

from the FOOTLIGHTS

NOVEMBER 2016

"Life shouldn't be all work and no plays."

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November 15: Footlights' Dinner-discussion of Tom Stoppard's The Hard Problem

Napoleon is said to have enjoyed embarrassing people, so he asked Pierre-Simon, marquis de Laplace, one of the great French mathematical physicists of the 19th century, if it was true that there was no mention of the solar system's Creator (i.e. God) in his latest work. Laplace replied: "I had no need of that hypothesis."

This pointed statement is, of course, one of the basics of the scientific method. If one theory adequately explains the development of a phenomenon, then you don't another theory. When Darwin and succeeding evolutionary biologists showed how changes in older forms of animals and plants could lead to modern characteristics, it would be unreasonable to argue that a supernatural force made the changes.

Laplace's rejoinder, obviously, did not stop those down to this day who believe that God did create the universe as stated in the Bible or in some other way. In this country, there have been many efforts over many years to introduce God as creator into school curricula. A few years ago, legislation was unsuccessfully introduced in various states to require teaching of an old argument made modern that saw God as the First Cause. This idea is that God created the beginnings of the universe that evolved by laws that He established into what we see now.

But, a somewhat new question has come up and the scientific and non-scientific ideas surrounding it are at the heart of this Stoppard play. The back cover of the published play says in part:

"Above all don't use the word good as though it meant something in evolutionary science.

The Hard Problem is a tour de force, exploring fundamental questions of how we experience the world, as well as telling the moving story of a young woman whose struggle for understanding her own life and the lives of others leads her to question the deeply held beliefs of those around her.

Hilary, a young psychology researcher at the Krohl Institute for Brain Science, is nursing a private sorrow and a troubling question. She and other researchers at the institute are grappling with what science calls the "hard problem"—if there is nothing but matter, what is

consciousness? What Hilary discovers puts her fundamentally at odds with her colleagues, who include her first mentor and one-time lover, Spike; her boss, Leo; and the billionaire founder of the institute, Jerry."

Another way of introducing what the play is all about is to quote the review by Ben Brantley in the NY Times almost two years ago:

"The beautiful young couple, hair mussed and eyes glazed, has just had a tumble in the sheets. It has clearly been a fulfilling encounter for both parties. Yet something unspoken still hovers between them.

So the woman, wearing a black satin teddy, turns to the man, who's wrapped himself in her negligee, and asks him to go ahead and do it, again and again. "Explain consciousness," she demands.

Ah, there's nothing like pillow talk, Tom Stoppard-style."

The issue is that our brains are enormous collections of neurons, genes, fluid, electrical charges and much more. Can that pile of material things give rise to immaterial consciousness -- to its thoughts, imagination, likes and dislikes and much more? We map more and more of the brain each day but where does consciousness exist. Scientists can pinpoint the areas of the brain that light up when we think, laugh, feel hungry. But these areas are just places containing material more or less similar to the material in the rest of our bodies.

Some scientists believe that it is simply a matter of time before we learn how the material gives rise to the immaterial. But others argue that materialists will not be able to explain consciousness, that there is something more, perhaps a place that God has created. It is like some people speaking of happy coincidences while others call them small miracles. And some neuroscientists and philosophers, I understand, believe that the problem is overblown (that is I understand their final judgment, not the details).

Stoppard does take a position. Not emphatically, but more than just suggestively.

Studio Theatre has produced many of Stoppard's plays and we are fortunate to have as our guest on **Tuesday, November 15** the director of *The Hard Problem*, **Matt Torney**. He is also associate artistic director at Studio and

director of programming for Origin Theatre in New York, an Off Broadway company that specializes in European new writing. Jerry Stilkind will moderate.

Our dinner-discussion is at Alfio's, 4515 Willard Avenue, Chevy Chase, MD, on the ground floor of the Willoughby Apartments – a short walk from the north entrance of the Friendship Heights metro stop on the red line. Street parking is limited if you drive, but valet parking is available at Alfio's. Dinner is at 6:30, the discussion at 7:30 and ends no later than 9.

The all-inclusive cost for dinner and discussion is \$20. Dinner is a green salad, choice among six entrées, and spaghetti, green beans, bread and butter, ice cream, and tea or coffee. Alfio's salad bar may be substituted for the entrée if you wish. Cash or check, please – no credit cards. Wine, beer, cocktails are available from the bar. You may come at 7:20 for the discussion only for just \$5.

Make reservations with Phyllis Bodin, at phylbo@verizon.net or 301-986-1768. Reservations and/or

cancellations will be accepted until noon on the day of the dinner-discussion. If you must cancel, please let Phyllis know as soon as possible since the restaurant needs a complete count. This is a seated, table-service dinner, not a buffet. We may be charged for no-shows and expect you to cover our cost.

Read the play. Copies of *The Hard Problem* are available in bookstores and from the usual online sites. Note: We encourage you to read the play before our discussion. Our discussion may include spoilers.

See the play. *The Hard Problem* will be performed at Studio Theatre, 1501 14th Street NW, Washington, DC 20005, from January 11 to February 19.

About Footlights

To subscribe to our e-list, go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/footlightsdc/join>, or e-mail footlightsdc-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. To learn more about Footlights, see <http://www.footlightsdc.org>.

Calendar:

- **Sunday, November 13**, 3 p.m., performance of *Six Degrees of Separation* by **John Guare**. Postshow cast discussion included. At Keegan Theatre, 1742 Church St NW, Washington, DC 20036. Phone: (202) 265-3767. Tickets for Footlights are \$30. Use the code FOOTLIGHTS to receive your discount. This offer is good for any other performance of *Six Degrees* (November 5 through December 3). If you are purchasing your ticket online at keegantheatre.com, select the 'adult' category and use the FOOTLIGHTS code.
- **Tuesday, November 15**, 6:30 p.m., dinner-discussion of **Tom Stoppard's** *The Hard Problem*. Guest: **Matt Torney**, director. Jerry Stilkind moderates. At Alfio's, 4515 Willard Avenue, Chevy Chase, MD. Reserve with Phyllis Bodin, phylbo@verizon.net or 301-986-1768.

Robin Larkin for **FOOTLIGHTS**
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