

Paper 4, Module 34: Text

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Tom Stoppard *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

Introduction

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by Tom Stoppard, is one of the most significant and well known plays of the twentieth century. A subversion of Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, it set a new model of farcical comedy. It is a distinct attempt at meta theatre and it is also noted for its closeness to the theatre of the Absurd.

Learning Outcome

The students become acquainted with Stoppard and his play.

They come in touch with Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, and its characters.

They learn about Existentialism and Absurdism

They learn about dramatic forms like comedy, parody, tragicomedy, farce, metatheatre etc.

Tom Stoppard

The author of a number of major plays, Tom Stoppard is considered one of the most important playwrights in the latter half of the twentieth century. He was born in Czechoslovakia on July 3, 1937. Stoppard began his career in England in 1954 as a journalist, and moved to London in 1960 and started as a playwright. His first play, *A Walk on the Water* (1960), which was televised in 1963, soon

reached London with a stage version titled *Enter a Free Man* (1968). His next work, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* acquired much critical acclaim immediately after its initial amateur production in Edinburgh, Scotland, in August of 1966. He has also written stage plays *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1978), *The Real Thing* (1982) and *Rock 'n' Roll* (2006), some short stories and a novel, *Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon*. He has given his valuable contributions to radio, television, film and stage. The Academy Award winning screenplay for the film *Shakespeare in Love* was co-authored by him in 1998. He has also written a number of adaptations of plays in foreign languages and several screen plays, including a feature film version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in 1990.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, a subversive farcical comedy is also considered as an existentialist tragicomedy. It can also be seen as an absurdist play. The play foregrounds Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the most insignificant characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. These two appear only seven times in *Hamlet*. Stoppard upends Shakespeare by putting these walk-ons at centre stage, from which they are virtually never absent. The effect created is that *Hamlet* appears to be going on in the wings of Stoppard's play and intrudes only seven times on Rosencrants and Guildenstern. A couple of not-too-bright Oxbridge (or Heidelberg) undergraduates on a bare Beckettian stage speak 1960's colloquial prose except where *Hamlet*, *Claudius*, *Polonius*, *Gertrude* and *Company* drop in from time to time to speak Shakespeare's blank verse. In Shakespeare's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are little more than plot devices, school chums summoned by King Claudius to probe into Hamlet's bizarre behaviour at court and then ordered to escort Hamlet to England (and his execution) after Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius. Hamlet escapes Claudius's plot and engineers instead the executions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose deaths are reported incidentally after Hamlet returns to Denmark. In Stoppard's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become the major characters

while the Hamlet figures become only plot devices. Thus, this can be seen as an absurd play dealing with the story of two ordinary men caught up in events they could neither understand nor control. It resembles Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and has some similarities with the works of George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Luigi Pirandello.

A Comedy

Though based on Hamlet, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is distinctly different from it with its changed tone and perspective. In spite of the many moments of rich humour, Shakespeare's play is basically a tragedy. Stoppard's treatment of the Shakespearean story clearly shifts to the realm of farcical comedy. When we meet Stoppard's courtiers at the beginning of his play they are casually flipping coins and speaking colloquial, informal prose rather than Shakespearean verse. The rag-tag tragedians add even more contrast with Shakespearean seriousness, especially when they descend in their financial desperation to the suggestion of a pornographic exploitation of little Alfred. However, when the two courtiers are sucked into the Shakespearean action and must mingle with characters speaking Shakespearean blank verse, they begin speaking the same way and the sharp contrast with their informal speech creates a comical effect. Their inability to escape the Hamlet plot is comic, as it is what appears to be a posturing attempt to fit into it when they can't escape. Finally, they are comic when they deflate again to their non-heroic stature after the characters disappear. In their first entry into the Shakespearean world, Stoppard indicates that the two courtiers are "adjusting their clothing" before they speak, and as they use the lines given them in Shakespeare's play, their inflated style is comic because it seems postured and implies desperate ineptitude. Then, back in their Stoppardian world, they are once again comically unheroic, as Rosencrantz whines, "I want to go home," and Guildenstern puts on his comical bravado, unconvincingly attempting to appear in control.

But if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are comically foolish because they seem overwhelmed by the power of the Shakespearean world, they are also comically noble because their ordinary presence seems eventually to deflate the Shakespearean high seriousness. It is as if their ordinary, prosaic quality begins to acquire a nobility of its own, and in contrast the Shakespearean characters eventually begin to sound exaggerated, even a little silly. This impression finds its culmination in Act III, when Hamlet is discovered lounging under a gaudily striped umbrella, reduced to something not quite classically Shakespearean. There is thus in Stoppard's play a kind of comic victory for the underdog, perhaps most clearly expressed at the beginning of Act II when Rosencrantz responds to Hamlet's esoteric Shakespearean language by saying, "half of what he said meant something else, and the other half didn't mean anything at all." Generations of readers and theatre goers who have silently struggled at times to understand the demanding dialogue of "the world's greatest playwright and the world's greatest play" chuckle as the ordinary man speaks up.

A Parody

Parody as a literary style frequently imitates a serious work in order to trivialize its subject, author, style, or some other target in a satiric or ironic way. But Stoppard's play is a parody with a difference because it is generally quite respectful and appreciative of its source rather than critical. Apart from his parodic use of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Stoppard is most clearly parodying Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, whose two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, play word games and "pass the time" as they wait for someone who never arrives. Beckett's play begins on a country road that is distinctly nondescript, so when Stoppard specifies in his opening stage directions that "two Elizabethans [are] passing the time in a place without any visible character" it is sufficient to recall *Waiting for Godot*. However, if this reference is missed, Stoppard includes another reference later in the play that is even less mistakable. Near the end of Act II, when Hamlet is dragging Polonius's body across the stage, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern unfasten their belts and hold them

taut to form a trap for Hamlet. This comes to naught as Hamlet avoids them, but the parodic comedy sparkles when Rosencrantz's trousers fall down, recalling a similar scene at the end of *Waiting for Godot*. The parody is not intended to satirize Beckett's play or either pair of characters. If anything, it ennobles both, paying respects to Beckett's genius, as in a "homage," and dignifying the silliness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. With his buddy's trousers comically gathered at his ankles and facing another complete failure, Guildenstern says quite simply, "there's a limit to what two people can do." Apart from the simple pleasure of recognition that such parody provides a knowing audience, this parody enlarges the suggestiveness of Stoppard's text. His two ordinary men are not to be taken as victims of an absurdist world, as Beckett's are. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern live in a simpler world where the inevitability of death is not tragic but a natural part of life. If human beings can calm their minds, they will realize that it is "silly to be depressed" by death, that "it would be just like being asleep in a box." When, at the beginning of the play, Rosencrantz exults that eighty-five consecutive winning calls of heads has "beaten the record," Guildenstern says "don't be absurd," and the clever allusion to Beckett speaks volumes to those who catch the joke.

An Absurd Play

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is an Absurd play. The Theatre of the Absurd arose after World War II and flourished in the 1950s and early 1960s. Its chief exponents were Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Samuel Beckett. These and other playwrights rejected the concept of a rational and ordered universe and tended to see human life as absurd and lacking purpose. To express this vision effectively, these dramatists tended to eliminate reassuring dramatic elements like logical plot development, realistic characterization, and rational dialogue, replacing them with bizarre qualities that forced audiences to experience absurdity. In this play Stoppard was indebted to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Like Beckett's Gogo and Didi, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two minor characters among history's *dramatis personae*. Their puzzled, funny, painful, perhaps not hopeless search is for

meanings, answers, causes, reasons. They spend their time, like many moderns, not deriving answers but playing the game of "Questions." Also like Didi and Gogo, one of them is weaker than the other, and they encounter Shakespeare's troupe of players where Beckett's pair meet Pozzo and Lucky. Both couples wait to find out what it's all about. Beckett's couple hope that Godot will turn up as promised (they seem to recall) and will explain things. Stoppard's team remembers being "sent for" in the dark of night by a faceless messenger from court, told to report to the king, and made to cool their heels while agonizing over what they're meant to be and do, and where they will end up. The condition of all four resembles that of Sartre's existential loner, or indeed that of the early medieval bird flying from an unknown place of origin through a lighted mead-hall to an unknown destination. Each couple wants to know the significance of the relatively lighted interval.

Metatheatre

Metatheatre provides the central structural element of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. As in *Hamlet*, we find in this play metatheatrical scenes, that is, scenes that are staged as plays, dumb shows, or commentaries on dramatic theory and practice. The player's speech, Hamlet's instructions to the players, and the meta-play "The Mousetrap" provide the metatheatrical elements in *Hamlet*. Stoppard's entire play can be considered a piece of metatheatre because Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are characters from another play. The play also abounds in metatheatrical episodes; like the players' pantomimes of *Hamlet* in Acts 2 and 3, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's obsessive role-playing, and the Player's "death" in Act 3. Bernardina da Silveira Pinheiro observes that Stoppard uses metatheatrical devices to produce a "parody" of the key elements of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that includes foregrounding two minor characters considered "nonentities" in the original tragedy. Pinheiro notes that Stoppard alters the focus of Hamlet's "play-within the play" so that it reveals the ultimate fate of the tragicomedy's anti-heroes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However, this alteration ultimately culminates in an absurdist anti-climax that runs counter to the effect of "The Mousetrap" in

Hamlet, which effectively reveals the guilt of the King. While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern confront a mirror image of their future deaths in the metadramatic spectacle staged by the players, they fail to recognise themselves in it or gain any insight into their identities or purpose.

Important themes

Human Predicament

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* beautifully blends the story of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with Stoppard's own version of how the two courtiers might have felt and behaved after they were summoned by King Claudius to spy on their schoolmate, Hamlet. He tried in the play to elaborate on aspects of their lives that Shakespeare did not specify, such as what they might have done with Hamlet on the ship to England. But once Stoppard chose to blend his story with Shakespeare's, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were fated to die at the end of Stoppard's story because they die at the end of Shakespeare's. Stoppard uses this literary fatalism as a metaphor for the fate that awaits all human beings—the inevitability of death.

The play begins with Stoppard's story, as two very un-Shakespearean courtiers flip coins as they pause on the road to Elsinore. The extraordinary suspension of the laws of probability that permits over 100 coins to land "heads" before one lands "tails" indicates that there is something special about this day. And when a coin finally lands "tails" Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are swept out of Stoppard's story and back into Shakespeare's, from which they originally came. Once they are placed in Shakespeare's story, their fate is sealed. They will die at the end, even though they shift back and forth from the Shakespearean to the Stoppardian story. What was special about this day is that it set in motion the events that would lead to their deaths.

Fate is something that has already been decided, something humans have no control over, something

that will happen whatever human beings do, and the literary fatality that comes from entering a world where events are already decided gives Stoppard the metaphor he needs for human fate. Though they resist accepting the fact, human beings are doomed to die as soon as they enter the world. When the tragedians first arrive in Stoppard's story, Guildenstern says "it was chance, then . . . [that] you found us," and the Player says, "or fate." Subsequent references to "getting caught up in the action" of the Shakespeare play are frequent, as are references to not having any "control." And when the Player says in their dress rehearsal for *The Murder of Gonzago* that "everyone who is marked for death dies," Guildenstern asks, "Who decides?" and the Player responds, "Decides? It is written."

Art and Experience

Stoppard elaborates on the theme of fate by exploring the relationship between art and experience. Throughout the play, he uses the tragedians and their spokesperson, the player, to emphasize that art can create an illusion that is often more real and convincing than the experience of ordinary life. The tragedians specialize in portraying death on stage, but Guildenstern argues that their version of death is not "real." The player responds by saying that the fictional representation of death is the only version that human beings will believe. He recalls the time he arranged for one of his actors condemned to be hanged to meet his execution on stage. However, to his surprise, the audience jeered and threw peanuts at this "real death" and the actor couldn't accept his fate calmly, crying the whole time, "right out of character."

Sigmund Freud asserted that human beings are psychologically incapable of seeing themselves dead. When we come close to dying in our dreams we wake up or alter the dream so we become spectators ourselves, and as soon as we exist as spectators we have not in fact died. In art, however, we can experience death vicariously and safely, testing our reactions to it in a way that paradoxically rehearses us for our own death while further distancing us from the reality of it. Playing the role of spectators is perhaps as close as humans can ever get to accept the reality of their human mortality.

This assertion is demonstrated most effectively in Act III, when the frustrated Guildenstern attacks the player and seems to stab him fatally in the neck with a dagger. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, audience initially unaware of the retractable blade in the stage dagger will experience a moment of shock when it appears that a real death has taken place on stage. But almost immediately we remember that we are at a play and that this death cannot possibly be real. When the Player comes to his feet to the applause of his fellow tragedians, the audience laughs in relief, as does Rosencrantz, who applauds and calls for an encore.

Death

The theme of humans denying their own mortality also helps to explain a number of problematic points in the play. When, for example, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover that the letter from Claudius orders Hamlet's death, the generally sympathetic and pleasant pair distance themselves from the fact and justify their non-involvement. As disagreeable and unheroic as this behaviour might be, it is in keeping with Stoppard's theme. Guildenstern justifies his non-involvement by feigning acceptance of "the designs of fate," and Rosencrantz's denial of responsibility is capped with a phrase that comes at the end of the play—"If we stopped breathing we'd vanish." Even more problematical, perhaps, is their behaviour after discovering the revised letter that orders their own deaths. Shakespeare's pair were probably ignorant of the letter's contents and surprised by their executions. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize they are delivering their own death warrants and do nothing to avoid it. But quite in character, Rosencrantz simply avoids thinking about it—"All right, then. I don't care. I've had enough. To tell you the truth, I'm relieved," while Guildenstern continues to look for explanations and escape routes—"there must have been a moment. . .where we could have said—no." His final words are either a continued denial of the reality of his death or an acceptance of his status as a literary character—"well, we'll know better next time."

Stoppard's theme is probably best summed up by the speech that Rosencrantz makes in Act II about lying in a coffin. Quite out of the blue he says to Guildenstern, "do you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying in a box with a lid on it? Quite honestly and significantly, Guildenstern says "no" and Rosencrantz echoes his response. But then the usually dim-witted Rosencrantz touches on the essential problem—"one thinks of it like being alive in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is dead. . .which should make all the difference. . .shouldn't it? I mean, you'd never know you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being asleep in a box." When human beings attempt to think about their deaths, they assume some kind of continued consciousness. Ironically, Rosencrantz demonstrates in this speech the very kind of thinking he has just categorized as "silly." After characterizing death as a kind of sleep, he associates death with a mortal dream state, complete with the possibility of waking to full consciousness and a sense of helplessness—"not that I'd like to sleep in a box, mind you, not without air." Unable to conceptualize his own death he refuses to fully accept that "for all the compasses in the world, there's only one direction, and time is its only measure."

CRITICAL OPINIONS

The cleverness in the concept of the play, its verbal dexterity, and its phenomenal theatricality brought its first reviewer, Ronald Bryden, to call it "the most brilliant debut by a young playwright since John Arden." Later, in London, Irving Wardle, writing for the Guardian, said that "as a first stage play it is an amazing piece of work," and in New York, Harold Clurman, reviewing the play, in *Nation* echoed the general sentiment by calling Stoppard's play a "scintillating debut." And Clive Barnes, the highly influential critic for the *New York Times*, asserted in October of 1967 that "in one bound Mr. Stoppard is asking to be considered as among the finest English-speaking writers of our stage, for this is a work of fascinating distinction." Terry Nienhuis, observes that Stoppard's themes of uncertainty and confusion make his play appealing to twentieth century audiences who easily identify

with his characters' doubts and fears.

However, as enthusiastic as critics were for this dazzling first effort, they also had some very clear reservations. Generally, they thought Stoppard's play somewhat derivative, too closely linked to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. For example, Bryden found the play "an existentialist fable unabashedly indebted to *Waiting for Godot*" and the appreciative Clurman called it "Waiting for *Godot* rewritten by a university wit." Also in New York, an appreciative Charles Marowitz writing for the *Village Voice* added, "my only objection is that without the exhilarating stylistic device of the play-beneath-the-play, the play proper would be very much second-hand Beckett." Michael Smith, also writing for the *Village Voice*, applauded the play, saying "the writing is brilliantly clever, the basic trick inspires a tour de force, and the play is great fun," but added, "the drawback is Stoppard's attempt to push it to deep significance. The early part of the play repeatedly echoes *Waiting for Godot* in sound and situation but entirely lacks its resonance."

Another reservation the critics voiced was the suggestion that the play's verbal dexterity and ingenious theatricality might have been all it had to offer, that underneath the dazzling surface there was very little of substance and that the play was ultimately shallow. This was suggested by Philip Hope-Wallace reviewing the first London production for the *Guardian* when he said, "I had a sensation that a fairly pithy and witty theatrical trick was being elongated merely to make an evening of it." And despite his generous praise for Stoppard's play, Charles Marowitz added that "much of its crosstalk is facile wordmanship that benefits accidentally from ambiguity."

Writing somewhat after the initial critical response to the play, critics Robert Brustein and John Simon summed up this ambivalent response. Brustein wrote, "I advance my own reservations feeling like a spoilsport and a churl: the play strikes me as a noble conception which has not been endowed with any real weight or texture," and in a now often quoted remark, Brustein calls Stoppard's play "a theatrical parasite, feeding off *Hamlet*, *Waiting for Godot* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*—Shakespeare provided the characters, Pirandello the technique, and Beckett the tone with

which the Stoppard play proceeds.” Similarly, critic John Simon writing for The Hudson Review admitted that “the idea of the play is a conception of genius” but also saw it as “squeezing large chunks of Beckett, Pinter, and Pirandello, like sliding bulges on a python as he digests rabbits swallowed whole,” finally reducing Stoppard’s play to “only cleverness and charm.”

Conclusion

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead continues to be a formidable achievement by Stoppard. Even by 1973, Normand Berlin, writing in *Modern Drama*, could assert that Stoppard’s first major play had “acquired a surprisingly high reputation as a modern classic.” And within a decade of its first appearance, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* had enjoyed over 250 productions in twenty different languages. Though a number of critics now feel that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is perhaps not Stoppard’s best play—that some of his later work have been more complex, polished, and mature, Stoppard’s first major play remains his most popular and his most widely performed.

Source

"Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead." *Drama for Students*. Ed. David M. Galens and Lynn M. Spampinato. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 213-232. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Web. 21 Nov. 2014.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Compare Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* and see how Stoppard uses the play as a source.
2. Consider *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* as an Absurd play and compare it with *Waiting for Godot*.
3. Consider the play as a philosophical musing on the basic human condition.
4. Discuss the play as a brilliant example of metatheatre.
5. How far *Rosencrants and Gildernstern* in Stoppard's play represent the doubts, fears and uncertainties of the twentieth century?
6. In spite of its indebtedness to Shakespeare, there is very little of substance and emotional intensity in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Discuss.
7. Stoppard uses the Theatre of the Absurd more for comic effects than for philosophical contemplation. Discuss.