

A double adaptation: *On the Razzle* by Tom Stoppard and Robin Orr

This paper will examine how Tom Stoppard adapts the musical part of the original play by Johann Nestroy, and how this adaptation in turn inspired composer Robin Orr to adapt Stoppard's play into an opera. In addition, this paper will compare *On the Razzle* to musical adaptations of Shaw's plays, look at similarities in the musicality of the language, references and adaptability.

On the Razzle by Tom Stoppard is a free adaptation of the farce *Einen Jux will er sich Machen* from 1842 by Johann Nestroy, which is itself an adaptation of a one-act play, *A Day Well Spent* from 1835 by English dramatist John Oxenford. The Oxenford play also provided the plot for Thornton Wilder's *The Merchant of Yonkers* (1939), *The Matchmaker* (1954), and the character Dolly, who became the heroine in the musical *Hello, Dolly* (1964).

To set the scene: *Einen Jux will er sich Machen* was first performed at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna on 10 March 1842. Johann Nestroy (1801-1862) designed the German play as a four-act musical play with music by Austrian composer Adolf Müller (1801-1886). By October that year, the play had already had 50 performances as well as guest performances in Prague, Brno and Berlin. The original German version goes like this:

Zangler, a wealthy grocer, is going to Vienna for the annual parade of the Grocers' Company of which he is President Elect. He leaves his assistant Weinberl in charge. He is also sending his niece Marie away to stay with a relative, Miss Blumenblatt, to protect her from the penniless Sonders, who she is courting. The assistant Weinberl and the apprentice Christopherl decide that they need to go "on the razzle" (enjoying oneself while drinking freely), so they too

head to Vienna. There they notice Zangler in the parade and try to hide in the salon of Madame Knorr, Zangler's fiancée. Weinberl pretends to be the new husband of the rich widow Frau von Fischer, and when she arrives she is so amused that she plays along. Sonders and Marie are also in Vienna, and everyone ends up together. In true farcical style, there are a lot of mistaken identities and this time around everyone ends up at the house of Miss Blumenblatt. Weinberl and Christopherl finally pretend to be Marie and Sonders until those two, along with Zangler, Madame Knorr and Frau von Fischer, also arrive. Weinberl and Christopherl narrowly escape and get back to the business. There they catch two burglars and are praised for it by Zangler. Marie and Sonders are finally allowed to hug each other. We get a classic happy ending with Weinberl making – successfully – a marriage proposal to Frau von Fischer. In the original German version two lines keep appearing: the lines “Das is classisch” (It is classic) by Melchior and “Das schickt sich nicht “ (that's not proper) by Marie. You will recognize those lines in the Stoppard adaptation.

Johann Nestroy was a singer, actor and playwright. He wrote nearly 80 comedies, and music played an essential part in amplifying the theme and moving the plot in his earlier plays – until 1841. After 1841 almost all the songs were Viennese Couplets sung by the characters he was playing. That is, songs where two successive lines rhyme and have the same meter creating a thought or meaning. In the original production of *Einen Jux will er sich Machen* Nestroy played the part of Weinberl, and the score had four songs for Weinberl and one for Melchior. Roughly half of his plays have been revived in modern German and many are a staple in today's Viennese repertoire. *Einen Jux will er sich Machen* is Nestroy's only popular play outside German-speaking countries, as only a few other of Nestroy's works have been translated into English. This seems to be due to Nestroy's stylized language and Viennese dialect as well as the puns and

allusions. Because of this and since many of the references in the original play were to Nestroy's contemporary Vienna, all translations and modern productions of *Einen Jux will er sich machen* tend to be adaptations. *Einen Jux will er sich machen* is three times longer than Oxenford's original play. It is smoother, faster, and more sober in the dialogue. The scenes and people inserted by Nestroy - the "classic" porter Melchior, the housekeeper Frau Gertrud, large parts of the inn scene, the meeting at Fräulein von Blumenblatt and others - are missing in the original. In Oxenford's version the colorless Miss Harriet has an isolated "Shocking, indeed!" in contrast to Nestroy's deliciously caricatured Marie with her stereotypical "It's not proper!"

The composer Adolf Müller, who wrote the music for 41 of Nestroy's plays between 1832 and 1847, also worked as an actor, singer and conductor. Part of his responsibility as the conductor was to compose overtures and musical interludes for farces, melodramas, pantomimes and ballets. He was extremely productive, creating music for over 650 stage works. His musical style spans from being close to Beethoven to close to Johann Strauss (the elder). While not quite the same as Viennese operetta music as we know it today, his music influenced the development of Viennese Operetta.

The only sheet music from *Einen Jux will er sich machen* I have been able to locate is a piano score with 12 musical numbers. I also found an additional song in an orchestral score. Apart from an overture and a finale for each act, it has four (or five) solo songs - four songs for Weinberl and one for Melchior - the rest are presumably orchestral with a total of 12 or 13 musical numbersⁱ, as Nestroy at this point was eliminating choruses and ensemble finales.

For his inspiration, Stoppard went back to the Nestroy version. Stoppard claims in his introduction that in most of the dialogue he did not even attempt to translate what Nestroy wrote.

According to his comments in the introduction to *On the Razzle*, he also took a step further than Nestroy in regards to music. Stoppard states:

On the Razzle makes no use of dialect, ignores period flavor in dialogue, and has no songsⁱⁱ.

However, after reading his play I must say I disagree with him. *On the Razzle* has many sound clues and several pieces of actual music. In the filmed version of the 1981 production from The National Theatre by Terence Donovan in association with Channel 4, as well as several productions available online, music is included. Actual music as stated in the printed script of *On the Razzle* include: occurrences of Viennese music, parade music, sextet serenading, a Viennese Waltz, and Happy Birthday. So at least five instances of actual music are performed. Sound clues include: Town clock, zing of cash register, knocking, coach horn, door slam, parrot, bawling, scream, doorbell, as well as what one would almost call a *leitmotif* – the sound of spurs – the *leitmotif* of Zangler. Then there are all the musical references: Piano player, musical, jingling, bands playing, grand parade, Verdi's *Macbeth*, Brass band, music, evergreens, golden oldies, *Blue Danube*, and bagpipes. Unlike the songs in Nestroy's version the music in Stoppard's play is only used to set the stage – create the mood – not to move the action or comment on the storyline. However, let us not forget the musicality of Stoppard's language which has several passages reading like Gilbert and Sullivan. Critic Paula Citron says about Stoppard's play

Stoppard is arguably the greatest wordsmith writing in English today, and while *On the Razzle* may be just a farce, (or Stoppard Lite, as one wag cleverly called it), the brilliance

of the language elevates the silly plot to a celestial Stoppardian plane. In his hands, the play is an overwrought exercise of dizzying verbal gymnasticsⁱⁱⁱ.

While most of the characters in *Einen Jux will er sich machen* and *On the Razzle* are the same, there are a few exceptions. Nestroy's original includes Kraps, Zangler's servant; Bruninger, a merchant; a landlord and Rab, a crook. Stoppard on the other hand includes a foreigner, an Italian waiter and a German and a Scottish couple. The latter are another possible contradiction to Stoppard's own words in the Introduction, which claims no dialects are being used – so instead he is parodying German and Italian as well as Scottish. Is Scottish a dialect..?

Robin Orr (1909 – 2006) was a Scottish academic, organist, composer and the first chair of The Scottish Opera 1962-1976, a company he founded together, with among others, Sir Alexander Gibson. He was also a Director of The Welsh National Opera (1977-82). Orr was awarded a CBE¹ in 1972 and honorary degrees from Universities of Glasgow and Dundee. Among his works are three operas as well as music for several plays^{iv}, and a song cycle *From the Book of Philip Sparrow*, that premiered in Glasgow in 1969 with world-renowned mezzo-soprano Janet Baker.

Scottish Television commissioned Robin Orr's first opera from 1967 called *Full Circle*^v. His second opera *Hermiston*, was commissioned by The Scottish Opera, and performed at the 1975 Edinburgh Festival^{vi}. And last, but not least, *On the Razzle*, commissioned by the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in 1988, based of course on Stoppard's play. It has been labelled an “witty, artful comic opera” that “displays a flurry of ingenious personal vignettes”.

¹ Commander of the British Empire.

Robin Orr's *On the Razzle* is a Comic opera in three acts with a running time of 2 hours and 10 minutes. Not only did Robin Orr compose the music, he also wrote the libretto adaptation – much like the Shavian operas adapted by Philip Hagemann. The opera is scored for 2 Sopranos, 2 Mezzo Sopranos, 2 Tenors, 1 Baritone and 1 Bass. The orchestra consists of 2 flutes (also playing piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 3 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, timpani, 2 percussionists, 1 piano, Strings (violin1.violin2.viola.cello.doublebass) and Celesta (sounds like a glockenspiel). In addition, there is a chorus. According to The New Grove Dictionary of Opera it was originally composed for student performance. The storyline is carried by the recitative and arias, with very few set pieces² and the orchestral commentary providing the continuity. Unlike his first two operas, where key motifs are worked closely undergoing many transformations, *On the Razzle* is

Less tightly organized, pays tribute to the spirit of the Viennese waltz [and] Orr's score is clear and telling, his fine sense of dramatic pacing evident particularly in the scenes of vigorous action^{vii}.

Musicologist Ian Kemp wrote about the opera

Its title proclaims a comic opera, as indeed it is, with a libretto from Stoppard's play of that name. It is brilliantly funny and with a plot complex enough to rival *The Marriage of Figaro*. Orr's music is carefully designed not to smother the text or plot. Its harmony piquancy is softened by pervasive Viennese waltz rhythms.^{viii}

² A Set-piece is a big musical number that is so spectacular that it requires an entirely new set. They change the set, perform the set-piece, and then change back to another set.

In some ways Orr's adaptation of Stoppard's adaptation is closer to Nestroy's original adaptation, with music once again moving along the storyline in contrast to the actual music left in Stoppard's adaptation, which as previously mentioned does not move or comment on the storyline, but is helping to "set the stage" – creating the ambiance. To put it in a Shavian perspective: Shaw described the difference between being a playwright and a composer the following way:

I have to write melodies without bars, *without indications of pitch, pace, or timbre*, and without modulation, leaving the actor or producer to divine the proper treatment of what is essentially wordmusic. I turn over a score by Richard Strauss [1864–1949], and envy him his bar divisions, his assurance that his trombone passages will not be played on the triangle, his power of giving directions without making his music unreadable.^{ix}

Reviewer Paula Citron says about *On the Razzle*:

Alas, it Stoppard's very language that causes director Craig Hall's production of *On the Razzle* to falter. Farce has to function at breakneck speed, yet, at the same time, the audience has to have time to absorb what is being said. It's a fine line — to maintain ferocious pacing while maintaining a clarity of language.^x

With Stoppard's language having a Shavian verbose eloquence it follows that setting Stoppard's words to music presents many of the same challenges. American composer Philip Hagemann,

who has composed more operas based on plays by Bernard Shaw than anyone else, has said this about setting Shaw's play to music:

Since I had seen so many of his plays, I was not surprised that some would work as an opera given the rich stories and characters. However, many are very wordy and I could not see using many. I did write an opera based on his play *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* but dropped his ending and gave it my own because of its wordiness and because the subject at the end lost the momentum of the plot. I was told that I had improved on the story.

In the New York Times interview, composer Joyce Barthelson, who wrote an opera based on Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple*, said this about adapting the text:

I hated to cut some of Shaw's wonderfully verbose discussions about love and relationships and so on, but you can't hold up the whole opera for them, so I wound up inserting my own ballads and love songs. They have to get through to the audience quickly and directly.^{xi}

With the plot almost unchanged, still including bits of music and with the musicality of Stoppard's language lending itself to musical adaptations, the main challenge – as with most of Shaw's plays – becomes the sheer length and wordiness of it, which means that the composer is forced to make cuts and simplify. This is, indeed, why the short and comical Shaw plays are the ones that lend themselves most to musical adaptations. So, like Shaw, Stoppard has to work

harder when he replaces music with word-music and in doing so he makes it harder for the audience to comprehend. Shaw and Stoppard are both unquestionably very brilliant wordsmiths, but in a case like this, I am not convinced that Stoppard's cleverness replaces the music and gives the audience the better dramatic performance.

ⁱ Inhalt (12 Lieder):

Ouverture

Nr. 1 Es sind gewiß in unsrer Zeit, (Da wird wohl auch was g'handelt wer'n), Lied (Weinberl)

Nr. 2 Finale I

Nr. 3 Entr'acte

Nr. 4 A Mann führt sei Frau 's ganze Jahr, (Das is a verruckte Idee), Lied (Weinberl)

Nr. 4a A jung's und schlank's Töchterl, (Und erlaub'n S' mir es schickt sich doch nicht), Lied (Melchior)

Nr. 5 Finale II

Nr. 6 Entr'acte

Nr. 7 Finale III

Nr. 8 Entr'acte

Nr. 9 's hat einer a Geld herg'liehn, (Und es schickt sich doch offenbar nicht), Lied (Weinberl)

Nr. 10 Schluß

In addition to:

No 3 Lied des Weinberl (Man muß sehn im Kaffeehaus) – place in the score..?

ⁱⁱ On the Razzle, p. 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.ludwig-van.com/toronto/2023/07/07/scrutiny-shaws-sloppy-careless-production-doesnt-justice-razzle/>

^{iv} Spring Cantata: Mezzo-choir-orchestra • (1956) • Cantates profanes : soli-chœur-orchestre

Deirdre of the Sorrows: play music • (1951) • Musiques de scène - Masques

Oedipe à Colonne: play music • (1950) • Musiques de scène - Masques

Winter's Tale (A): play music • (1947) • Musiques de scène - Masques

Robin Orr at 90: Age of Gold.

^v According to his biography at The British Music Collection it has a “pithy, socially perspective” and “employs identical forces to Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat*”^v, scored for the same instruments plus viola, and a Scottish libretto based on the words of poet Sydney Goodsir Smith (1915-75).

^{vi} , and has been described as “tense and powerful, lyrical and graphically bleak, with skillfully characterized libretto by Bill Bryden”^{vi}, which is based on R. L. Stevenson’s unfinished novel *Weir of Hermiston*.

^{vii} Stanley Sadie (Ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, “Orr, Robin”, volume 3, pp. 778-779. Oxford University Press, London 1992

^{viii} Ian Kemp, *The Musical Times*, Vol. 140, No. 1866 (Spring, 1999), pp. 11-12+14+16-17 (5 pages)

^{ix} Martin Meisel, *How Plays Work: Reading and Performance* (New York: Oxford university Press, 2007), 7.

^x <https://www.ludwig-van.com/toronto/2023/07/07/scrutiny-shaws-sloppy-careless-production-doesnt-justice-razzle/>

^{xi} Sherman, Robert. “*Devil's Disciple*’ Set to Music”. *New York Times*. November 4, 1977.