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Indian Ink

A play

Tom Stoppard

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

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FOUNDED 1830

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INDIAN INK

First produced by Michael Codron at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford, and subsequently at the Aldwych Theatre, London, on 27th February 1995 with the following cast of characters:

Flora Crewe	Felicity Kendal
Coomaraswami	Rashid Karapiet
Nazrul	Ravi Aujila
Eleanor Swan	Margaret Tyzack
Eldon Pike	Colin Stinton
Questioner	Akbar Kurtha
Nirad Das	Art Malik
Anish Das	Paul Bhattacharjee
David Durance	Dominic Jephcott
Dilip	Akbar Kurtha
Englishman	Kenneth Jay
Englishwoman	Diana Oxford
Resident	Peter Wickham
Club Servant	Ravi Aujila
Rajah/Politician	Madhav Sharma
Rajah's Servant	Naim Khan-Turk
Nell	Nickie Rainsford
Eric	Daniel Wellon

Directed by Peter Wood
Designed by Carl Toms
Lighting by Mark Henderson

CHARACTERS

Flora Crewe
Coomaraswami
Nazrul
Eleanor Swan
Eldon Pike
Anish Das
Nirad Das
David Durance
Dilip
Resident
Englishwoman
Englishman
Rajah/Politician
Nell
Eric

In addition:
Indian Questioner(s)
Club Servant(s)
Rajah's Servant(s)

The play is set in two periods, 1930 (in India) and mid-1980s (in England and India)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is not intended that the stage be demarcated between India and England, or past and present. Floor space, and even furniture, may be common. In this respect and in others, the play profited greatly from Peter Wood's direction. The stage directions generally follow the original production but are not offered as a blueprint for the staging.

T.S.

Indian Ink is dedicated to the memory of
Laura Kendal

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Dirty Linen *and* New-Found-Land
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Hapgood
If You're Glad I'll Be Frank
Night and Day
The Real Inspector Hound
The Real Thing
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead
A Separate Peace

with Clive Exton
The Boundary

ACT I

Dusk

Flora sits alone on a moving train. Her suitcase is on the rack above her head. The train is approaching a station. Flora, already speaking, stands to lift down her suitcase. By the end of her first speech, she is on the station platform at Jummapur

Flora “Jummapur, Wednesday, April the second. Darling Nell, I arrived here on Saturday from Bombay after a day and a night and a day in a Ladies Only, stopping now and again to be revictualled through the window with pots of tea and proper meals on matinée trays, which, remarkably, you hand back through the window at the next station down the line where they do the washing up; and from the last stop I had the compartment to myself, with the lights coming on for me to make my entrance on the platform at Jummapur. The President of the Theosophical Society was waiting with several members of the committee drawn up at a respectful distance, not quite a red carpet and brass band but garlands of marigolds at the ready, and I thought there must be somebody important on the train ——”

Coomaraswami (*interrupting*) Miss Crewe!

Flora “— and it turned out to be me.”

Coomaraswami Welcome to Jummapur!

Flora “—which was very agreeable.” Thank you!

And as she is garlanded by Coomaraswami

How nice! Are you Mr Coomar ...

Coomaraswami Coomaraswami! That is me! Is this your only luggage?! Leave it there!

He claps his hands imperiously for assistance, and then shakes hands enthusiastically with Flora

How do you do, Miss Crewe!

The handshake which begins on the station platform ends on the verandah of the “Dak Bungalow”, or guesthouse. The guesthouse requires a verandah and an interior which includes, or comprises, a bedroom. On the verandah

is a small table with at least two chairs. There is an electric light, unlit, and an oil lamp, lit. The bedroom contains a bed under a mosquito net, a washstand, a bedside table, an electric fan and a "punkah". There is a door to a bathroom off stage

A servant, Nazrul, carries Flora's suitcase into the bedroom, and then retreats to his quarters, out of sight

Flora *(completing the handshake)* Thank you!

Coomaraswami Welcome, my dear Miss Crewe! And farewell! A day of rest!

Flora Thank you — you were so kind to ——

Coomaraswami I will leave you! Tomorrow, a picnic! Do you like temples?

Flora Well, I don't know ... I'm sure I ...

Coomaraswami Leave everything to me!

Coomaraswami leaves her, shouting in Hindi for his buggy-driver

The Shepperton garden is now visible. Here, Mrs Swan and Pike are having tea while occupied with a shoebox of Flora's letters

Flora "And in no time at all I was installed in a little house, two good-sized rooms under a tin roof... with electric light ..."

She tries the electric light switch without result

"... and an oil lamp just in case ..."

She looks out from the verandah

"... a verandah looking out at a rather hopeless garden ... but with a good table and chair which does very well for working ..."

She tries out the chair and the table

"... and a wicker sofa of sorts for not working ... and round the back ..."

She disappears around the corner of the verandah where it goes out of sight

Mrs Swan turns a page of the letter

Mrs Swan I wish I'd kept the envelopes, they'd be worth something now, surely, the Indian ones at least.

Pike Oh, but it's the wine, not the bottles! These letters are a treasure. They may be the only *family* letters anywhere.

Mrs Swan I dare say, since I'm the only family.

Pike Her handwriting sometimes ... (*He passes a letter to her for assistance*)

Mrs Swan (*deciphering where he indicates*) "... a kitchen bit with a refrigerator ..."

Flora reappears

Flora "... a kitchen bit with a refrigerator! But Nazrul, my cook and bottle-washer, disdains the electric stove and makes his own arrangements on a little verandah of his own."

She goes into the interior, into the bedroom, where she tries the switch for the electric fan, again without result

"My bedroom, apart from the electric fan, also has a punkah which is like a pelmet worked by a punkah-wallah who sits outside and flaps the thing by a system of ropes and pulleys, or would if he were here, which he isn't. And then off the bedroom ..."

She disappears briefly through a door

Mrs Swan passes the page to Pike and they continue to read in silence

Flora reappears

"... is a dressing-room and bathroom combined, with a tin tub, and a shower with a head as big as a sunflower — a rainflower, of course ..."

Pike grunts approvingly

"... and all this is under a big green tree with monkeys and parrots in the branches, and it's called a duck bungalow ..."

Mrs Swan *Dak* bungalow.

Flora "... although there is not a duck to be seen."

She disappears into the bathroom with her suitcase

Mrs Swan *Dak* was the post; they were post-houses, when letters went by runner.

Pike Ah ...

Mrs Swan I like to have two kinds of cake on the go. The Madeira is my own.

Pike I'm really not hungry.

Mrs Swan I wouldn't let that stop you, Mr Pike, if you hope to get on my good side.

Pike I would love some. The Madeira.

She cuts him a slice

And won't you please call me Eldon? (*He takes the slice of cake*) Thank you. (*He takes the bite and gives a considered verdict*) Wonderful.

Mrs Swan I should think so.

Pike It's the excitement. There's nothing like these in the British Library, you know!

Mrs Swan (*amused*) The British Library!

Pike The University of Texas has Flora Crewe indexed across twenty-two separate collections! And I still have the Bibliothèque Nationale next week. The "Collected Letters" are going to be a year of my life!

Mrs Swan A whole year just to collect them?

Pike (*gaily*) The notes, the notes! The notes is where the fun is! You can't just *collect* Flora Crewe's letters into a book and call it "The Collected Letters of Flora Crewe". The correspondence of well-known writers was mostly written without a thought for the general reader. I mean, they didn't do their own footnotes. So there's an opportunity here. Which you might call a sacred trust. Edited by E. Cooper Pike. There isn't a page which doesn't need — look — you see here? — "I had a funny dream last night about the Queen's Elm." Which Queen? What elm? Why was she dreaming about a *tree*? So this is where I come in, wearing my editor's hat. To lighten the darkness.

Mrs Swan It's a pub in the Fulham Road.

Pike Thank you. This is why God made poets and novelists, so the rest of us can get published. Would that be a *chocolate* cake?

Mrs Swan Why, would you ... ?

Pike No, I just thought: did your sister like chocolate cake particularly?

Mrs Swan What an odd thing to think. Flora didn't like chocolate in any form.

Pike Ah. That's interesting. May I? (*He takes the next page of the letter from the tea-table*)

Flora approaches, accompanied by Coomaraswami, who has a yellow parasol

Flora "The sightseeing with picnic was something of a Progress with the president of the Theosophical Society holding a yellow parasol over me while the committee bicycled alongside, sometimes two to a bike, and

children ran before and behind — I felt like a carnival float representing Empire — or, depending how you look at it, the Subjugation of the Indian People, and of course you're right, darling, but I never saw anyone less subjugated than Mr Coomaraswami."

Coomaraswami We have better temples in the south. I am from the south. You are right to be discriminating!

Flora (*apologetically*) Did I seem discriminating? I'm sure it wasn't their fault. The insides of churches ...

Coomaraswami I understand you completely, Miss Crewe!

Flora But I don't know what I'm trying to say!

Coomaraswami That is not a requirement.

Flora I'm afraid I'm without religion, you see.

Coomaraswami I *do* see! Which religion are you afraid you are most without?

Flora Now, Mr Coomaraswami, turning a phrase may do for Bloomsbury but I expect better from *you*.

"And I told him about Herbert's lady decorator being asked on her deathbed what was her religion and telling the priest, 'I'm afraid I worship mauve'."

Coomaraswami (*thoughtfully*) For me, it is grey.

Flora "I'm going to like India."

Pike (*with letter*) Who was Herbert?

Mrs Swan Wells.

Pike Ah. (*Catching on*) H. G. Wells? Really? (*Cautiously*) You don't mean he and Flora ... ?

Mrs Swan You should see your face. Flora met him not long before she went out.

Pike Out?

Mrs Swan To India. It must have been round Christmas or New Year. I think I got a postcard from Paris (*She delves into the shoebox*) Flora loved Paris. Here, look ... is that it?

Pike Paris, yes ... no, 1924 ... it's a souvenir of the Olympic Games.

Mrs Swan Oh yes, the hurdler. Flora apologized publicly in the Chelsea Arts Club. No medals for us in the *hurdles*.

Pike Is that *true*, Eleanor?

Mrs Swan Now, Eldon, you are *not* allowed to write a book, not if you were to eat the entire cake. The *Collected Poems* was a lovely surprise and I'm sure the *Collected Letters* will be splendid, but *biography*, is the worst possible excuse for getting people wrong.

Flora "So far, India likes me. My lecture drew a packed house, Mr C's house, in fact, and a much more sensible house than mine, built round a courtyard with a flat roof all round so I had an audience in the gods like gods in the audience ..."

There is the sound of the applause. Coomaraswami faces the audience with Flora. It is night. There may be a microphone for the public statements

“... and it all went terribly well, until ...”

Coomaraswami Miss Crewe in her wisdom and beauty has agreed to answer questions!

Flora “— and the very first one went ——”

Questioner Miss Crewe, it is said you are an intimate friend of Mr H. G. Wells ——

Flora “— and I thought, ‘God, how unfair! — to have come all this way to be gossiped about as if one were still in the Queen’s Elm’ ——”

Pike A public house in the Fulham area of Chelsea.

Flora “— but it turned out nothing was meant by it except ——”

Questioner Does Mr Wells write his famous books with a typewriter or with pen and ink?

Flora (*firmly*) With pen and ink, a Waterman fountain pen, a present from his wife.

There is an appreciative hubbub

“Not that I had the least idea — Herbert showed small inclination to write his famous books while I was around.”

Pike FC had met Wells no earlier than December and the affair was therefore brief, possibly the weekend of January 7th and 8th; which she spent in Paris.

Flora “After which there was a reception with lemonade and Indian Scotch ...”

Flora and Coomaraswami are offered drinks from a tray of drinks

They are joined in due course by the Questioner and then Das

“... and delicious snacks and conversation — darling, it’s so moving, they read the *New Statesman* and the *TLS* as if they were the Bible in parts, well, I don’t mean the Bible but you know what I mean, and they know who wrote what about whom; it’s like children with their faces jammed to the railings of an unattainable park. They ask me ——”

Questioner What is your opinion of Gertrude Stein, Miss Crewe?

Flora Oh ... yes, Gertrude Stein! — “and I can’t bring myself to say she’s a poisonous old baggage who’s travelling on a platform ticket ...”

Pike FC went to tea with Gertrude Stein and her companion Alice B. Toklas in Paris in 1922. The legend that Stein threw her out of the apartment because FC asked for the recipe of Miss Toklas’s chocolate cake cannot be trusted. FC did not like chocolate in any form.

Flora “Then I met my painter ...”

Das Miss Crewe, may I congratulate you on your lecture. I found it most interesting!

Flora Thank you ...

Das I was surprised you did not mention Virginia Woolf.

Flora I seldom do.

Das Have you met George Bernard Shaw?

Flora Yes. I was nearly in one of his plays once.

Das But you are not an actress ... ?

Flora No, that was the trouble.

Das What do you think of Jummapur?

Flora Well, I only arrived the day before yesterday but ——

Das Of course. How absurd of me!

Flora Not at all. I was going to say that my first impression ——

Das Jummapur is not in any case to be compared with London. Do you live in Bloomsbury?

Flora No, I live in Chelsea.

Das Chelsea — of course! My favourite part of London!

Flora Oh! You ... ?

Das Yes, I hope to visit London one of these days. The Chelsea of Turner and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood! — Rossetti lived in Cheen Walk! Holman Hunt lived in Old Church Street! *The Hireling Shepherd* was painted in Old Church Street! What an inspiration it would be to me to visit Chelsea!

Flora You are a painter!

Das Yes! Nirad Das.

Flora How do you do.

Das I am top hole. Thank you. May I give you a present?

Flora Oh ...

Das Please do not judge it too harshly, Miss Crewe ...

Flora Thank you!

Das Of course, I work in oils, Winsor and Newton. If it would please you to sit for your portrait I would like to repay you for your superfine portrait-in-words of the rough-and-tumble of literary life in London.

Flora Would you really?

Das I would very much!

Das produces a small sketch pad and tears off a sheet. He gives it to her shyly

Flora "... and he gave me a pencil sketch of myself holding forth on the literary life."

Flora retraces her steps with Coomaraswami. Das goes

Pike She mentions a pencil sketch. Do you know what happened to it?

Mrs Swan I'm sure I never saw it. I would have remembered if it had been among what was called her effects. It was only one suitcase.

Pike Do you still have it?

Mrs Swan What? Her suitcase? Heavens, it was a battered old thing even then, and being always on the move, Eric and I, one shed things ...

Pike You threw away Flora Crewe's suitcase?

Mrs Swan What is it you're up to, Eldon? A *luggage* museum? Really, you're like an old woman about her; except, of course, that I'm not.

Pike But she was Flora Crewe!

Mrs Swan (*crisply*) Well, if so, where was everybody sixty years ago?

Mrs Swan replenishes the teacups. Pike takes one or two more letters from the ~~shoe~~ box and scans them

At the guesthouse, Nirad Das arrives by bicycle. He has his wooden workbox strapped to the pillion-rack. His folded easel is strapped to his back. He rides one-handed, holding a canvas in his free hand

Flora, in her cornflower-blue dress, comes out from the interior

Flora Good-morning!

Das Miss Crewe! Here I am! A little late! Forgive me!

Flora I didn't realize — I've been writing a letter. Does this look all right?

Das (*nervously*) Very, very good.

Flora Now ... this will be nice, we'll both be working. Poet and painter. Work in progress. .

Das unstraps his work-box and establishes himself on the verandah. Flora establishes herself at her work table. Pike is puzzling over a letter

Pike She says paint on paper.

Mrs Swan Yes.

Pike "... a smudge of paint on paper..." — "Perhaps my soul will stay behind as a smudge of paint on paper" ... She's referring to an actual painting, isn't she?

Mrs Swan I don't know.

Pike And "undressed". She says "undressed". Like a nude. On *paper*. That would be a watercolour, wouldn't it?

Mrs Swan What would? There isn't any "it".

Pike Well, if it doesn't mean a portrait of Flora undressed, what do you think it means?

Mrs Swan As much or as little as you like. Isn't that the point of being a poet?

Pike I don't know, I'm not a poet, but it reads quite specific, the deserted house ... where is the bit?

Mrs Swan Between your teeth, Eldon.

Pike Here. "In an empty house ..." — "Perhaps my soul will stay behind as a smudge of paint on paper, as if I'd always been here, like ... Radha?"

Mrs Swan Radha.

Pike "— the most beautiful of the herdswomen, undressed" ——

Mrs Swan (*interrupting, briskly*) Well, the portrait, as it happens, is on canvas and Flora is wearing her cornflower dress.

Pike Portrait?

Mrs Swan She mentions the portrait somewhere. It was rolled up in the suitcase.

Pike Eleanor ... do you mean there's a portrait of Flora?

Mrs Swan Would you like to see it?

Pike Oh my God.

Mrs Swan It's fairly ghastly, like an Indian cinema poster. I think I know where it is but I'll need you to get it down for me. Should we go in? We're about to lose the sun.

Pike Oh my God. But this is ... Oh my God. There's never been one, not a real portrait.

Mrs Swan That's true. Apart from the Paris portrait; but that was on canvas, too.

Pike The *Paris* portrait ... ?

Mrs Swan Yes, Flora's first time in Paris, she was driving an ambulance, officially, in the last year of the '14-'18 war ... so she was twenty-three, I suppose, when she met Modigliani.

Pike Modigliani?!

Mrs Swan Oh, Flora met everybody. Not that Modigliani was anybody at the time.

Pike A portrait by Modigliani?

Mrs Swan I was nine at the Armistice, so that was, my goodness, sixty-six years ago! I'm coming up to seventy-five, you know.

Pike Eleanor ... I can hardly believe my ears.

Mrs Swan I'm afraid so. I was born in 1909. But thank you, Eldon. Have another slice of cake.

Pike No — thank you — I — excuse me: a painting of Flora by Modigli —

Mrs Swan Yes. A nude.

Pike (*reverently*) A nude!

Mrs Swan I never saw it myself. I was at school, of course, and then, it was too late.

Pike Too late?

Mrs Swan Yes, isn't that bad luck? The Technicolor Flora like a cork in a storm, washed up on top of a wardrobe in a bungalow in Shepperton, and the Modigliani, which would have paid for the bungalow several times over, burned to ashes in a bathtub in the Ritz.

By now she has assembled the tea-tray and she leaves with it

Pike Could you run that by me again?

Pike totters after her

Flora, in her blue dress, is at the table on the verandah, writing in her notebook with a fountain pen. She pauses, thinking, sitting quite still. Her feet are bare and her shoes are placed neatly to one side. Das is painting her portrait

Flora (*recorded*) “Yes I am in heat like a bride in a bath,
 without secrets, soaked in heated air
 that liquifies to the touch and floods,
 shortening the breath, yes
 I am discovered, heat has found me out,
 a stain that stops at nothing,
 not the squeezed gates or soft gutters,
 it slicks into the press
 that prints me to the sheet
 yes, think of a woman in a house of net
 that strains the oxygen out of the air
 thickening the night to Indian ink
 or think if you prefer —”

Flora has unconsciously crossed her legs, which brings Das’s work to a halt. He waits, patiently. She notices that Das has stopped

Oh ...

Das No, please be comfortable.

Flora I’m sorry! (*She puts her feet side-by-side*) There. Is that how I was?

Das You are patient with me. I think your nature is very kind.

Flora Do you think so, Mr Das?

Das I am sure of it. May I ask you a personal question?

Flora That is a personal question.

Das Oh my goodness, is it?

Flora I always think so. It always feels like one. Carte blanche is what you’re asking, Mr Das. Am I to lay myself bare before you?

Das (*panicking slightly*) My question was only about your poem!

Flora At least you knew it was personal.

Das I will not ask it now, of course.

Flora On that understanding I will answer it. My poem is about heat.

Das Oh. Thank you.

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