Patrick Marber traces his relationship with Tom Stoppard all the way back to his schooldays. "That was when I had my first encounter with his work," he says. "I was 14, and some students put on his play Travesties -- older boys and girls, who then seemed so glamorous to me. I still remember it: the feeling of absolute incomprehension it gave me, and the incomprehension it gave me, and the incomprehension it gave me. I still remember it: the feeling of absolute incomprehension it gave me, and the incomprehension it gave me, and the incomprehension it gave me. I still remember it: the feeling of absolute incomprehension it gave me, and the incomprehension it gave me, and the incomprehension it gave me." In 2016, Marber directed Travesties, first in London and then in New York; at last, he and Stoppard were working together. "I think he had his doubts about that at first," he admits. "I took quite a bold swipe at it. But once preview audiences were laughing, he was happy." It was around this time that he first heard talk of the idea that would eventually become Leopoldstadt, Stoppard's new play. "He'd been saying that he needed to write a new play, and I knew it was important to him. There were a couple of false starts, but when he told me, one day, that he was in Vienna, I knew he was going to be OK -- the play is set in the city's Jewish community, in the early years of the last century."

Did he have any idea that he would end up directing it? "I knew I was in a strong position. It seemed fairly clear that for a play with a strong Jewish theme, it would be useful to have an older, revered playwright being nice to a younger, up-and-coming one. I valued it greatly." A rueful smile. "He read a draft of my play Howard Katz, and gave me some notes. The play wasn't a great success, but the notes were very good." In 2016, Marber directed Travesties, first in London and then in New York; at last, he and Stoppard were working together. "I think he had his doubts about that at first," he admits. "I took quite a bold swipe at it. But once preview audiences were laughing, he was happy." It was around this time that he first heard talk of the idea that would eventually become Leopoldstadt, Stoppard's new play. "He'd been saying that he needed to write a new play, and I knew it was important to him. There were a couple of false starts, but when he told me, one day, that he was in Vienna, I knew he was going to be OK -- the play is set in the city's Jewish community, in the early years of the last century."

Did he have any idea that he would end up directing it? "I knew I was in a strong position. It seemed fairly clear that for a play with a strong Jewish theme, it would be useful to have a Jewish director. But it's also a big play; a lot of stuff is going on. Tom knew I would be devoted to it, that I'd direct him the way that I'd want to be directed, which is with Greyfriars Bobby-like loyalty. It's a brilliant play. I wouldn't be directing it if it wasn't. But it does feel like a huge responsibility. For a director of my generation, having studied him at school and grown up with him, this is as good as it gets."

For several years now, Marber has combined writing (for both stage and screen; he was nominated for an Oscar for his screenplay for Notes on a Scandal) with directing -- something he credits with making him much happier. "What happened was that in 2001, I directed Howard Katz, and at the end of that, I thought: I'm not being very productive as a writer, so I'm going to stop directing, and see if I get more written. I did that, and I found out that I got about the same amount written, but that I was also a bit lonelier and sadder." So he returned to directing. "I find contemplating a year where all I'm doing is writing almost unbearable, whereas the thought of a summer in a rehearsal room feels very bearable."

Does being a playwright give him an advantage as a director? "It gives me an advantage with Tom, I think. If I want something looked at -- I mean changed! -- I've got an understanding of what it's like to unpack a scene you've spent hours writing. I know the pain of it." And what about in the rehearsal room? "Yes, there too, because I have a good grasp for what the line is for, the effect it's supposed to have. Not all directors think this -- it's a bit unfashionable -- but I'm a director who wants to serve the play. The minutiae of a line is very present to me. Some directors like a broad sweep, but I'm persnickety, and I cast persnickety actors."

Marber loves the idea of turning points -- "that moment when someone connects with something in themselves that allows them to do something beyond their own expectations" -- and in terms of his own career, he thinks there have been two. First, there was getting a phone call, in 1990, from Armando Iannucci, who asked him if he would join the team that would write and perform On the Hour, the Radio 4 news parody (and the show that first brought us Alan Partridge). "I was in Paris," he says. "I'd given up stand-up. I was taking a sabbatical to become a writer, but I was in despair because there was nothing. On the Hour, though I didn't know it at the time, was the beginning of being a playwright. Ultimately, it gave me the opportunity to write things that were on the telly [its TV spin-off was The Day Today], and that gave me the confidence to think, ultimately, that I might be able to do a play."

Second, there was the moment when Richard Eyre, who was then running the National Theatre, suggested that Marber direct his own play Dealer's Choice. "It had such a complicated poker scene in it," says Marber. "He couldn't think of anyone else who'd understand it but me. Before that, I'd never thought of being a director, but I certainly wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth." He cuts himself another slice of the cake we're sharing. "Good old Richard. He gave me those two careers instantaneously."

Tom Stoppard’s Leopoldstadt is showing at Wyndham’s Theatre from 25 January. For tickets, call 0844 482 5151* or visit delfontmackintosh.co.uk

Tom Stoppard and Patrick Marber

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