility that we—like Thomasina—could die tomorrow. Structurally, the simultaneity is the culmination of a process that has taken place since the beginning of the play: the alternation of timelines. The two strings have been drawn closer and closer together until they are finally as one. The emotional impact of this moment can only be achieved via the overlap of time periods; by layering time and space, Stoppard creates layers of meaning. The effect would not be same if the dances were played in sequence, nor if they were separated by some other barrier. It is only by having the specific knowledge that we do and by watching those specific bodies move through a real space simultaneously that gives the final moment of Arcadia such a powerful impact.

**The Invention of Love: A Dream of Time and Space**

**Story and Structure**

*The Invention of Love* tells the story of Alfred Edward Housman, real life poet and classical scholar (1859–1936). The play opens with AEH dead, standing on the bank of the River Styx. We discover later that he is only dreaming, though he is on his deathbed (I adopt Stoppard’s convention of using *AEH* to indicate the seventy-seven year-old dreamer and *Housman* to indicate his younger self, played by a different actor). The dreaming AEH and his conversations with Charon serve as a frame for the rest of the play, which begins by taking the audience back to his days as an Oxford undergraduate in the late 19th century. There, we see Housman fall in love with male compatriot Moses Jackson. The first act includes a dream-like croquet game between Oxford faculty and a conversation between AEH and his younger self. The dream returns several times to a boat trip taken by Housman, Jackson, and their friend, Pollard. In the second act, Housman has flunked his graduation exams (the play hints, on purpose) and now shares an apartment and an office with Jackson, who remains oblivious to Housman’s affections. Housman is forced to confess his love, which the straight Jackson cannot reciprocate. They separate. AEH (now an actor in the dream, no longer just an observer) turns to
a career of classical scholarship, earning a chair at Cambridge and writing *A Shropshire Lad*, a long poem presumably inspired by his relationship with Jackson. Throughout the play is a discourse on classical poetry, with particular emphasis on the homoerotic nature of Greek culture, as well as an intricate discussion of textual criticism. Constantly in the background is Oscar Wilde, whose flamboyant lifestyle is contrasted with the conservative Housman; Wilde appears in the final moments for an imaginary conversation with AEH. The play closes with AEH delivering his own eulogy, but considering himself “lucky” (102).

Stylistically, the best description of the play would be *dream-like*, although it is not consistently so. The first act is fluid, surreal, and seemingly random in sequence; the second act is chronological and realistic. The language tends to be colloquial, but it frequently becomes comic, repetitive, and surreal, and there are several long speeches that are highly theatrical. No one obviously breaks the fourth wall, but there are several instances of *metatheatrical commentary*, moments when the characters speak as if they are aware of their performance within the play. In short, it would be fair to call the play heavily theatrical, but the precise style will become more clear as the discussion continues.

The structure of *Invention* differs from *Arcadia* at several key points. Whereas *Arcadia* employs formal divisions between scenes, *Invention* is almost totally fluid. Stoppard makes no formal divisions in the text except for an act break. And whereas *Arcadia* used a predictable alternation between timelines, *Invention* is fractured in both time and space. Act one takes place entirely at Oxford but is chronologically scattered; act two changes locations but proceeds linearly. For the sake of analysis, the play can be divided into roughly twenty scenes. To rearrange act one in correct chronological sequence, the scenes would go in this order: 2, 8, 9, 4, 1, 3, 5, 6, 10 (scene seven, a conversation between AEH and Charon, is part of the frame). As one can see, the time is out of joint. However, even this sequence is debatable. The boat trip with Jackson, Pollard, and Housman, scenes 1, 4, 8, and 9, could take place before or after scenes 5 and 6, which show more of their lives at Oxford. Act two proceeds mostly linearly, but like *Arcadia*, the structure of time seems to break down in the final minutes, which include reprisals of several earlier events. Put back in order, these scenes tell Housman’s life story. In addition, there is another layer to the play, the story of the dreamer, which progresses linearly but sporadically. The story of AEH’s lucid dreaming proceeds from scene 1 to scenes 7, 8, and 9 in act one, and then skips to scenes 19, 20, and 21 at the end of act two.
Table 2: *The Invention of Love* Scene Breakdown. Note: These scene divisions are arbitrary and are not explicitly marked in the script. I marked these only to give a sense of the chronological sequence; this breakdown is neither definitive nor concrete.11

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In addition to unusual chronological sequence, the two acts of the play behave in very different ways. Act one is the most dream-like. The overall setting is Oxford, and the overall time is Housman’s tenure as an undergraduate, but the specific time and place of each event remains ambiguous. Stoppard sometimes gives vague setting descriptions, such as “An Oxford garden, a river, a garden seat,” (8, scene three) but more frequently gives no description at all. I have broken the act up into scenes, but there are no hard edges between them; each movement
blurs and transitions to the next as images might do in thought, or in memory. The game of croquet between classical scholars plays over and under scenes with Housman and his friends, sometimes interacting, sometimes ignoring each other completely. Where is the game taking place? When is it? The scholars intersect with Housman at different points in his undergraduate career, although the game appears to be continuous. The conversation between the scholars is repetitive (each of them has a passage beginning with “when I first saw Oxford” [15]) and their advice to the undergraduates inept (“A genuine love of learning is one of the two delinquencies which cause blindness and lead a young man to ruin” [9]), making them appear more like caricatures than characters. The overall impression is that the croquet game is entirely imaginary; the scholars are figments moving through a dreamscape. The entire act has this dream-like quality.

Act two, in contrast, begins as a much more realist play in both structure and acting style. Scenes eleven through fifteen (in my breakdown) are distinct scenes that take place in real, identifiable spaces: a subway station, a track meet, Jackson’s apartment. Stoppard begins to indicate specific years and ages for the characters, as well as giving cues for distinct lighting changes: blackouts, and so forth. The locations themselves switch from outdoors to indoors, probably necessitating other lighting changes and possibly the placement of props. Each scene contains a distinct set of characters that moves on and off, as opposed to the overlapping narratives of act one. In other words, this is typical theatre as we know it. After scene sixteen, however, the edges blur again and we move back into dreamspace. AEH takes the stage, playing both himself in middle age and the dreamer, who acts as an observer and narrator. While other characters move on and off, AEH remains, reciting poetry and quoting from his own scholarly work. By scene nineteen, Jubilee Night, the boundaries of time and space, and even of narrative and performance, have dissolved almost completely. Not only is AEH aware of his status as dreamer and performer, but so are some of the other characters. Chamberlain asks, “What happened to me, by the way?” AEH replies pertly, “How should I know? I suppose you became a sort of footnote” (91).

So are all of these shifts in time and space disruptive, in Barker’s catastrophic sense? Given the nature of this particular play and its presentation, I find the prospect unlikely. The Castle disrupts because of its radical and unexpected interruptions. The anachronisms of The Bite of the Night are more pervasive, but again, the juxtapositions are extreme and unexplained; as
soon as the audience thinks it knows what is going on, Barker shifts the terrain. The final scene of *Arcadia* is striking because the collapse of the theatrical frame is also surprising, even though, in a sense, the overlap proceeds logically from the events before. However, in this play, Stoppard tells the audience from the opening moments—when AEH sees his younger self canoeing into Hades—to expect the unexpected. No one, not even AEH, knows where the next moment will go, but everyone knows that it will be somewhere completely different. Secondly, this is the only play so far to offer a logical explanation for the timeplay: it is all a dream.

As mentioned earlier, the dream acts as a framing device for the rest of the action. AEH opens the play with the line, “I’m dead, then. Good. And this is the Stygian gloom one has heard so much about,” but a few minutes later he corrects himself: “Not dead, only dreaming” (1, 5). At this point, the status of AEH as dead or dreaming remains somewhat ambiguous, but Stoppard makes it clear when AEH returns in scene seven: “The Oxford of my dreams, re-dreamt. The desire to urinate, combined with a sense that it would not be a good idea, usually means we are asleep” (26–27). The dream puts this play into an entirely different category from the others I have examined so far. The rules of physics no longer apply in this space, only the rules of thought. AEH sits down to have a conversation with himself, saying, “What an unexpected development. Where can we sit down before philosophy find us out?” (3). Stoppard breaks both physics and Foucault’s discipline of time, but in a completely justifiable way. Furthermore, both Stoppard and AEH are aware of the discrepancy. AEH’s line is a wink to the audience, inviting them to ignore the discipline of time and join in the fun. Like the overlapping timelines in *Arcadia*, the impossible meeting between young and old Housman can produce a feeling of wonder. Critic Julie Dam, for instance, found the meeting “electrifying,” while John Heilpern called it “scintillating.” The dream gives Stoppard license to do whatever he wants with time, space, and physics, ignoring the problems that would arise even if AEH were dead and existing in some sort of afterlife.

However, even with this license to bend the rules of reality, the form of the dream is somewhat irregular. AEH is lucid, but he is not in control of the dream. Events, such as meeting Housman, surprise him. Nor is the dream composed entirely of memory; some scenes, such as the meeting of the journalists in the railway car, are events AEH could not have witnessed in real life. Possibly part of the play is dream, and part of it is a theatrical narration of Housman’s life?
Barker would force the audience to confront and deal with these discrepancies; in this play, however, there is no such pressure. It is, after all, only a dream.

**Loss, Love, and Literature: Major Themes**

Once again, theme and structure intermingle and reinforce each other. Like *Arcadia*, the unknowability of the past is a major theme. Whereas Stoppard’s earlier play used an elaborate discussion of science to prove this point, *Invention* delves into the world of textual criticism. Housman and the scholars of Oxford are classical scholars and textual critics. Their job is to examine and interpret the texts of antiquity; however, knowing what authors such as Virgil and Hesiod actually wrote is impossible, as Jowett explains: “anyone with a secretary knows that what Catullus really wrote was already corrupt by the time it was copied twice, which was about the time of the first Roman invasion of Britain: and the earliest copy that has come down to us was written about 1,500 years after that. Think of all those secretaries!” (24). AEH’s conversation with Charon over the lost plays of Aeschylus (Charon was in *Myrmidones*, but the only line he can remember is the one AEH already knew) reinforces the idea that some things are simply lost and irrecoverable. The theme of loss is further extended to people, as well as their poems: “Nobody makes it stick like Horace that you’re a long time dead—dust and shadow, and no good deeds, no eloquence, will bring you back” (71). The structure of the play reinforces this theme somewhat with the vagueness of the dream format. AEH admits at the end the inaccuracy of his memory: “Which is not to say that I have remembered it right, messing about in a boat with Moses and dear old young Pollard on a summer’s day in ’79 or ’80 or ‘81” (100). However, this aspect of the play is not as important in itself as much as for how it dovetails into the theme of unfulfilled passions.

At its core, *The Invention of Love* is a story of unrequited love. Housman loves Jackson, who does not love him back. Housman’s love and ultimate rejection shape his entire life. Even the classical passages that AEH translates emphasizes this: “At night I hold you fast in my dreams, I run after you across the Field of Mars, I follow you into the tumbling water, and you show me no pity” (49) This is where the structure of the play and its timeplay becomes most effective. AEH’s dream, consciously or unconsciously, takes him back again and again to the moment where he falls in love with Jackson: the boat trip. The boat trip appears four times in the play, three times in act one and once as a final reprise at the very end of act two. Each time AEH
sees the event he is surprised and deeply moved: “Mo!” he cries out again and again, “I would have died for you, but I never had the luck!” (5, 46, 100). It is as if each time the dying AEH sees his paramour, he is smitten anew. Housman actually tells us that this is the moment he fell in love, when he confesses to Jackson: “We took a picnic down to Hades. [...] After that day, everything else seemed futile and ridiculous” (77). The character of Housman never moved on from that event, and so the play—or rather, AEH’s mind—takes us repeatedly back to that moment. Pollard has to remind Housman, who has multiplied the event in his mind, that the boat trip “was only once” (66). The physical shape of the play, with the repeated scenes that multiply the event for the audience, is a manifestation of Housman’s mind and of the play’s major theme.

In addition to the boat trip, the entire format of the play revolves around Housman’s relationship with Jackson. The play really portrays three different Housmans, defined by the stage of their relationship. The first is young Housman, before falling in love. We meet him at matriculation and on the river bank talking with his older self. This young Housman appears naïve and hopeful. As AEH discusses the band of Theban lovers who died beside one another in battle, Housman announces to AEH, “I would be such a friend to someone,” unaware of what pain such friendship will bring him (43). This conversation takes place immediately before the boat trip. The second is the Housman who has fallen in love. He spends all his time with the unaware Jackson, and declares, “friendship is all, sometimes I’m so happy, it makes me dizzy” (55). The third is the rejected Housman, played entirely by AEH, even though Housman was only twenty-six at the time of the break-up. It is as if the rest of Housman’s life is over; he has already become the man who will turn into the aged AEH and die alone in the Evelyn Nursing Home. His course is now fixed. This transition is emphasized by the refrain of “What will become of you, Hous?” spoken by both Jackson and Pollard at various points in the story. We have seen from the very beginning what has become of him: young Housman transforms into AEH.

Housman’s fate dovetails into the theme of loss, as expressed by the discourse on textual criticism and poetry. Both themes come to fruition in the long conversation between AEH and Housman on the riverbank, the moment before the fateful boat trip. This scene operates in a manner very similar to the stereoscopic vision of Arcadia, except that Housman’s own life has been folded in half. We already know what will happen to Housman, because we know AEH. Throughout the conversation, Housman announces projects he is working on or would like to do, and AEH speaks of those same projects in the past tense as thing he accomplished or failed. They
both surprise each other in the conversation, but it becomes clear that AEH has lost the enthusiasm for poetry that brought him into the field:

AEH: The Romans were foreigners writing for foreigners two millenniums ago [...] but whose idea of what is exquisite is, we flatter ourselves, mysteriously identical with ours.

HOUSEMAN: But it is, isn’t it? We catch our breath at the places where the breath was always caught. [...] Two thousand years in the tick of a clock. (36)

AEH is able to educate Housman regarding textual criticism, but he cannot educate him about love, nor change Housman’s course away from love for all he disparages it. Young Housman’s path is already fixed. “Love it is, then,” Housman says, “and I will make the best of it. I’m sorry that it made you unhappy, but it’s not my fault, and it can’t be made good by unhappiness in another” (43). The person AEH once was is lost and cannot be recovered, just as lost texts cannot be recovered, but only guessed at. The truth arrived at in this moment is only possible via Stoppard’s unique timeplay.

The play offers two solutions to the dilemma of loss and the certainty of death. One is immortality through poetry, the course Wilde advises at the end: “You didn’t mention your poems. How can you be unhappy when you know you wrote them? They are all that will still matter” (97). However, given the discourse on textual criticism, this type of immortality is uncertain at best. The second solution is proffered, of all people, by Pater, one of the Oxford scholars: “The Renaissance teaches us that the book of knowledge is not to be learned by rote but is to be written anew in the ecstasy of living each moment for the moment’s sake. Success in life is to maintain this ecstasy, to burn always with this hard gem-like flame. Failure is to form habits” (19). For all that AEH despairs of love and poetry in his conversation with Housman, he yet burns with a gem-like flame each moment he sees the young Jackson: “Mo!” he cries each time, as if for the first. One is reminded of the final moments of Arcadia and the implicit message to live for today. Both plays possess a certain fatalism, emphasized by our foreknowledge; as AEH says, “Life is brief and death kicks at the door impartially,” but it is because of this that we should all strive to “capture the awareness of each moment; and for that moment only (39; 19).
Metatheatrical Layers

Much of the meaning—and the humor—of this play operates in layers, layers that break the fourth wall and acknowledge the play as performance, a tactic not used in *Arcadia*. The meeting of AEH and Housman is again a worthwhile example, when AEH says, “Where can we sit down before philosophy find us out?” (30). The encounter does raise a philosophical question regarding time and consciousness, but at the same time it is a joke in which Stoppard the playwright acknowledges that he is getting away with an impossible moment. Stoppard does this again in a brief exchange between AEH and Charon:

AEH: The desire to urinate, combined with a sense that it would not be a good idea, usually means we are asleep.

CHARON: Or in a boat. That happened to me once.

AEH: Were you asleep?

CHARON: No, I was in a play.

AEH: That needs thinking about. (26–27)

AEH’s retort only makes sense as a metatheatrical comment; in pointing out the pun, he also acknowledges himself as a performer. Stoppard is playing with layers of theatricality, and he does so at a moment when AEH is questioning his status as dreamer. This metatheatrical commentary happens more and more at play’s end. Just as the barriers of time and space break down, so does the barrier between stage and audience. This infringement become most apparent in a long speech AEH delivers in the final moments:

And yet not dreaming either, wide awake to all the risks—archaism, anachronism, the wayward inconsequence that only hindsight can acquit of *non sequitur, quies- tus interruptus* by monologue incontinent in the hind leg of a donkey class [...] , and the unities out of the window without so much as a window to be out of.” (100)

On one level, this speech certainly shows Stoppard’s awareness of what he is doing, that he is consciously playing with time, space, and theatrical conventions. As touched on earlier, Stoppard invites the audience to ignore the rules of physic and the discipline of time and simply play with him for a while. On another level, Stoppard is creating a sort of theatrical hall of mirrors: Charon is in a boat in a play in a boat in a play; AEH is awake in a dream in a play about a dream. These jokes work on an intellectual level, as one appreciates Stoppard’s wit, but they also serve the very important function of calling the audience’s attention to what Stoppard is doing in the rest
of the play, namely overlapping time and consciousness. For what purpose? Perhaps to emphasize the *carpe diem* message discussed above. Perhaps to keep the audience unbalanced, to encourage them to think about the what they are seeing, as Barker does. In any case, these layers add to the richness of the piece as a whole. As with the puns Stoppard is so fond of, the audience will take away as much meaning as layers they perceive.

**Anachronism**

Neither of these plays use anachronism as a disruptive event in the same manner as Barker, although there is some anachronism in each. John Simon points out that Septimus and Thomasina’s interpretation of Poussin’s *Et in Arcadia Ego* as an expression of death pre-dates the first such scholarly interpretation of the painting by about 150 years. Surely, this anachronism would blow by anyone in the audience who is not an art history major, and perhaps even then. However, Stoppard cannot resist including some minor instances of intentional anachronism in *The Invention of Love*, primarily as jokes. As the Oxford scholars lament the advance of technology, primarily rail travel, Jowett casually throws out the phrase “Mind the gap,” a laugh line, to be sure (15).

A more significant type of anachronism occurs in the characters themselves. Thomasina is anachronistic in that she is ahead of her time, but the point is that genius operates in leaps and bounds. She is not anachronistic in the same way that Homer is in Troy. Septimus tells Lady Croom that she belongs with the philosophers and sculptors of the Athens of Pericles, but he is only flattering (71). In *The Invention of Love*, there are two anachronistic characters. AEH tells Wilde that “Your life is a terrible thing. A chronological error” (96). In another time, Wilde’s vice might have been called virtue. But the person who is truly out of time in this play is Houseman himself, who would have been much better off in the era of the poets he studied, dying with Jackson in the sacred band of Thebes. Thomasina and Houseman are both anachronisms, and in a way, their lives end in tragedy because of it. Stoppard seems to present a two-fold message. On one level, he shows how those who do not fit into the social expectations of their historical moment can be oppressed or even wiped out, while at the same time he encourages us to live for today on the time that we have, because no power of human will can take us out of our own time.
Desire: The Force that Moves Time

As in Barker’s plays, human desire is that force that alters time, and also like Barker, that
desire takes two forms: one sexual, the other intellectual. Both forms of desire alter time in both
plays. In Arcadia, the discussion of carnal embrace, time, and determinism is made plain; as Chloë
says, “it’s all because of sex” that determinism breaks down, or as Valentine puts it, because of “the
attraction that Newton left out” (73, 74). In The Invention of Love, Housman’s desire for Jackson
literally changes the shape of the play, bringing his dream back over and over to the same moment
in time. Jackson himself explains the power of physical desire: “Kissing girls is not like science,
nor is it like sport. It is the third thing when you thought there were only two” (11).

In both plays, the quest for knowledge also alters time. In Arcadia, Hannah displays an
almost Barkeresque lust for knowledge: “It’s wanting to know that makes us matter. Otherwise
we’re going out the way we came in. That’s why you can’t believe in the afterlife […] Better to
struggle on knowing that failure is final.” (75-76) Though her passion is not as tragic as Sav-
age’s, it is that desire that ultimately enables her to reach back in time to drink from Septimus’s
glass. In The Invention of Love, Housman expresses a similar drive, arguing passionately in favor
of “Useless knowledge for its own sake. Useful knowledge is good, too, but it’s for the faint-
hearted, an elaboration of the real thing” (71). Housman describes knowledge as if it is a Platonic
Form; “Knowledge is the Good,” he seems to say. Housman’s quest to recover the ancient texts
consumes his life, and even in death (in his dream) he arrives at Hades rather than in Heaven or
Hell. In Stoppard’s case, the will of his characters has more to do with personal choices and life-
styless than with the actual alteration of physics. Hannah, Bernard, and Houseman all live in the
past, both intellectually and emotionally. To some extent, we are all capable of doing this; the
question Stoppard seems to raise is, is it worthwhile, and is it positive? In what time do we chose
to live?

Critical Reactions

Critical reactions to both of these plays were very similar. A striking majority of
reviewers from the original productions (and the Broadway production of Invention) gave the
plays a positive report, while very few, perhaps two or three in each case, gave an outright negative review. Many reviewers felt like Nicholas de Jongh did at Arcadia: “irritated and exhilarated, bemused and challenged” at the same time (406). The most common charges wielded against Stoppard are that he is overly cerebral, emotionally flat, confusing, and undramatic. In his review of the Broadway production of The Invention of Love, Steve Jones summarizes the frequently mixed reviews, calling the play a “brilliantly written, frequently hilarious and often quite moving study of one man’s pursuit of personal fulfillment, but it hasn’t a sensual or sentimental bone in its body. At times, in fact, the play can seem as coldly cerebral as its key figure.” In stark contrast, however, many other critics found both plays deeply moving, especially the final scene of Arcadia and the confession scene in The Invention of Love.

In Arcadia, at least, Stoppard’s layering technique seems to work. Reviewers of the original production discussed many of the play’s themes, but especially the unknowability of the past and the contrast between order and chaos. The alteration of timeframes clearly illuminated the disjunction between past and present, and many commented on the brilliantly timed revelation of information via the structure. Those who disliked the play seemed to suffer from a surfeit of information. As with Barker’s plays, many who did not like the play still recognized its major themes, while some who raved about it admitted that they probably missed quite a bit of the content. However, the majority of those who praised Arcadia understood it at many different levels, showing that the play worked better for those who took away more meaning from Stoppard’s multiple layers. Even more than Arcadia, The Invention of Love caused information overload; as Robert Brustein put it, “There is not enough plot here for twenty minutes of action, but there is enough erudition for a fortnight.” Still, most reviewers identified strongly with the comparison between Housman and Wilde and found themselves asking which led the better life. The circular plot confused some, but thrilled others; Amy Gamerman eloquently proclaimed that “What The Invention of Love captures so vividly as it traces its elegant figure-eights in time is the gulf between innocence and experience.” For most viewers of both plays, the timeplay created layers of essential meaning.
CHAPTER THREE:
CHRUCHILL’S IMPOSSIBLE OBJECTS

“There’s no use trying,” she said. “One can’t believe impossible things.” “I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

—Lewis Carol, *Through the Looking Glass*

Caryl Churchill combines the techniques of both Barker and Stoppard to create two plays that are wholly unique; though to be sure, her work predates that of both of these men. Like Barker, she uses severe anachronism and sometimes jars the audience with radical interruptions. Like Stoppard, she uses non-linear story-telling and frequently creates a stereoscopic view of time. The effect produced by this amalgamation of techniques is both similar and different from that of the other works. Barker confronts the audience, forcing them to work and think in the moment. Stoppard draws his audience in, inviting them to share in his joke as they unravel the layers of the piece. Churchill, in contrast, tends to work slowly and subtlety, setting up a problem and leaving it for the audience to solve on its own. In *Traps*, first performed in 1977, she combines a relatively banal domestic situation with radical changes in reality, but it is not until the very end of the play, as the alterations in reality build on each other and take a shape, that one might be able to assign an overall meaning to the play. In *Top Girls*, from 1981, she presents a problem at the beginning of the play and then seems to turn away from it, but what she is really doing is allowing the spectators’ minds to work over the problem as she juxtaposes it with other events. As Alisa Solomon says, “Churchill’s questionings insinuate themselves into our experiences of her plays. [...] Their challenges are sneaky” (49).
Traps: Impossible Object

Story and Structure

Traps explores perhaps two days in the lives of a small group of people engaged in communal living. It begins simply enough, with Syl and Albert having a domestic dispute over household responsibilities, while Jack looks on. Reg arrives looking for his wife, Christie, who is also Jack’s sister. She arrives momentarily, and Reg tries to take her home. In the meantime, Del, a former roommate, has also arrived, upset because no one paid him for the last milk bill. But as the plot progresses, the reality of the on-stage world slowly changes. Syl begins the play with a baby, presumably fathered by Albert. A few pages later, she laments the fact that she does not have a baby. A few pages after that, she is married to Jack, and pregnant with his child. Del reconciles with the others, exits, but then re-enters a few moments later repeating the lines from his first entrance as if the previous scene never took place. However, the action has been continuous, as emphasized by the presence of a clock telling real time (called for specifically by Churchill). Throughout the play is a discussion of willpower; Jack, for instance, believes he caused Christie to come to the house using telepathy. The play is also permeated with puzzle and game imagery: a jigsaw puzzle, a magic card trick, Mobius strips, games of solitaire. In act two, we learn that the group is now living in the country, even though act one took place in the city and the set has not changed. Del and Christie appear to be lovers. Syl is pregnant, probably with Albert’s child, but Albert has committed suicide. Reg has joined the community, and a question arises as to whether Christie will stay married to Reg, even though he is abusive. Albert then appears, very much alive, but this surprises no one. In the final moments of the play, each character strips and bathes in the same bath water, then eats a meal grown from the garden. Reg initially resists taking a bath, but then gives in. They all eat and smile. Reg smiles and laughs.

Stylistically, the play is realistic. No one breaks the fourth wall; the dialogue is not noticeably heightened. The action proceeds linearly and is interrupted only by the act break. Yet, the play is filled with discontinuities. The general pattern is that Churchill establishes a specific situation using typical expository techniques. That situation is later contradicted by new assertions made by the characters, in effect, creating a new reality. A few minutes later, that reality gives way to another reality, which in turn gives way to yet another, throughout the play.
Each moment is *real*, but the fact that reality constantly changes creates a strong sense of surreal reality. In a preface to the text, Churchill speaks in detail about this technique:

> When we were casting *Traps*, we found ourselves repeating the same two things to actors as some kind of introduction to the play. First, that it is like an impossible object, or a painting by Escher, where the objects can exist like that on paper, but would be impossible in life. In the play, the time, the place, the characters’ motives and relationships cannot all be reconciled—they can happen on stage, but there is no other reality for them. Second, that the characters can be thought of as living many of their possibilities at once. There is no flashback, no fantasy, everything that happens is as real and solid as everything else within the play. (v)

Churchill set out to create a world that existed in *unreality*, where contradictions in time, place, and behavior cannot be reconciled because the characters do not exist within a consistent, law-abiding universe. In creating this impossible space, Churchill also created an incredibly disruptive, disorienting play.

In some ways, *Traps* is the most disruptive of all six plays because it presents actual impossibilities. The world of the characters changes from moment to moment in extreme and irrational ways that defies the consistency of real life. Not only does the play work against our embodied sense of time, it contradicts our embodied sense of how reality works. Pregnancy and death cannot be reversed (even after an abortion, a woman was never *not pregnant*), yet within the play both events are *undone*, breaking one of the fundamental conditions of reality described by Lakoff and Johnson. Not even Barker goes so far as do undo events that have already happened. Nor is there any reasonable explanation for the play’s bizarre events, such as Skinner’s magic or AEH’s dream. The discontinuities cannot be explained away as heightened theatricality, nor are they quite like the poetic conceit of Hannah drinking from Septimus’s glass. The play defies reality at a basic level, contradicting everything our embodied minds know to be true.

As an example: The set includes a broken bowl that Albert mends on-stage with super-glue. Del enters, enraged, and breaks the bowl. At the start of act two, the bowl is whole again. This sequence is at least *possible*; the bowl could be broken and mended innumerable times. However, the impression is not that the bowl has been glued, but that it has been *unbroken*, as if the event of breaking the bowl never took place. Del also shreds a plant, “tearing the leaves and smashing it on the floor,” yet, in act two, the plant appears whole and healthy (36). This is an
impossible event; no amount of superglue could undo the plant’s destruction. To borrow from the science of Stoppard, not only have the characters gathered up the pieces from the smash, they have also gathered up the heat. The household has proceeded from disorder to order, breaking the second law of thermodynamics and effectively reversing the direction of time. Even though the real-time clock ticks constantly forward (in fact, emphasizing the impossibility of these events), the characters have restarted their story, presenting impossible actions that defy physics, lived experience, and theatrical convention.

So what is the effect of all of these discontinuities? The discontinuities are subtle, in that none of the characters react as if anything is odd. So initially, the discontinuities could make the spectators question their own theatrical experience: Did they hear correctly? Have they really been paying attention? In a sense, audience members are forced to examine their own reality, a sly trick on Churchill’s part. At the same time, the discontinuities are incredibly disruptive because they violate the fundamental laws of physics and every aspect of our embodied sense of time and space. These changes in reality could potentially give a visceral kick equal to the disruptive power of timeplay, because these disruptions are a type of timeplay. They violate the fabric of reality as we know it, reversing events that we know, through our everyday experience in the world, cannot be reversed. The larger incidents are certainly disruptive enough to make the audience pause and think about what is going on. But what is there to think about? At each particular incident, perhaps nothing. There are no ready explanations nor even any immediate motivations behind either Del’s cyclical entrance nor Albert’s resurrection. As I will explore below, any meaning in the work must be taken from the play as a whole, from the cumulative effect of the repeated interruptions combined with other discussions held throughout the play.

This type of dramaturgy has the potential to be problematic, depending upon how insistent the audience is at putting together a continuous story. The play disguises itself as a linear narrative, but really it disrupts the regular reception process by denying coherency and plot. If the audience holds too tightly to conventional expectations, the style of the play can lead to frustration and apathy. If everything changes, then nothing we are told matters. If any act is irrevocable—even death—then no act has significance. Reviews (those few available), lend some credence to this possibility. W Steven Gilbert, though he seems to enjoy the play, says that “Churchill’s purpose nonetheless remains obscure” (32). Solomon, who otherwise praises Traps and Churchill’s œuvre in general, admits that “the play is not entirely successful” and that “the
audience [...] will strain to find Significance where there isn’t any” (55). As Brecht suggests, the mundane and the extreme will both be ignored, and this play strays far into the territory of the extreme.

Fortunately, Churchill mitigates the potential for frustration with a vast amount of secondary imagery and metatheatrical commentary. In addition to the major shifts in reality, Churchill fills the play with minor puzzles and discrepancies, some possible, some not. Most prominent is a large jigsaw puzzle that the characters work on throughout the show. Syl and Del perform a magic card trick in which a volunteer simply *wills* a card to move, and it does. Del insists on making a Mobius strip. The cumulative imagery creates a sense of illogic, of objects behaving in unexpected ways, just as the play behaves in an unexpected way. As Mel Gussow says in his review, these puzzles “clue the theatre-goer to the gamesmanship of the contest.”

In terms of metatheatrical commentary, Churchill does not go as far as Stoppard’s AEH, who all but acknowledges that he is a character in a play, but she does provide certain clues that tell the audience that something is afoot. Several of the characters make seemingly meaningless asides: “You don’t correlate” (18). “There’s no such thing as a normal street” (9). “I can’t continually wake up every day as if the day before hadn’t happened” (20). “What are you asking? Something impossible” (32). Taken as a whole, these lines give the impression that the world of the play is amiss and that it is supposed to be. The most obvious clue comes from Jack, the self-professed psychic, in the second act:

JACK: I believe all world religions and minor sects before I even start. All science and superscience. And that every vision can be made real. Before breakfast. That’s all possible things. I spend the morning believing impossible things. [...] DEL: And the afternoon?

JACK: Being impossible things.

DEL: Like?

JACK: Here. Now. (42)

This is the point where Churchill most obviously acknowledges what she is doing. Like Stoppard’s metatheatrical commentary in which he winks at the audience, Churchill is asking the audience to stick with her, to play along, to try to solve the puzzle. Unlike Barker, who denies his audience meaning with his abrupt interludes, Churchill coaxes, promising meaning at the end of the play.
Juxtapositions

If the audience does stick with the play until, the alterations in reality build upon one another to create a coherent picture. Whereas the structure of Barker and Stoppard’s plays reinforced distinct discourses on time and space, the structure of this particular play, when combined with dialogue and other imagery, creates layers of juxtapositions. Primarily, Churchill juxtaposes the various discontinuities of the play with other factors that are absolute. The final result is to point out the discontinuities within human behavior, perhaps asking the audience to do something about their own behavior.

First of all, Churchill juxtaposes the discontinuities of the plot with supposedly absolute factors within the world of the play. Jack, for instance, says he has a photographic memory. Del has “kept lists” and “can put a date and place to everything” (20). They should both, then, be able to recognize the discrepancies in the world around them, but they do not. The only explanation is that their pasts—their entire existences—have changed as the on-stage world has changed. All of the play’s events are juxtaposed against the real-time clock. Act one is set in the “bluish gloom of early evening,” which might actually correspond with the real time of an evening performance depending on the time of year (1). Act two, however, begins some time before sunset and will necessarily not correspond to clock time, no matter when the performance started. These obvious contradictions, like the contradictions between reality and the play’s world, draw attention to themselves, emphasizing the unreality of the situation and the fiction of the play.

On a second level, Churchill juxtaposes real life certainties with real life discontinuities. In the second act, the characters make a great fuss about watching a sunset and a moonrise. Both are examples of astronomical time. The sun has always been our most constant heavenly object, the easiest to predict, and our most certain way of telling the passage of time, even from humanity’s earliest days. Del emphasizes the sun’s persistence when he warns Christie that the sunset “won’t wait” (46). On one level, the constancy of the sunset further off-sets the unreality of the rest of the play. More significantly, Churchill juxtaposes the sunset against real life cases where the sun appears to act in an irrational and unnatural manner. Specifically, Del discusses a trip he took to Finland, where “it was light all night. I felt quite sick by morning. It was midday before I got to sleep” (50). Del must have been north of the arctic circle, where the tilt of the Earth’s axis dips the horizon so low that at some times of the year the sun never sets. And while
the this is a naturally occurring event, Del found it psychologically and physiologically disturbing; his circadian rhythm and his entire bodily sense of time was disrupted. Del goes on to say that “In the winter you’d see the sun going round the edge of the horizon” (51). If at any of the lower latitudes we looked up and the sun was turning circles in the sky, we would probably think “madness” or even “the end of the world.” But the event is real, depending upon your where you stand, literally speaking, in the world. The point of all this, as I read it, is that those things we take as most certain in life are not certain at all; they are predicated upon maintaining a specific point of view. Unlike the world of the play, these discontinuities are not fictional.

Finally, Churchill throws human behavior into the mix. Two incidents stand out in the play where a character says one thing and does the opposite. In the first, Del relates an incident to Christie where he raped and killed a woman, although he did not want to and did not enjoy doing it: “I hated her because I was raping her. You don’t think I enjoyed it? [...] She didn’t have to get herself killed did she, fighting and that” (39). In the second case, Reg beats his wife on stage, all the while saying he does not want to hurt her: “We must part. It’s the only way. I don’t want to hurt you. Be sensible [...] REG hits CHRISTIE across the face. I don’t want to hurt you. Be sensible [...] He starts kicking her. She huddles into a ball” (59). Although both incidents involve violence against women, Churchill does not offer an explicit judgment on these events within the play. What Churchill is doing is pointing out the discrepancy between words and actions, between avowed sentiment and true sentiment. It is a continuation of a string of absolute events juxtaposed with the impossible and the improbable. Churchill is holding up human behavior and asking, “What is wrong with this picture?” Which is real, the avowed sentiment or the actual action? Why do they not correlate? The discontinuities within the play, while disturbing, are fictional and need not challenge anything. The discontinuities between the sunset and the perpetual day of Finland is real, but outside the bounds of most people’s experience. The discontinuity of human behavior, however, is personal. We all have discrepancies between our actions and our words, though some more severe than others. Taken as a whole, the long string of discontinuities in the play becomes a challenge to the audience to examine their own behavior and to seek out the discrepancies within it.
Willpower

A second major theme in the play is the role of willpower. Willpower takes on many forms, both major and minor, and it is ultimately this that alters the reality of the play. Like the discrepancies in spacetime, willpower is constantly brought to our attention via minor incidents. Both Syl and Del perform a card trick in which the volunteer is asked to will a card to move within the deck. “You got beautiful willpower,” Del says, “Move mountains with that” (21). Albert, who is paranoid, complains of seeing a policeman every time he looks out a window. Del tells him that his paranoia brings the policeman: “Think of it like magnetism” (21). The largest discussion of willpower in the play revolves around Jack and his self-professed telepathy. He claims that he willed Christie to come to the house. Christie gives him some credit for her arrival, but not all: “You can read my mind, all right, I’ll give you that. You cannot make my mind up” (30). A discussion of Jack’s mental powers plays a prominent role in both acts, foregrounding the notion of willpower throughout the play.

Willpower is significant because it is will that seems to affect the changes in the play’s reality. Many, though not all, of the play’s major changes are predicated by the expression of some desire by one or more of the characters. Syl and her baby is the most obvious example. At the beginning of the play, Syl has a baby, but she spends several pages complaining about how difficult it is to take care of her. The next change, in fact, the first change of the play, is that she no longer has the baby and never had one. Syl and Jack begin to talk about having an affair. A few pages later, they are married. The relationship between desire and the alterations in reality is not immediately obvious, as several changes, such as Del’s second entrance, take place without any warning at all. But again, taken as a whole, it becomes clear that the characters themselves, through their desires, are altering the reality around them.

To what purpose? Once again, nothing is explicit within the text, but Churchill gives us several clues from which we might glean a meaning. Individually, the alterations in reality serve to amend a pressing personal concern: the desire to have/not have a baby, the desire to have a specific lover. Collectively, they are striving to reach an equilibrium in which they all function equitably and happily within their communal living situation. “Utopia means nowhere, right?” Del asks, and it is this impossible utopia for which they search (19). Each alteration of reality is an attempt to move closer to an ideal situation. They make mistakes along the way; Del’s second entrance is more hostile than his first, moving them away from their collective utopia. But taken
as a whole, the play reflects a movement towards an ideal community. The transition from city to country settings is a manifestation of this; “It was better living in the country,” Del says, “All went wrong once we got here” (22). Perhaps, through the symbolic rebirth/baptism of the bath at the end of the play, they have finally gotten it right.

The expression of willpower in the play is a reflection of the way willpower works in real life, in that every decision we make alters our lives in one way or another. Each time we decide to take a job, get married, or order something for lunch, we alter our reality. That is the power of choice. Admittedly, the play exaggerates this ability; the willpower of these characters not only alters their futures, but their pasts and their entire existences. We, the audience members, cannot break the second law of thermodynamics or any other law of reality. Unlike the characters in the play, who receive as many chances at life as it takes to get it right, we must muddle on through our mistakes, dragged helplessly forward through life by the unstoppable flow of time. Perhaps this is the point. Churchill encourages us to examine our lives thoroughly, to make our choices wisely, to chose our paths carefully, with an awareness that our actions do not always correspond with our words.

Top Girls: Fantastic Voyage

Story and Structure

Top Girls opens in a posh restaurant on a Saturday night. Marlene has been promoted to managing director of Top Girls employment agency, and she is throwing a party for herself. Her guests happen to include Isabella Bird, intrepid traveler from 19th century Scotland; Lady Nijo, emperor’s concubine and Buddhist nun from 13th century Japan; Pope Joan, who, disguised as a man, served as Pope between 854 and 856; Dull Gret, the subject of a painting by Brueghel; and Patient Griselda, a character from Chaucer’s “Clerk’s Tale.” This group of women eat and share their tales, discussing commonalities and differences: travel, dead lovers, dead children, dressing as men. Each of them, in some way, has been victimized by male society or by specific men, and each has rebelled against that victimization in some fashion. The women tend to talk at each other, rather than with each other, and dialogue overlaps to the point where it becomes nigh incomprehensible. The light-hearted conversation comes to a sudden end when Pope Joan
explains how she was stoned to death after giving birth in the middle of a processional. The scene cuts abruptly to the Top Girls employment agency, where we briefly see Marlene interviewing a client. The scene suddenly cuts again to the backyard of a suburban home, where we meet sixteen-year-old Angie and her twelve-year-old playmate, Kit. Angie discusses running away from home to say with her aunt in the city. All of the actors who played historical figures are now double or triple cast as other characters, and we do not see the historical figures again. Back at the employment agency, Angie arrives seeking Marlene, whom she hero worships. Assessing her niece’s potential for the world, Marlene declares with grim finality, “She’s not going to make it” (120). The final scene is a flashback to the previous year, to a visit Marlene pays on her sister, Joyce, and Angie. Over a long argument about class politics, Margaret Thatcher, and individualism, we learn that Marlene is actually Angie’s mother, but that she gave her up to Joyce to lead an unencumbered life. Angie has overheard the conversation, but Marlene believes she has only had a nightmare. “Frightening,” Angie says, “Frightening” (141).

Top Girls is an odd mix of strict realism and high theatricality. For example, the gross anachronism of the dinner party is entirely fantastic, but the scene itself is played realistically. Marlene introduces the guests as if they are all old friends of hers, and some of them seem to be acquainted from previous visits. None of the characters thinks it is odd that they are meeting any of the others, even though they spend a copious amount of time discussing their own disparate lives, and sometimes even their own deaths. However, after the dinner party, the play becomes startlingly realistic; some reviewers have called the following scenes naturalistic (McAfee, Hirrschorn, Spencer) or even documentary (Morley). But within this realism, the play retains a high level of theatricality due to the double casting between the historical figures and the other characters, a technique that contributes to much of the play’s final meanings.

The structure of the play is interesting for several reasons, not the least of which is that there is a difference between the text as written and its original performance. Churchill originally wrote the play as it is described in Table 3, in which the action is divided into three acts. Act two, scene one is slightly out of sequence, as it probably takes place Monday morning; however, there is no real way to know this during a performance. The flashback of the last scene is not interesting as an event in itself, but it is significant because the information we learn there would not be as powerful if we discovered it in its correct chronological sequence. What is more interesting is the difference between the text as written and as performed.
Table 3: *Top Girls* Scene Breakdown, as indicated in the text of *Plays: Two*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Sequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Act One</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Saturday Night</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act Two: Scene one</td>
<td>Top Girls</td>
<td>Monday Morning</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene two</td>
<td>Joyce’s Backyard</td>
<td>Sunday Afternoon</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene three</td>
<td>Top Girls</td>
<td>Monday Morning</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act Three</td>
<td>Joyce’s Kitchen</td>
<td>Sunday, a year earlier</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the written text, the act breaks formally divide the play into three distinct stories: the dinner party, Angie’s story, and the conversation between sisters. Not by accident, the act breaks also divide out the play’s two chronological discrepancies, the anachronism and the flashback. The traditional purpose of an act break, from the 19th century onward, is functional; it gives the crew enough time to change the set. Audiences are used to such changes in time and place between acts; therefore, these breaks would mitigate the shifts in time and place that occur between sections. However, this is not how the play was first performed. Not wanting to have two intermissions, Max Stafford-Clark, the director, divided the play into two acts, with a break after act two, scene one. One printed version of the text also divides the action this way. In this case, the first act contains three seemingly disparate scenes, played in different locations and in different styles. Janet Brown suggests that “these sudden shifts in scene and style, criticized by some reviewers, can also be viewed as a deliberately jarring use of Brechtian alienation technique” (107). These scene shifts, though mundane, tend to jar the audience because of their incongruity, much as temporal interruptions jar the audience with their more exotic incongruities. Brown further notes that the first three scenes, lacking any indication of time, take place in “an eternal present” that further disorients the audience; there are no temporal markers with which the spectators can ground themselves (107). Indeed, some reviewers of the original production called the structure “confused” (Watt), “oddly constructed” (Barnes), “abrupt [and] inexplicable” (Rich).

In the text of *Plays: Two*, Churchill says that she finds the three-act structure “clearer,” but that productions may “do whichever you prefer” (54). Fortunately, we can test her hypotheses against another production. Max Stafford-Clark revived the play in 1991, this time using the three act structure. None of the reviewers of this production complained of any jarring effect in the structure, but the act breaks divided the play thematically. Morley, for example, called it “not
one, but essentially three one-act plays,” and others made similar comments (459). The production became clearer in the sense that the three narrative parts became more distinct. Productions therefore have a choice of whether to emphasize disruption in the narrative using a deliberate alienation technique, or to use formal act breaks to clarify the story.

Themes and Techniques

Like Traps, the meaning of Top Girls is created by cumulative imagery, therefore, it is difficult to examine the parts separate from the whole. In this particular case, it is easier to discuss briefly what the play is about and then examine the elements of timeplay that contribute to the overall meaning. Top Girls is initially a critique of feminism in its particular time and place, specifically Britain in the early eighties. One of the play’s strongest messages is that if any progress is to made towards the equality of the sexes, women must move forward as a group, not as individuals. “I believe in the individual,” Marlene says, “Anyone can do anything if they’ve got what it takes” (138, 140). But as Joyce poignantly asks, “What about Angie?” (140).

Marlene’s own daughter will be left behind because of her individualism. Churchill extends this argument to apply to class issues. “I don’t believe in class,” Marlene says, but all of her actions reinforce the class system and the established social hierarchy. Churchill said in an interview that “The idea was that it would start out looking like a feminist play and turn into a socialist one, as well” (qtd. in Betsko and Koenig 82). A third major theme is the idea of quality of life; Marlene has achieved success, but only with great personal sacrifice, including her own happiness. Churchill goes on to say, “that was one of the ideas behind writing Top Girls, that achieving things isn’t necessarily good; it matters what you achieve” (qtd. in Betsko and Koenig 78). All of these themes are crucially set-up and reinforced by the play’s timeplay.

Act One: The Dinner Party. The most effective reinforcement of the play’s themes, and indeed, the most striking scene in the entire play, is the anachronistic dinner party between the historical figures. The scene, which includes three long-dead women, a fictional character, and the subject of a painting, is not only anachronistic, but a sheer impossibility. Churchill provides no explanation of any kind for their appearance (except that Marlene invited them), so there is no magical method or high-tech device that the audience can believe or disbelieve. The audience must accept or reject their presence at face value, perhaps accounting for their appearance as
merely a theatrical device. Churchill scholar Joseph Marohl notes how “immediately, Isabella’s appearance estranges the setting” with her historical costuming (383). However, if the audience is disturbed by the anachronism, this disturbance cannot last for very long because of the overwhelming ease with which the characters accept each other. Unlike the overlapping timelines of *Arcadia*, with the constant tension between worlds, the only tension here comes from the conversation. The dinner party gives the overall sense that we are breaking the rules, but that the deviation is perfectly acceptable. This puts the scene closest to AEH’s reflexive interview. Once again, we are cheating the discipline of time and getting away with it, elevating the scene to something outrageously playful. Like Stoppard’s exceptional moment, the dinner party is universally praised, described as “dazzlingly theatrical” (Bayley), “exhilarating” (Hirschhorn), a “terrific coup de theatre” (Spencer), and filled with “imaginative chutzpah” (Nightingale). Rather than disturbing, this first scene frees the audience members from their culturally-reinforced temporal straight-jackets and opens their imaginations, and yet, because of the abnormality of the extreme anachronism, it remains incredibly powerful.

As one might imagine, Churchill does not include this spectacular scene for no purpose; it has a vitally important thematic function that develops as the scene and the play unfolds. Most obviously, the scene presents a cross-section of women across time. Naturally, the anachronism accomplishes this, but in a totally visceral, visual manner. As Marohl describes it, “As each successive character enters in costume […], the audience becomes aware, perhaps only dimly, of the process of history the costumes represent” (383). Like the soldiers’ litany or Creausa’s opening to *The Bite of the Night*, the anachronistic device allows the audience to experience several centuries at once. However, rather than pushing or pulling the audience through time, Churchill presents the figures and allows the audience to absorb them slowly over the scene.

More specifically, the party includes a group of women who have all had amazing adventures. Marlene toasts her guests: “We’ve all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements” (67). Certainly, they are all exceptional women, but what the scene as a whole proves is that they are only exceptions. The characters come from disparate cultures spread across twelve hundred years, yet in that time there has been no discernable change in fundamental feminist problems. Marlene faces the same issues as Pope Joan, who hails from the ninth century: How to balance career and personal life, what to do with unwanted children, how to survive in a man’s world. Brown comments that
“Their similarities, despite the separation of their lives by hundreds of years, suggest a complete lack of historical progress” (106). Churchill makes the point that collectively, these women have learned nothing. Benedict Nightingale comments that the women of the play “don’t learn sufficiently from accumulated experience.” All of them, with the exception of Isabella, buy into the patriarchal system that oppresses them, and all of them, except for Gret, are staunch individualists. None of them have tried to change the system; they have simply learned how to succeed within it. Marohl notes that Marlene’s “success does not really challenge patriarchal authority but appropriates it” (382).

The end result is that Churchill moves from a celebration of individual lives or from an examination of the circumstances of a specific time and place to a critique of the entire system. If after twelve hundred years the same fundamental problems remain in both Eastern and Western culture, if the lives of these exceptional women have done nothing to better the lives of their sisters and daughters, then human society as a whole is at fault. Brown contends that the play is a call for revolution, that Churchill “challenges [her audience] to move beyond individual solutions to confront the larger contradictions created by a capitalistic patriarchy. In fact, the play demands nothing less than a feminist transformation of society” (114). Marohl argues that “The play in performance moves the audience from the apparent dichotomy of ‘female/male’ [...] to the underlying dichotomy of ‘oppressor/oppressed’ which is the effect of phallocentric hierarchism and which operates outside of the classifications of sex and gender” (387). Churchill gets her point across using the extreme anachronism of the fantastic dinner. While traditional theatrical methods might be able to introduce the ideas, none would present them with the same vigor and vitality as these live, impossible people.

In addition to these major themes, Churchill starts several smaller threads in this first scene that continue throughout the play: individuality, sisterhood, birth and abortion, women passing for men in a man’s world. Marlene herself has connections to all of these women, allowing—in fact, asking—the audience to draw connections between them. The most common factors between the historical women are travel, dead lovers, and dead children, while Joan, and to some extent, Gret, dressed as men. Marlene traveled to America. Although she says that she does not have a dead lover in her past, Angie’s father is certainly absent, and might be considered dead. In addition to Angie, Marlene says she had two abortions, a case remarkably similar to Griselda’s story, in which her two children were taken from her, or like Nijo, who also
had abortions. Regarding Angie herself, Marlene was foolish about her pregnancy, as Joyce tells us: “for someone so clever you was the most stupid, get yourself pregnant, not go to the doctor, not tell” (134). Marlene, although a modern, educated woman, behaved very much like Joan, who ignored her pregnancy until it was too late. And while Marlene insists that “I don’t wear trousers in the office. I could but I don’t,” she also admits that “I’m not clever, just pushy” (62, 126). Rightly or wrongly, Mrs. Kidd also calls her “one of those ballbreakers,” emphasizing Marlene’s masculine qualities (114). These topical similarities imply that there are other connections between Marlene and her party-goers in their historical and social situations.

Strikingly, all of the historical figures disappear from the stage after this point, and they are never referenced, not even by Marlene. So what is Churchill doing? At first, it might seem as if she is turning away from all of these issues, especially with the radical scene shift to the office and then to Joyce’s backyard. However, what she is actually doing is allowing these topics to stew in the audience’s minds and to reverberate throughout the rest of the play. By foregrounding the social and historical context so vividly, Churchill is free to step back and let the audience work, drawing their own connections between the dinner party and the rest of the play. At the same time, Churchill is able to keep all of these issues fresh in the audience’s minds through another remarkable technique, the double casting.

**Act Two: Double Casting, Double Vision.** Although the historical figures do not reappear, in a sense, they are constantly on stage because of the double casting. All of the actors—with the exception of Marlene—play double or triple roles. Like Stoppard, Churchill creates a stereoscopic view of time, except that this view is even more pervasive because of its constancy. The audience cannot help but compare and contrast the modern day women with their historical counterparts; the faces from the dinner party constantly overlap the women of the present. The two sets of characters could be double cast in several different combinations; however, a brief scan of cast lists indicates that most productions stick with Churchill’s original casting assignments. This does have significance, as specific echoes will be set up through different characters. For example, Nijo, the emperor’s concubine, doubles as Win in the Top Girls office, a woman who is having an affair with a married man. Like the ancient concubine, Win denigrates herself for her lover, lying down in the back of his car so the neighbors will not see her going into the house. On the other hand, Nell, the double of Griselda, is the opposite of
her counterpart. Nell has two men on a string, but will marry neither because of her career. To add another layer of complexity, Nell/Griselda also plays Jeanine, the client that Marlene callously puts down in her job interview. As Nell, however, she in turn squashes Shona, her own client. Reinforcing the major theme, as Marohl sees it, the oppressed has become the oppressor. And reinforcing another lesson from act one, Neither Nell nor Win have gone anywhere or learned anything from their previous incarnations.

This layering of meaning between roles is almost entirely passive. Churchill draws no connections out loud; the audience must determine connections on their own. Churchill explicitly plays upon the layering of roles at only one point, when Louise, formerly Joan, says that, “I think I pass as a man at work,” a line oft remarked-upon by reviewers and scholars (66). While the line is entirely justified within the context, it is also a not-so-subtle reminder that keeps the dinner party in the minds of the audience.

**Act Three: Flashback.** The dinner party, with its anachronisms, is the primary temporal disruption of this play. As a corollary effect, the doubling of roles creates resonances that echo throughout the evening. Structurally, the only major temporal discrepancy is the flashback of the final scene. The final scene actually shares many similarities with the opening scene. Like the dinner party, the style and theme of the flashback is somewhat disparate from the middle third of the story. It is a family dispute and a political argument set in a kitchen. It is almost a separate story in itself, and one can see why Churchill separates it with the act break in the text. Like the dinner party, the scene is long debate between two women, and Marlene once again gets drunk. This is also the only other point in the play where the dialogue overlaps extensively. Unlike the friendly banter of the historical figures, Marlene and Joyce fight openly and end in estrangement. So as an opposite number to the dinner party, the scene makes a good bookend to the play.

But why, then, stage the scene as a flashback? The scene’s primary feature—the political argument between Marlene and Joyce—could have taken place at any time relative to the action in the Top Girls office. However, by reversing the order of presentation, Churchill controls the revelation of a specific piece of information. The climax of the play then becomes a discovery, not by Marlene, but by Angie and by the audience: Marlene has sacrificed her own daughter for her success. This revelation forces the audience to suddenly reevaluate the rest of the play. At this point, the audience’s opinion of Marlene might not change very much, or not at all. She is
certainly the same person we saw in scene one. But the revelation makes explicit the connection between Marlene and the historical women. We learn that Marlene has made the exact same choices under very similar circumstances to Nijo, to Griselda, to Joan. Marlene has learned nothing, and neither will she pass anything on. Marlene’s extreme individualism has brought her success, but for her only. It does not even extend to her own daughter.

Curiously, given the apparent significance of the motherhood revelation, Churchill said in an interview that making Angie Marlene’s daughter was almost an afterthought: “Originally the idea was just that Marlene was ‘writing off’ her niece, Angie, because she’d never make it; I didn’t yet have the plot idea that Angie was actually Marlene’s own child” (qtd. in Betsko and Koenig 82). The question arises, then, as to what the play would mean if Angie was only Marlene’s niece. To me, this would emphasize even more the sisterhood message of the play, that Marlene has more of a responsibility to Angie as a woman and as a human being than as a blood relation.

Additionally, the fact that the play ends by going backwards could have larger thematic implications. Brown suggests that “The spiraling or circular structure, characteristic of women’s writing, seems here to say that human society is ‘going in circles,’ no progress is being made” (111). Indeed, within the scene, Joyce gives Marlene the chance to claim her Angie, but Marlene passes again. The overall sense is that Marlene would always make the same decision, in the past, present, and future. Marohl further explains that “The play moves backwards, negating its ‘arguments’ as it proceeds. [...] The progress of the principal character Marlene proves to be illusory, and, in the end, she is not more morally advanced than the other characters and seems unusually dependent upon the sacrifices of others” (380). So the flashback is not merely a convenient method of telling the story. Like Stoppard, Churchill creates meaning via the very shape of the play, that shape being predicated upon her timeplay.

**Thought**

The role of thought or willpower in this play is not quite as obvious as in *Traps*. Like *Traps*, Angie briefly touches upon mental telepathy: “I been thinking yesterday could I make things move. You know, make things move by thinking about them without touching them. Last night I was in bed and suddenly a picture fell down off the wall” (88). The line appears to be superfluous, though, as it fails to connect to anything else in the play. The real question of will in
the play is, what causes the dinner party? Possibly, the party takes place entirely within Marlene’s head. Marlene has clearly orchestrated the event, inviting the guests and making arrangements with the restaurant. She says twice that her promotion is “worth a party” (67). The possible implication is that the real Marlene, actually denied any sort of celebration because of her total lack of personal connections, is throwing herself a fantasy party within her own head, and the staging of it is a matter of expressionism. Brown contends “It is only in fantasy that Marlene could celebrate her promotion with a dinner party; in reality, she says, she fell asleep in front of the television.” (110). However, the question is perhaps too formalistic within the context of this play. Churchill does not tell us where the historical women come from, and we are not meant to ask.

**Critical Reactions**

Unfortunately, very few reviews are on hand for *Traps*, a play written before Churchill had gained national acclaim and that is now rarely revived. The lack of revivals in itself suggests something, perhaps that the play’s discontinuities frighten off directors and producers, or perhaps that it has not found its own ideal time and place.

*Top Girls*, on the other hand, has had several major revivals. As in all of the plays examined here, Churchill’s timeplay and unusual structure were bound to confuse some. Many reviewers of the original production found the juxtaposition of the first three scenes confusing, and they were equally perturbed by the overlapping dialogue. John Russell Taylor complained that “to me at least, the pieces in the puzzle remain determinedly separate, never quite adding up to more than, well, so many fascinating pieces in a fascinating puzzle,” yet he admitted that “It is a play which sends you out asking questions and trying to work out, not disagreeably, just what it is you have been watching” (22-23). However, whereas the timeplay of Stoppard and even Barker is often overlooked, the extraordinary dinner *always* elicits comments. Some critics, such as Annalena McAfee and Bryan Robertson, spend as much as two-thirds of their reviews describing the dinner party and the rest lamenting how the rest of the play does not live up to the brilliance of the first scene. But almost every reviewer notices that the opening scene, as Sheridan Morley succinctly puts it, is “about the cost of feminine survival through the ages” (459). Some critics elaborate on this theme, with either a positive or a negative spin. John Peter
gleaned from the dinner party that “the lowest common denominator has always been passive obedience, and the highest common factor a rebellion which inevitably kills something in you as a person” (459). And many critics, Benedict Nightingale for one, go on to link the dinner party with the rest of the play: “What use is female emancipation, Churchill asks, if it transforms the clever women into predators and does nothing for the stupid, weak, and helpless? Does freedom, and feminism, consist of aggressively adopting the very values that have for centuries oppressed your sex?” Most reviewers still label Top Girls as a strictly feminist play, albeit a highly praised one, and tend to miss the more humanist message explored by both Brown and Marohl. But even so, the communication of Churchill’s major themes via her timeplay is extraordinarily successful.15
CONCLUSION
AS FAR AS THOUGHT CAN REACH

“Every dream is a prophecy. Every jest is an earnest in the womb of time.”
—George Bernard Shaw, *John Bull’s Other Island*

These three playwrights have taken us across time, space, and culture, from a feminist medieval commune to a cutthroat capitalist employment agency, from ancient Troy to the end of the universe, breaking the basic laws of physics along the way. So, to return to the original questions of this study, what happens when playwrights do the impossible? What does the disruption of spacetime do that no other method can accomplish? And what are the broader implications of this set of dramatic pieces that so freely play with the fundamental laws of space and time?

These six plays have shown us an entire spectrum of possibilities for timeplay, both in methods and in results. Barker uses deliberate, unavoidable anachronisms that interrupt the flow of his narrative: the soldiers, the jets, the little discrepancies of *The Bite of the Night* that are further punctuated by his oblique interludes. These anachronisms run counter both to our intellectual understanding of time and to our every day experience of time in the world, creating the potential to jar the audience on intellectual, emotional, and even visceral levels. Barker would hope that in their efforts to reconcile these impossible events, the spectators end up thinking critically about his plays as they unfold, completing the works by drawing their own meanings from the performances. Stoppard avoids overt anachronism, but instead interweaves and overlaps disparate timelines to create wonderfully impossible moments: the waltz, Housman’s reflexive conversation. In light of Foucault and Hall’s insistence on the cultural conditioning of time, these moments of getting away with the impossible could create a sense of liberation, in addition to the scenes’ more obvious ironies. Churchill’s method of undoing events in *Traps* has the potential of radically jarring the audience because such discrepancies are so far outside the bounds of reality,
but at the same time, she leaves clues that invite the audience to participate in solving a mystery. Similarly, the provocative opening anachronism of *Top Girls* introduces a problem, while the double-casting draws that problem through the play, allowing the spectators to solve it at their own pace.

The through line across all of these plays is thought. Thought manifests itself differently in each work: as sexual desire, the quest for knowledge, or private fantasy, but human will lies behind all of the major temporal discrepancies. On the stage, thought can cause the impossible: the intrusion of the castle, Hannah reaching through time, the altered reality of *Traps*. But as *Traps* most strongly shows us, all of us have the power to affect reality to some degree. Every decision we make, from the life-altering to the mundane, changes the reality of our lives. Furthermore, these plays demonstrate how much of our lives are predicated upon our personal worldviews, our mental spaces that are totally governed by thought. AEH lived his life in a single moment, a place in time from which he could not escape, even in death. Hannah lived her life facing backwards, into the past. Marlene resorted to fantasy when she had no other companionship. These plays ask, in what time do we *choose* to live? The choice between living in the past, the present, and the futures does lie within our power. The cumulative message of all of these plays, from Savage’s burning quest to the second chances of *Traps*, is to make the best choices you can in the moment in which you live, carefully examining the operation of your own will in shaping your reality. As AEH tells his younger self, folded in time through the dream-warp of his mind, “If I had my time again, I would pay more regard to those poems of Horace which tell you you will not have your time again.” (39).

In addition to these specific meanings, the timeplay of these playwrights leads to much broader political and ideological implications. For instance, *The Castle* has been linked almost exclusively to Greenham Common, but Barker’s timeplay takes us far beyond that single moment. The soldiers do not point only to Berkshire in 1985; they pull the audience across time, indicting military conflicts from the Crusades to the present day, whenever that is. Likewise, Creausa tells us she is not just in Troy, she is in Calais, in Carthage, in Brandenburg (one could add, in Baghdad). Barker’s medieval sense of time makes his Troy a Troy of all time. Additionally, by pointing out the discrepancies between received notions of history—Helen as sexual prize versus Helen as an economic metaphor—Barker directly asks about the creation of history and culture: Is history crafted more by the actors or by the recorders?
Stoppard’s temporal stagecraft evokes very similar conclusions. Through the shape of his plays and through the discussions of thermodynamics and textual criticism, he proves (to me, at least) that the past is impossible to know for certain. We must accept uncertainty and we must accept loss. Applied to historiography, these plays call into doubt any statement of absolute truth about the past. Consequently, they also challenge our entire cultural self-image that is based upon received ideas of certain historical facts. In an era when the question of knowing is important not only to the study of history, but to global military actions; in an era where the records of political candidates mysteriously appear and disappear, Stoppard’s questions about the reconstruction of history have startlingly pertinent political implications.

Churchill is probably the most topically political of these three playwrights. *Top Girls* was specific commentary on its time and place: feminist London of 1981, but the message of the play is certainly not limited to that. Many reviewers considered the 1991 revival even more powerful than the original production, in large part because they were looking back on a decade that Churchill had prophetically described. However, the play contains meanings that apply to more than just the eighties. As the play continues to age, Marlene will become more and more a historical artifact, so like the other women in the dinner party, she will become someone to whom we can compare our own lives. And as Churchill shows, the problem of inequality, or of class, or of individual achievement versus the needs of the family and community, are issues that will not be resolved any time soon. Finally, the very structure of the play, like Stoppard’s, carries implications of its own. The flashback of the final scene is highly suggestive political commentary, indicating that as a culture and as a species we are moving in circles, failing to pass down our knowledge and achievements. It also reminds us that it is possible to end up farther back in the march of social progress then when we started. In this light, Churchill’s timeplay is not just a convenient way of telling a story, but as Marohl suggests, a call to action.

Furthermore, taken as a group, the timeplay of these plays says something about the times in which we live, or more specifically about the mindset of the playwrights and audiences of the late twentieth century. To take anachronism as an example: Medieval writers and artists used anachronisms haphazardly, unknowingly, ascribing the values of their time indiscriminately to the past (at least, that is the case as well as historians are able to reconstruct). In the modern age, as European cultures differentiated between past and present, anachronism was recognized and treated as mistakes to be avoided. Now, in the postmodern era, anachronism is not avoided but
embraced, either as a method to constructively create meaning, as with Barker, or frequently as a way to make a sly joke, as with Stoppard. Non-linear story telling is used by Stoppard, Churchill, and many others, but all of these playwrights expect their audiences—increasingly exposed to the non-linearity of channel- and web-surfing than the linearity of books—to be able to reassemble the narrative into a coherent whole. That these postmodern playwrights are able to write these impossible plays at all implies that their minds are open to thinking about time, space, and narrative in unconventional ways. To fully explore the links between timeplay and postmodern British and American culture would require a much broader examination than what I have done here, but it is fair to say that these plays both reflect and shape the postmodern world.

To return, finally, to the critical function of timeplay. In each of these plays, the most powerful and most memorable events are brought about by breaking the rules of time: Skinner’s visions, Savage’s journey, the double waltz, Housman’s self-examination, Albert’s resurrection, the dinner party. Furthermore, the plays’ very shapes reinforce the major discourses that run through each: in *The Castle*, the ability of consciousness to link past, present, and future; in *The Bite of the Night*, the social construction of history and desire; in *Arcadia*, the behavior of heat and the unknowability of the past; in *The Invention of Love*, the power of will to shape reality; in *Traps*, the irrationality of human behavior; in *Top Girls*, the illusion of social progress and the cyclical nature of history. To remove the anachronisms, reconcile the impossibilities, and straighten the story-telling would break the plays and remove their meanings. The impossibilities make possible these amazing stories.
NOTES

1 Physicists Carlo Rovelli and Julian Barbour of the University d’Aix-Marseille, in France, have made this argument recently. They are referenced in Musser.

2 The fundamentals of relativity should be described in any physics textbook; however, an accessible and totally lucid description of the effects of general relativity can be found in Kaufmann’s *Black Holes and Warped Spacetime*. Rob Salgado of Syracuse University provides a comprehensive and but more technically-minded guide to relativity at <http://physics.syr.edu/courses/modules/LIGHTCONE/index.html>. For a closer look at relativity and time, see also the articles by Paul Davies in the September 2002 issue of *Scientific American*.

3 In *Arguments for a Theatre*, page 38. All quotes attributed to Barker alone come from this source.

4 Greenham Common protesters drew the most attention in 1982, when some 30,000 women gathered to demonstrate against the storage of nuclear-tipped cruise missiles on the site. The movement was almost exclusively female. Women remained at the Common, living in tents and trailers, until 2000, after the missiles had finally been removed. See: “The Women’s Peace Camp” and *Greenham Common*.

5 Reviewers of the original production of *The Castle* include Rissik, Billington, Hiley, Nathan, Bardsley, King, Barber, Shulman, Ratcliffe, Gordon, Coveney, and O’Shaughnessy, all of whom appear in *Theatre Record*. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from these reviewers regarding this play refer to “The Castle” entry for *Theatre Record* in the Works Cited.

6 Reviewers of the original production of *The Bite of the Night* include Conway, Connor, Dunn, Hiley, Hirschorn, Edwards, Hones, Kemp, Nathan, Shulman, Morley, Spencer, Tinker, Billington, Ratcliffe, and Coveney. All reviews appear in *Theatre Record*. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from these reviewers regarding this play refer to “The Bite of the Night” entry for *Theatre Record* in the Works Cited.

7 Conway, Connor, Dunn, and Hiley, were pro. Hirschorn, Edwards, Hones, Kemp, Nathan, Shulman, Morley, Spencer, and Tinker were con. Billington, Ratcliffe, and Coveney were mixed.

8 Quoted by AEH in *The Invention of Love*, page 43.

To be sure, the debate between a forever-expanding, flat universe and a cyclical, expanding-and-collapsing spherical universe goes on; however, thanks to recent discoveries by the WMAP space probe, launched by NASA in 2003, the majority of evidence now supports the theory that the universe will expand forever. See “Some Theories Win, Some Lose” for details on the latest discovery, as well as *Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe* and Edward Wright for a larger discussion of cosmology.

For example: The beginning of scene two, “Matriculation at Oxford,” is clearly marked by the exit of AEH and Charon and the entrance of Housman, Pollard, and Jackson, along with a light change (5). The beginning of scene three, “Croquet with Faculty,” is marked by the entrance of Pattison, chasing a croquet ball (8). Scenes two and three overlap here, as Pattison starts a discussion with the boys, who are still on stage. The boys exit, followed by Pattison. Next, Pater and a student enter and leave, and they are followed by Ruskin and Jowett, also playing croquet (9). All this I count as a single scene. Ruskin and Jowett exit, and the boys re-enter on a boat, thus marking the beginning of scene four, “The Boat Trip” (10). A few minutes later, the boys exit on the boat and the faculty re-enter (14), thus beginning scene five, and so on.

Reviewers of *Arcadia* include Michael Billington, Graham Hassell, David Nathan, Benedict Nightingale, Irving Wardle, Steve Grant, Paul Taylor, John Gross, Michael Coveney, Charles Spenser, Maureen Paton, Clive Hirschhorn, and Roger Highfield (pro); Aleks Sierz and Christopher Tookey (con); and Sheridan Morley, Nicholas de Jongh, Malcolm Rutherford, John Peter, and Jack Tinker (mixed). All reviews appear in *Theatre Record*, and all quotations from these authors regarding this play refer to the entry “Arcadia.”

Reviewers of *The Invention of Love* include Howard Kissel, Adam Phillips, John Heilpern, Clive Barnes, Sheridan Morley, Wendy Lesser, Julie K.L. Dam, Benedict Nightingale, Amy Gamerman, Kate Kellaway, and Daniel Mendelsohn (pro); Robert Brustein, John Simon, and D.P. Stearns (con); and Ben Brantley, Jeremy Treglown, Steve Jones, Michael Feingold, and William Triplett (mixed). These reviews are compiled at *The Complete Review*, <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/stoppt/invent.htm>. Those quoted refer to the entry, “The Invention of Love.”

Reviewers of the 1991 production of *Top Girls* include Annalena McAfee, Sheridan Morley, John Peter, Clare Bayley, Alastair Macaulay, James Christopher, Ros Asquith, Michael Billington, Benedict Nightingale, Michael Coveney, Paul Taylor, Clive Hirschhorn, Ian Dodd, and Charles Spencer, all appearing in *Theatre Record*. All reviews and quotations from them refer to the entry, “Top Girls.”

If Marlene actually did mention in the text that she spent her Saturday night watching television, it would, in my opinion, give proof positive that the entire dinner party was an
expression of Marlene’s own fantasies. However, neither text I have makes any references to what Marlene actually did over the weekend. As we saw earlier in the discussion of the act breaks, there are discrepancies between printed texts. Perhaps Brown has yet another printed version, or perhaps the text was changed after the original performance.

Reviewers of the original production of *Top Girls* (which began in London and transferred to New York with the same cast) include Benedict Nightingale, John Russell Taylor, Frank Rich, Bryan Roberton, Clive Barnes, and Douglass Watt, listed separately in the works cited. See note 13 for reviewers of the 1991 revival.


- - - . Top Girls. New York: Methuen, 1982. [Note: This text contains the two-act structure.]


Jay M. King (or sometimes Gipson-King) graduated as valedictorian from Astoria High School and with a summa cum laude from Linfield College, both in Oregon. He worked for two years at Portland State University, where he edited national publications for the Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children’s mental health. During this time, he wrote a study-guide for *Gypsy* at Portland Center Stage. In addition to academic work, he has written two full-length plays: *Confessions of a Shoe Whore*, a comedy produced at Linfield College in 2000, and *The Infamous Samantha Wiggins*, a drama produced by Theatre Southeast at Florida State University in 2004. He has also worked as an actor, director, and dramaturg for productions at Linfield College and Florida State University.