

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

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ROSENCRANTZ

GUIL: Are you deaf?

ROS: Did you speak?

GUIL (*admonishing*): Not now——

ROS: Statement.

GUIL (*shouts*): Not now! (*Pause.*) If I had any doubts, or rather hopes, they are dispelled. What could we possibly have in common except our situation? (*They separate and sit.*) Perhaps he'll come back this way.

ROS: Should we go?

GUIL: Why?

Pause.

ROS (*starts up. Snaps fingers*): Oh! You mean—you pretend to be *him*, and I ask you questions!

GUIL (*dry*): Very good.

ROS: You had me confused.

GUIL: I could see I had.

ROS: How should I begin?

GUIL: Address me.

They stand and face each other, posing.

ROS: My honoured Lord!

GUIL: My dear Rosencrantz!

Pause.

ROS: Am I pretending to be you, then?

GUIL: Certainly not. If you like. Shall we continue?

ROS: Question and answer.

GUIL: Right.

*watch
musical
beats.*

ROS: Right. My honoured lord!

GUIL: My dear fellow!

ROS: How are you?

GUIL: Afflicted!

ROS: Really? In what way?

GUIL: Transformed.

ROS: Inside or out?

GUIL: Both.

ROS: I see. (*Pause.*) Not much new there.

GUIL: Go into details. *Delve*. Probe the background, establish the situation.

ROS: So—so your uncle is the king of Denmark?!

GUIL: And my father before him.

ROS: His father before him?

GUIL: No, my father before him.

ROS: But surely——

GUIL: You might well ask.

ROS: Let me get it straight. Your father was king. You were his only son. Your father dies. You are of age. Your uncle becomes king.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: Unorthodox.

GUIL: Undid me.

ROS: Undeniable. Where were you?

GUIL: In Germany.

ROS: Usurpation, then.

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GUIL: He slipped in.

ROS: Which reminds me.

GUIL: Well, it would.

ROS: I don't want to be personal.

GUIL: It's common knowledge.

ROS: Your mother's marriage.

GUIL: He slipped in.

Beat.

ROS (*lugubriously*): His body was still warm.

GUIL: So was hers.

ROS: Extraordinary.

GUIL: Indecent.

ROS: Hasty.

GUIL: Suspicious.

ROS: It makes you think.

GUIL: Don't think I haven't thought of it.

ROS: And with her husband's brother.

GUIL: They were close.

ROS: She went to him——

GUIL: —Too close——

ROS: —for comfort.

GUIL: It looks bad.

ROS: It adds up.

GUIL: Incest to adultery.

ROS: Would you go so far?

GUIL: Never.

ROS: To sum up: your father, whom you love, dies, you are his heir, you come back to find that hardly was the corpse cold before his young brother popped onto his throne and into his sheets, thereby offending both legal and natural practice. Now why exactly are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?

GUIL: I can't imagine! (*Pause.*) But all that is well known, common property. Yet he sent for us. And we did come.

ROS (*alert, ear cocked*): I say! I heard music——

GUIL: We're here.

ROS: —Like a band—I thought I heard a band.

GUIL: Rosencrantz . . .

ROS (*absently, still listening*): What?

Pause, short.

GUIL (*gently wry*): Guildenstern . . .

ROS (*irritated by the repetition*): What?

GUIL: Don't you discriminate at all?

ROS (*turning dumbly*): Wha'?

Pause.

GUIL: Go and see if he's there.

ROS: Who?

GUIL: There.

ROS goes to an upstage wing, looks, returns, formally making his report.

ROS: Yes.

GUIL: What is he doing?

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN, ARE DEAD

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Study guide

1. Why is the word choice mentioned so many times in the play?
2. What is the theme of the play? Clues to help you find it:
 - a. What things are repeated? List them.
3. How do the quotes below relate to the theme?
 - a. pg 38 Ros: "I haven't forgotten - how I used to remember my own name - and yours. Oh yes! There were answers everywhere you looked."
 - b. pg 39 Guil: All your life you live so close to the truth, it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye, and when something nudges it into an outline it is like being ambushed by a grotesque."
 - c. pg 41. Guil: "What a fine persecution - to be kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened. . . "
 - d. pg 61 Guil: We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered."
 - e. pg 63 Player: "Don't you see? we're actors - we're the opposite of people!"
 - f. pg 80 Player: " We're tragedians you see. We follow directions. There is no choice involved. The bad ends unhappily; the good, unluckily. That is what tragedy means."
 - g. pg 108 Ros: I wish I was dead. I could jump over the side. That would put a spoke in their wheel.
Guil: Unless they're counting on it.
Ros: I shall remain on board. That will put a spoke in their wheel.
 - h. Pg 121 Guil: "We've travelled too far and our momentum has taken over: we move idly towards eternity without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation."
Ros: Be happy. If you're not even happy, what's so good about surviving?
 - i. pg 125 Guil: "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said - no."

R&G Student responses to study questions:

Some answers to 2 a (repeated ideas):

1. directions
- 2, the summons
3. games
4. Every body is watching everybody else.
5. contradictions
6. title (are they dead?)

Other clues to theme: quotes from Hamlet

- 1." There is a divinity that shapes our ends. . .rough hew them how we will."
2. "The readiness is all."

Some student responses to theme:

1. The more man seeks to know who he is, the more he doubts himself.
2. Man may control his thoughts, but his actions are predestined.
3. Reality is what you make it.
4. The existence of man is not important to the universe - only to himself.
5. You can never know the truth.
6. The truth is inconceivable so you have to live in an illusion called life.

Other notes

Stoppard on R&G: "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the most expendable people of all time. Their very facelessness makes them dramatic; the fact that they die without ever really understanding why they lived makes them somehow cosmic."

Other applicable quotes:

"If this life be not a real fight in which something is eternally gained for the Universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will."

William James

"When an actor and an audience are united in the last seven minutes of the play, what they are united to is the universe. Afterwards you return to dualistic living. But oh how you've changed for having had those few moments of unity."

William Ball (ACT director)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

Act I

1. Play opens with R and G passing time while waiting for some meaningful task or explanation of why they've been summoned to Elsinore. Who are they? What do they represent?
2. The coin comes up heads 75 times before any dialogue begins. Only G. is astonished at this breakdown in the laws of probability. What kind of a world is this?
3. The audience is not grounded in time or place for a while. It's ten minutes before names are used and then they're mixed up. Finally audience realize they're on their way to Elsinore. Is this any different than way Shakespeare introduced them?
4. R and G seem to be two sides of one temperament (like V and E). They can't keep their identities straight. Why not? What is the connection between identity and role? What differences do you perceive? (Guil is more cerebral than Ros, has greater awareness of the ambiguity of their situation and struggles with it. R is more passive, operates by instinct. He can't be astonished. When he does initiate, it's about death.
5. The tragedians are important. At first the actors are overjoyed to meet R and G. Why? Audience is important and they are a potential audience.
6. p. 28 Actors don't offer tragedy; they offer pornography, "to do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off." This is sexual innuendo but isn't it also what Stoppard is doing to Hamlet?
7. Coin comes up tails on p. 34. Reaction?
8. Pp. 38-40. After receiving their instructions from K and Q, R and G realize they are caught up in sequence of events they are powerless to understand or influence, much less control their own destinies. But there is comfort, too, in having choices determined in advance by Shakespeare's play.

Any difference between alternatives but no choices?

Act I ends when Hamlet greets them.

Act II

1. How many questions did Hamlet ask? 27 Answers? 3. Is this play about questions also? Godot? Is this an age of questions? What's different about a life framed by questions rather than answers?
2. Why lose a coin? out of their hands? So is their destiny.

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3. Save pages 64 to 66 for discussion on relation between life and art, under general questions.
 4. Point out brilliant exchange on Hamlet's madness pp 66-67: "startk raving sane." Difference between artist and critic.
 5. "Life in a box is better than no life at all." Who's in a box? Metaphor for Hamlet which boxes everyone in, even R and G though Stoppard gives them new life in his play but limits it with W.S's. Are R and G already in a box? already hung--like V and E?
 6. "events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusions." Does Hamlet? Does this play? Do our lives? p 79
 7. p 82. R and G, watching and listening to play within the play learn of their own deaths. How do they react? Remind you of anyone? Us? Guil insists death cannot be acted, pp 83-84.

Act III

1. Any idea why R cheated at coin toss game? Taking destiny into his own hands? both of them?
2. Irony of Guil's seeing boat as "safe" and "free."
3. Differences in response to order to kill Hamlet? Ros: Hamlet is our friend. Guil rationalizes non-interference.
4. "within limits." What are some of the limits within which we and these characters live? play of Hamlet? play of R and G are Dead? natural law (spit into the wind and you get it back in your face)? between birth and death?
5. Without Hamlet, R and G more adrift and purposeless than ever. They open the letter and see their own execution order. One critic said, "Stoppard's decision to have R and G see their execution order and dumbly accept it makes them fools." Do you agree? Why do they accept their fate? Do they have a choice? Is it more than what they had in Hamlet? What effect does this have on the ending?
6. "still, finally, to be denied an explanation." What is so poignant about these lines? echoes?
7. How does the player demonstrate that art has greater reality than life? Look also at pages 64 and 66. Should we accept appearance for truth?
8. Talk about the ending. R and G disappear in mid-sentence. Drama teaches us about death.

General Questions

1. Play has been called "profound comedy" and "meditation on pre-destination." Agree with either?
2. Another critic called it "second-hand Beckett." Response?

3. Still another critic called it "a blinding metaphor about the absurdity of life. We are summoned, we come. We are given roles, we play them. We are dismissed, we go. Have we ever been? Has there been a point? If so, what?" Comment.
4. Stoppard, himself, said about R and G: "Basically, I like them as people. Shakespeare suggests they're black conspirators in alliance with the King. But to me they seem like just men thrust into a situation they know little about, then killed for reasons they know nothing about, not having sinned against God or anyone...just two blokes."
5. What do you think of the idea of having characters exist outside of literature?
6. We no longer live in an age of heroic tragedy. Either study or look at Prufrock:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
 Am an attendant lord, one that will do
 To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
 Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
 Deferential, glad to be of use,
 Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
 Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
 At times, indeed, almost ridiculous--
 Almost, at times, the Fool.

Compare Hamlet with R and G. How do you feel when they die?
 How did their ages differ?

7. Characterize the language: puns, literary allusions, in-jokes, tricks with rhythm and rhyme, vocabulary of gamesmanship, even breakdown of language, our weariness with it in Act III. How does language reflect the content?

Stichomythia: a form of repartee developed in classical drama and often employed by Elizabethan writers. It is a sort of line-for-line "verbal fencing match" in which the principals in the dialogue retort sharply to each other in lines which echo the opponent's words and figures of speech. Antithesis is freely used. The thought is often sententious.

Hamlet: Now, mother, what's the matter?
 Queen: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
 Hamlet: Mother, you have my father much offended.
 Queen: Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.
 Hamlet: Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.

Antithesis: figure of speech characterized by strongly contrasting words, clauses, sentences, or ideas as in "Man proposes, God disposes." It is a balancing of one term against another for emphasis or stylistic effectiveness. Can be wretched if poorly done. True antithesis demands that there be not only an opposition of idea, but that the opposition in different parts be manifested through similar grammatical structure:

The hungry judges soon the sentence sign.
 And wretches hang that jury-men may dine.

Pope

STUDY GUIDE

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by Tom Stoppard
(Grove Press, 1981 Printing)

Act I Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

1. How does the coin flipping game indicate that "the time is out of joint," as Hamlet says it is in Shakespeare's play? What makes this game "boring"?
2. Guildenstern says, "At least we can still count on self-interest as a predictable factor I suppose it's the last to go." What does this "faith" indicate about the quality of the human condition presented in the play? (14)
3. Guildenstern posits four theories about the meaning of the unusual fall of the coins. What are they? What are the limitations of this kind of speculative reasoning? What is a syllogism? What academic disciplines use the syllogism? (16)
4. Guildenstern asserts, "The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear." Do you agree? What advantage does the examination of human phenomena through literature have over science and philosophy? (17)
5. Stoppard satirizes logical reasoning in this scene. In what way does Hamlet's employment of this kind of thinking help or hinder him in Shakespeare's play?
6. Guildenstern reveals that he and his friend are on a journey because they were "sent for." (18-19) What ironic or abnormal circumstances are associated in this passage with being "sent for"?
7. What double meaning is there in Guildenstern's comment, "We are entitled to some direction" How is the story of the man who sees the unicorn connected to Guildenstern's desire for direction? How do human beings determine reality, according to this passage? Are the usual methods reliable? (20-21)

The Players

1. The player declares, ". . . we grow rusty . . . by this time tomorrow we might have forgotten everything we ever knew . . . We'd be back where we started—improvising." What implication does this comment have for this play's examination of the nature of the human condition? (22)
2. How are "performance" and "patronage" the same in this play and in *Hamlet*?
3. What kind of drama do these player's perform? Stoppard, like Shakespeare, criticizes the popularity of sensationalized drama? What does each writer imply about players and their audiences? about human beings in general? (22-27, 33)
4. Why are the times "indifferent" to the player but "bad" to Rosencrantz?

5. The players and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have in common being out of control, being victims of fate and chance. Why?
6. Why is Guildenstern angered by the obscenity of the players? What is he searching for in their performance? Why does Rosencrantz see the times as "indifferent"? (27)
7. The player says, "We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else." What does he mean? How is the statement related to the fact that the play is based on characters who are in a play? to the fact that both of these plays explore the problem of penetrating illusions and defining reality? Consider the role of Alfred, who must play female parts. How is this theme of exits and entrances that border on each other acted out in the scene? (34-37, for example) How is the theme of Hamlet's "transformation" connected?
8. How does Guildenstern use the coins to trick the Player?
9. What kind of play do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern request?
10. The play they get is the intersection with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act II, scene i, a scene in which the king and queen interchange their names as if they are two sides of the same person. Are they?

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern engage in a sequence of banters that recapitulates the themes that have been hinted at in the first two sections of Act I.

1. Consider the problems of language and meaning: confused cliches, questions without answers and answers without questions, rhetoric, words without meanings and meanings without words, language as a game-word play.
2. Consider the problems of action: orders and obedience, choice, actions and their results, play acting, games of action, the spectator who is a viewer of actions, consistency, illicit actions, the issue of inaction for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and for Hamlet.
3. Consider the problems of masks and illusions, of family relationships and responsibilities, of immortality and death. What is the situation in *Hamlet* when that play intersects with this one again at the end of Act I?

Act II

1. Act II begins with the continuation of the scene from *Hamlet*. What roles have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern assumed in Shakespeare's play by the time of this scene? What problems are they having with this role in Stoppard's play? Are their characters different in the two plays?
2. They are playing the question and answer game again. How is the game

connected to Hamlet and his problem? Why can they not understand him?

3. Why does Guildenstern suggest that "pragmatism" may not offer any solutions to their problem? Is he correct? (58)

4. What does Guildenstern mean when he says, "Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are . . . condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one—that is the meaning of order. If we start being arbitrary it'll just be a shambles: at least, let us hope so. Because if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we'd know that we were lost." (60) How is memory connected to the problems of order and foreknowledge?

5. When the Player rejoins them, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are concerned about their loss of words, while the Player is concerned about his loss of an audience. How do these losses undermine their sense of identity? What philosophies do they suggest in order to cope with the sense of instability they feel? They advocate trust, but what is it they trust? What attitudes are revealed toward language, questions, madness, passion, reasons, death, eternity? How does Rosencrantz react when the *Hamlet* play "enters" again? (73)

6. What effect is created when the Player begins rehearsing the scene of the play that will be acted before the king and queen in *Hamlet*? Guildenstern asks a question that critics have often asked about "The Murder of Gonzago" in *Hamlet*—"What is the dumbshow for?" What is the player's answer? yours?

7. Look at the scenes in *Hamlet* that are suggested—Hamlet with Ophelia, the player-king's Pyrrhus and Priam speech, Claudius's determination to send Hamlet to England. What themes are developed in these scenes?

8. Look at the Player's statement of aesthetic values: "There's a design at work in all art—surely you know that? Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral, and logical conclusions Between 'just desserts' and 'tragic irony' we are given quite a lot of scope for our particular talent." What implications are suggested for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's destinies since they are mere characters in a play, or doubly so? What problems of identity and meaning in life are suggested by the exchanges about playacting, death in playacting, and the intersection of this play with Hamlet? (80-91)

9. As Act II comes to an end, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are aware of change, a change in circumstances and a change of the seasons. What is suggested by the autumn leaves and cold weather?

Act III

1. It is dark when Act III opens. Where are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What is symbolized by the dark and the sea journey? Are they "free" because they are on the boat? What is the significance of the letter they carry? Discuss their language play in this scene. What themes are recapitulated from Acts I and II?

2. What evidences are there of their lack of direction? How are they "slipping off the map"? How would suicide "put a spoke in their wheel"?

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3. What reactions do they have when they discover the letter orders Hamlet's death? How do they rationalize their "betrayal"? What are Guildenstern's arguments for obeying orders and not defending Hamlet? (110) Why do they feel "on top of it now"?
 4. Compare the themes of logic and poetry in the two speeches, p. 112.
 5. Why do the players appear on the boat? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sum up for the players and the audience all the events of Hamlet's circumstances in his play. Then Rosencrantz concludes, "All we get is incidents! Dear God, is it too much to expect a little sustained action?" What does he mean?
 6. When the pirates attack and Hamlet disappears, the despair of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern increases. Why? How will they deal with their problem? Why do they refuse to "act"? What do they discover by reading the letter?
 7. How does Guildenstern analyze their situation? What is the answer to his question, "Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths?" What universal implications does the question have?
 8. What contrast does Guildenstern make between the experience of "actors" and his own experience? What is the significance of the "playacting" of death?
 9. Death is accompanied by darkness and cold. How is death defined by Guildenstern? Is it true that "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said-no"?
 10. With what scene from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* does Stoppard's play end? What is signified by the actors, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, disappearing from the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and this transformation of Stoppard's play into Shakespeare's?
 11. Discuss the similarities and differences in the themes of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Stoppard's play. What is his purpose in alluding to a past work of literature?

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ROBERT EGAN

A Thin Beam of Light: The Purpose of Playing in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

To quote one of its own phrases, Tom Stoppard's first major work is "gathering weight as it goes on."¹ While we have been variously intrigued and entertained by *The Real Inspector Hound*, *Jumpers*, and *Travesties*, considered responses to these plays are still being formed. Yet *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is apparently finding a stable place in our shared opinion. Now over ten years old, the play is still very much with us, as its many recent revivals and its persistence on college reading lists attest. The passage of another decade or two may well find it a modern classic.

I wonder, though, whether we have yet attained a full sense of the play's depths and resonances. We are well beyond Robert Brustein's early charge of "theatrical parasitism," his rechristening the play "Waiting for Hamlet" to indicate that Stoppard merely offers "a form of Beckett without tears."² Yet several of the studies that have since appeared echo Brustein's definition (though without his pejorative sense) of Stoppard's play in terms of Beckett's. In this essay, I will be suggesting an alternative perspective, one grounded within Stoppard's play rather than outside it. First, however, I would like to point out that, whatever its affinities to earlier modern drama may be, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is not, essentially, a recasting of *Waiting for Godot* in Shakespearean terms. Stoppard's is a consciously literary style of playwriting: his scripts are dense with allusions to his artistic predecessors, both by quotation and parody. And certainly, at several points *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* recall Beckett's two tramps, both in their relationship to one another and their responses to the world at large. But their world is not that of *Waiting for Godot*. To begin with, the equivalent of Godot for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* arrives early in the play. A messenger has summoned them, a coin has come up heads eighty-five times in a row, and the open space in which they are passing the time will shortly be filled with a welter of characters and events. Moreover, in contrast to Beckett's play, the universe in which *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* find themselves discloses a manifest sense of order, plan, and predictability.

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² *The Third Theatre* (New York, 1969), pp. 149-53.

Of course, they are no less unhappy and disoriented in their ordered world than are Didi and Gogo in their vacant wasteland. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern view the world of *Hamlet* from a perspective that is a dark converse of Hamlet's own ultimate vision. Shakespeare's protagonist struggles through social disorder, psychological crisis, and metaphysical confusion to an affirmation of an order operating through all things, a "divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (V.ii. 10-11). With this realization of "special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (V.ii. 219-220), his spiritual suffering is at an end.³ He resigns himself to enacting his given role in the divine plan, and immediately afterwards everything he has sought throughout the play comes to pass: the exposure of Claudius's villainy, the purging of Denmark's throne, the avenging of Hamlet Senior and the quietus of Hamlet himself.

Adrift in this same world, Stoppard's central characters by degrees sense its providential plan moving around and through them. Yet what dawns on Hamlet as an epiphany comes to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a visitation of terror; for they have no assurance that the grand scenario in which they are caught up has anything to do with their desires or welfare. And since we, as audience, already know the plot of *Hamlet*, we are aware that their worst fears are thoroughly justified. As William Babula has noticed, Shakespeare's script is their destiny; they are "trapped in a mode of art, trapped in a mode of life."⁴ The script that will culminate in the apotheosis of Hamlet has foreordained them to manipulated lives and obscure deaths.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead does not present us, then, with figures in a Beckettian vacuum, at liberty to wait for a Godot who does not arrive. But neither is the play an ironic account of human marionettes, utterly without access to hope, insight, or meaningful action. In this study, my chief point of focus will be the Player and his Tragedians. My contention is that the actions of the Tragedians and the comments of the Player together constitute a source of meaning that counterweights the play, significantly offsetting what would otherwise be its closed, fatalistic perception of existence.⁵ My perspective is a slanted one, having been shaped by my experience of performing the role of the Player.⁶ Consequently, much of the in-

³ These quotations are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974).

⁴ "The Play-Life Metaphor in Shakespeare and Stoppard," *Modern Drama*, 15 (1972-73), 279-81.

⁵ C. J. Gianakaris ("Absurdism Altered: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," *Drama Survey*, 7 [1968-69], 52-58) and Thomas R. Whitaker (*Fields of Play in Modern Drama* [Princeton, 1977], pp. 12-17) both note a significant tension in the play between absurdist premises and an alternative perspective of some sort. Gianakaris locates this latter factor primarily in Stoppard's sympathetic playfulness and lightness of tone, while Whitaker points to the "tacit affirmation" and celebration of play implicit in the play's performance. Jill Levenson ("Views From a Revolving Door: Tom Stoppard's Canon to Date," *Queens Quarterly*, 78 [1971], 430-42) singles out the Player as representing an approach to existence alternative to that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, specifically through acting as a "way of life and not merely a mirror up to nature." Yet she finds this a flawed approach, a "purely defensive measure" that "does nothing to enrich the soul it protects." Each of these views in part anticipates my own, though this essay goes considerably further, I believe, in its emphasis on the Player and the Tragedians and its interpretation of their significance.

⁶ At the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in 1977. For whatever insights prove of value in this essay, I must acknowledge considerable debts to the direction of Martin L. Platt and the performances of Bruce Hoard as Guildenstern and Mark Varian as Rosencrantz.

terpretation that follows derives from a view of the play as seen by one actor through the eyes of one character. Yet, such a bias may prove helpful to the central concerns of this essay. For the essence of the Player's philosophy lies in a particular concept of play; and I would hope that what I learned in playing the role afforded me a practical hint, at least, of what that philosophy is.

II

For some ten minutes of stage time Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been tossing coins and waiting, confined "in a place without any visible character" (stage direction, 11).⁷ Guildenstern, the intellectual of the two, feels a frustrated suspense that mounts with each call of "Heads." Then, "on the wind of a windless day," they hear "the sound of drums and flute" (18). Thus, the approaching music of the Tragedians seems to promise relief from their predicament. Guildenstern, in fact, hopes for a mystical encounter of some sort. When Rosencrantz stolidly refuses to believe that the music is real, Guildenstern relates a fable in which a succession of men who see a unicorn deny the truth of their miraculous experience by convincing themselves that they have seen "a horse with an arrow in its forehead" (21). This parable is far more applicable to his situation than Guildenstern himself can know. He does not offer a moral to his little tale; yet in a sense, all that occurs between him and the Tragedians will point up that moral.

When the Player and his band finally straggle onstage, Guildenstern is bitterly disappointed: "It could have been—it didn't have to be *obscene*. . . . It could have been—a bird out of season, dropping bright-feathered on my shoulder . . . It could have been a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way . . . I was *prepared*. But it's this, is it?" (27). He has hoped for an omen, such as the hero of a romance might receive at the outset of his quest. Bad enough, given his expectations, to be confronted by "a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes" (27); but worse still is the implication that the Tragedians do indeed constitute a kind of obscene anti-omen, a grotesque reflection of Guildenstern's worst fears about his and his friend's place in the order of things. At the outset, the Player hails them both "as fellow artists" (23), and this seems to be a kind of jeering *tu quoque* jest. Shabby and unheroic, traveling in a random direction toward an unknown goal, the Tragedians play out the roles predetermined for them by the gory melodramas of their repertoire. We immediately sense a metaphor here for the plight of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, soon to enact the parts dictated to them by Shakespeare's script. Guildenstern himself senses a connection: "You said something—about getting caught up in the action" (26). The Player replies by presenting them with an even more explicit and tawdry emblem of their condition: poor Alfred, whose role, no matter what the script, must be that of the helpless and used victim. What happens to Alfred literally in *The Rape of the Sabine Women* reflects figuratively what will happen to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as they are "caught up in the action" of *Hamlet*.

⁷ All quotations and page references from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* are to the Grove Press edition (New York, 1968).

Yet Guildenstern, in his aversion to the Tragedians, misses the full significance of what they do and what they are. For, despite their sorry condition, the Player and his troupe are that very hint of magic for which Guildenstern has been looking. Of course, we as audience are in no way disappointed or disturbed by the Tragedians. For us, they are a welcome addition to the show; their incessant slapstick and mock histrionics infuse the stage with playfulness. In fact, in all their onstage moments they call attention to and celebrate the practice of dramatic play itself. The Player's entering cry, "An audience!" (21), not only expresses the character's response to finding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; it affords the actor playing the Player an opportunity to voice all the joy, fear, and anticipation that accompany his first step into our presence. In the course of my own performance, I found that Stoppard repeatedly provides the role of the Player with such moments, when character and performer intersect in a common testimony to the nature of the theatrical experience.

The behavior of the Tragedians, however, runs beyond the boundaries of what we normally consider theatrical circumstances; and this pertains to more than the services they are prepared to render. Their playing is all-encompassing and nonstop. Always in character, never out of costume, they recognize no limits to the time and place appropriate to dramatic play, and in this they profess "a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else" (28).⁸

More than a profession, then, the acting of the Tragedians is in effect a way of living. Thus, the importance of their metaphoric relationship to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern runs deeper than the ironic joke it has seemed to be. Like them, the Player and his band are doomed to act in scenarios not of their own devising. Yet unlike the protagonists, who at this point fear to recognize, let alone come to terms with, the truth of their situation, the Tragedians accept from the outset their dislocated and unfree condition. Acknowledging that they exist within a dramatic plan over which they "have no control," they "take [their] chances where [they] find them," playing their roles as best they can, wherever and whenever they must play them: "Tonight we play to the court. Or the night after. Or to the tavern. Or not" (25). And they do so in full knowledge that their drama, like that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, can have one ending only. Despite their *lazzi* and comic banter, they call themselves Tragedians.

This first encounter with the Player and his company ends in a flourish of stage magic. The Player agrees to perform number "thirty-eight" in their repertoire and then follows his men offstage, after indicating entrances and a playing area. Rosencrantz picks up the coin the Player has just been standing on and discovers that it has come up heads. Immediately afterward, a lighting change transforms "a place without any visible character" to the interior of Elsinore, and Ophelia runs on, pursued by Hamlet. There is a two-fold implication here. On one level, our attention is being

⁸ The Player even runs in a twentieth-century version of the *theatrum mundi* trope. Where John Osborne's Archie Rice taunts an unresponsive music hall audience with the plea, "Don't clap too hard—it's a very old building" (*The Entertainer* [New York, 1958], p. 59), the Player, at a similar moment, intones, "Don't clap too loudly—it's a very old world" (23).

called to the power of play in the theatre: through their art, actors on a stage can change one place into another, end one action and begin a new one. But within Stoppard's fiction, the fact that they have so totally transformed the conditions of reality as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have known it until now gives the Tragedians new authority and attaches a special significance to their playing. Like the sign Guildenstern had hoped to find by the road, the Tragedians do indeed "point the way." The greeting of "fellow artists" has in fact been an invitation, in which the Player has held out to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for the first of several times in the play, a valid mode of action and being.

III

In the course of Act 2, the Player and his troupe progressively clarify and demonstrate the approach to existence they represent. Late in the first act, however, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves begin to experiment with the key to that approach, with play as a means of ordering and coping with reality. As Guildenstern puns idly on the subject of the King's memory, Rosencrantz, repeating an earlier line of the Player's, asks, "What are you playing at?" The reply: "Words, words. They're all we have to go on" (41). The notion that language itself is a form of play, a system of artificial counters that can be manipulated and rearranged to improvise meanings, leads them to explore its possibilities as such in the competitive game of "Questions and Answers." Subsequently, they go on to another game, in which Guildenstern plays the role of Hamlet while Rosencrantz interrogates him. Thus, from word-association to dialogue to dramatic *mimesis*, they explore progressively more sophisticated modes of play, and in the process they manage not only to remember their own names but to anticipate and rehearse their approaching encounter with Hamlet.

Of course, they forget their names again moments later, and their actual interview with Hamlet is a shambles (Rosencrantz scores it twenty-seven to three in Hamlet's favor [57]). The point is that they are not yet experienced players; repeatedly, their attempts break down in confusion, and they are left to ask, "What's the game? What are the rules?" (44). Nevertheless, their very lack of success at meaningful play prepares them to recognize the authority of the Player, and on their second encounter Guildenstern pays him that recognition, however reluctantly:

GUIL: You're evidently a man who knows his way around.

PLAYER: I've been here before. . . .

And I know which way the wind is blowing.

GUIL: Operating on two levels, are we? How clever! I expect it comes naturally to you, being in the business so to speak.

[66]

Being in the business, he is a past-master of playing, both as a theatrical art and a way of existing, and he proceeds to educate them in what is interchangeably an aesthetic and a philosophy. Nearly all his maxims do indeed operate "on two levels," since they rest on the assumption that truth onstage is indistinguishable from truth offstage:

GUIL: I'd prefer art to mirror life, if it's all the same to you.

PLAYER: It's all the same to me, sir.

[81]

The Player's instruction begins, properly enough, with a dialogue on the subject of acting:

GUIL: But for God's sake what are we supposed to do?

PLAYER: Relax. Respond. That's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn.

GUIL: But we don't know what's going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don't know how to act.

PLAYER: Act natural. You know why you're here at least.

GUIL: We only know what we're told, and that's little enough. And for all we know it isn't even true.

PLAYER: For all anyone knows, nothing is. Everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true. It's the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn't make any difference so long as it is honored. One acts on assumptions. What do you assume?

[66-67]

The verb "to act," of course, is used here in both its senses, the histrionic and the literal. Either way, the principle is the same: if we are cast irrevocably in a scenario over which "we have no control," a dramatic plan whose inherent significance and purpose we can neither know nor be certain exist, our only valid option is to accept our roles within that plan and act them "on assumptions." For all anybody knows, nothing is true, but if, in our acting, we honor what we assume to be true, what in other words we decide *ought* to be true, we can, in effect, create that truth through the artistry and conviction of our performances. Through playing, we can endow the script that confines us with a meaning of our own devising.

Yet any assumptions which are to be acted into truths must be measured against the single, absolute certainty that circumscribes all acting: and the Player holds out no optimistic illusions as to what that certainty is: "It never varies—we aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies. . . . We're tragedians, you see. We follow directions—there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means" (79, 80). Whatever actors may do, everyone who is marked for death dies, and everyone, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is marked for death. It follows that a valid attempt to create meaning through play must take death into account; death itself must be made an object of play. And playing at death is precisely what the Tragedians concentrate on doing. Death, as the Player says, "brings out the poetry in them" (77): "It's what the actors do best. They have to exploit whatever talent is given to them, and their talent is dying. They can die heroically, comically, ironically, slowly, suddenly, disgustingly, charmingly, or from a great height" (83). Their craft is thus a literal *ars moriendi*, and like its medieval counterpart it is an *ars vivendi* as well; by incorporating death into their playing, they can also incorporate and give meaning to life.

The option that the Player represents is not, as some critics have suggested, a form

of self-defense, a retreat from reality into empty histrionics. The playing of the Tragedians in no way insulates them from the pain and fear of existence as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern experience it. On the contrary, playing lays greater demands on the Tragedians and renders them that much more vulnerable. They must enact every aspect of their lives on "the single assumption which makes [their] existence viable—that somebody is *watching*" (63). They must "pledge" their "identities" (64) to the principle that every detail of their emotions, sensations, and actions, however intimate, is worth making manifest with all the style and form they can muster. And they must have the courage to do so in spite of the constant possibility that no one is watching, that they are playing in a silent, unresponsive void, "stripped naked in the middle of nowhere . . . every gesture, every pose, vanishing into the thin, unpopulated air" (63). (The actor speaking these lines, too, has the opportunity to voice his own sense of nakedness and vulnerability in performance.) In return for their playing, however, they are afforded the hope of giving meaning to an existence in which meaning may not be inherent. Thus they have access to a special kind of magic, a creation of something out of nothing.¹⁰ As the Player puts it, in a statement that expresses the core of his credo, "I extract significance from melodrama, a significance which it does not in fact contain; but occasionally, from out of this matter, there escapes a thin beam of light that, seen at the right angle, can crack the shell of mortality" (83).

Finally, Guildenstern rejects what the Player has offered him, lashing out at all the Tragedians represent: "Actors! The mechanics of cheap melodrama!" (83). In particular, he refuses to recognize the worth and validity of what they claim as their greatest talent: "No, no, no . . . you've got it all wrong . . . you can't act death. The fact of it is nothing to do with seeing it happen—it's not gasps and blood and falling about—that isn't what makes it death. It's just a man failing to reappear, that's all—now you see him, now you don't, that's the only thing that's real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back—an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death" (84). He denies, then, that death can be acted, that it can be accommodated into play and so endowed with man-made significance. And in denying this, he denies the same of life, insisting upon the dumb, blank illegibility of all existence: "now you see him, now you don't, that's the only thing that's real."

But Guildenstern has failed to grasp what has just occurred in his presence, the Tragedians' second major stroke of stage magic. What began as their dress rehearsal of *The Murder of Gonzago* has metamorphosed in the playing to *The Life and Death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. The action of the "cheap melodrama" has, impossibly, outstripped the present tense of the *Hamlet* plot and become a prophetic mirroring of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's future: their deputation by Claudius to

¹⁰ See Levenson, pp. 436-37, and Whitaker, pp. 14, 16-17.

¹¹ It is here, perhaps, that the play owes its truest debt to *Waiting for Godot*. One of the few consolations Didi and Gogo have in their limbo state, beside the uncertain pleasure of one another's company, is their sporadic ability to improvise games, thereby temporarily endowing their existence with an artificial sense of form and meaning. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the tenuous and very note of hope represented by this sense of play becomes a major chord and a dramatized philosophy.

escort Hamlet to England, their sea voyage, and finally their deaths at the hands of the English king (81-82). Thus the very sort of magic that the Player describes has come to pass. He and his troupe have, by their playing, created "a thin beam of light" and trained it on the fact of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's mortality, offering to "crack the shell" of its mystery. Lodged in the corny rhetoric of the playlet's closing chorus—"Traitors hoist by their own petard?—or victims of the gods?" (82)—is a very real assertion of the significative possibilities of their deaths. "Victims of the gods," after all, bespeaks a tragic death, one in which some version of self or purpose has been expressed, while the alternative epithet indicates an ironic death, without dignity or import. But Guildenstern, confronted with a dramatic vision of his own death in a context of potential significance, denies that such a vision, or such a death, can be. The implications of that denial will become crucially clear in the third act. Meanwhile, face to face with a unicorn, he insists that he sees only a horse with an arrow in its forehead.

IV

Although Guildenstern rejects the substance of the Player's advice, he and Rosencrantz do not cease to play. Midway through Act 3, in fact, they play their most important game of all. Finding themselves on a boat to England and moving irreversibly into darkness, they experience an uneasiness about their approaching destination, an inability to picture England as anything but a blank (108). We, of course, know that their premonition is fully warranted, that for them England will be the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns, the ending of their life-script. In the face of their growing anxiety, they resort once again to play, this time a dramatic acting-out of their arrival in England. Significantly, they need no preparatory discussion or agreement on the rules, as they did in the first act. Through their repeated contacts with the Tragedians, their playing has grown to be a spontaneous and intuitive activity. As they ponder what to say upon arriving, Rosencrantz instinctively assumes the role of the English king, and the dialogue begins. Their improvised scene quickly gathers momentum, and before either of them realizes what has happened, Rosencrantz, in the heat of his performance, has torn open and read aloud Claudius's order for Hamlet's death (109).

Thus, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reach their point of crisis as protagonists. In effect, they have managed to duplicate the sort of magic the Player has spoken of and demonstrated. Through the energy and commitment of their play-acting, they have created "a thin beam of light" that has momentarily illuminated the shadowy workings of the script containing them. Suddenly, miraculously, they have what they had despaired of having: choice and the capability to act. Perhaps they are not Prince Hamlets nor were meant to be; perhaps anything they do to turn aside the course of events will prove futile, and the boat will carry them to England and death in any case. Nevertheless, their playing has made available to them the opportunity to define significant versions of self through a concrete moral decision and a subsequent action, even if a useless action. If the script has predestined them to obscure deaths, better to perform those deaths as victims of the gods than as traitors hoist by their own petard.

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Yet, once again, and this time irrevocably, Guildenstern refuses the option that play has offered him:

GUIL: We are little men, we don't know the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels, et cetera—it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate or even of kings. All in all, I think we'd be well advised to leave well alone. Tie up the letter—there—neatly—like that.—They won't notice the broken seal, assuming you were in character.

ROS: But what's the point?

GUIL: Don't apply logic.

ROS: He's done nothing to us.

GUIL: Or justice.

ROS: It's awful.

GUIL: But it could have been worse.

[110-111]

Guildenstern deliberately looks away from what the thin beam of light has shown him. He denies that he is capable of knowledge and the responsibility that goes with it. He insists on being a little man, without choice or significance. And Rosencrantz goes along with him; moments later, he declares that they "don't know what's in the letter" (112). Thus both of them specifically opt for a mode of life without meaning, even if at the expense of someone else's illogical and unjust death. In a sense, all that follows is anticlimax where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are concerned. They have passed their crucial moment and they have chosen to be traitors—much more to themselves than to Hamlet. They will play out their arrival in England once more, only to discover that in denying their significance as actors they have acceded to insignificant deaths (121-122). But prior to that, Rosencrantz realizes that, dead or alive, they have willed their own nonbeing: "If we stopped breathing we'd vanish" (112).

V

One more significant episode remains. If the action involving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is effectively over, the ongoing dialectic between Guildenstern and the Player stands unresolved. And so, for a final time, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern encounter the Tragedians. After reading the letter that seals their deaths, Guildenstern once more protests their helplessness and bewilderment as little men: "But why? Was it all for this? Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths? (*In anguish to the Player:*) Who are we?" (122). That question is meant to be rhetorical, but the Player will not let it go unanswered:

PLAYER: You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's enough.

GUIL: No—it is not enough. To be told so little—to such an end—and still, finally, to be denied an explanation—

PLAYER: In our experience, most things end in death.

GUIL: (*fear, vengeance, scorn:*) Your experience—Actors! He snatches a dagger from the Player's belt and holds the point at the Player's throat: the Player backs and Guild advances, speaking more quietly.

I'm talking about death—and you've never experienced *that*. And you cannot act it. You die a thousand casual deaths—with none of that intensity which squeezes out life ... and no blood runs cold anywhere. Because even as you die you know that you will come back in a different hat. But no one gets up after death—there is no applause—there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that's—*death*—

And he pushes the blade in up to the hilt.

[122-23]

Again, Guildenstern denies that death can be acted, can in any way be encompassed or rendered legible by human means. At this point he *must* deny such a possibility, having foregone the chance to act his own death into meaning. Now, however, he intends not only to prove the Player wrong, but to set a terrible certainty on his proof by inflicting on the Player a death as meaningless as he anticipates his own will be.

Yet, far from putting a stop to all playing, Guildenstern has set the stage for the Player's best performance. He recoils "*with huge, terrible eyes*," falls to his knees and then to the floor, suffers his death agony and "*finally lies still*." A silence passes, the Tragedians "*start to applaud with genuine admiration*," and suddenly the Player bounces up to receive the congratulations of his fellow actors (123). It is a trick, of course. The Player has not in fact died and come back to life; freely, he demonstrates the retracting knifeblade. But there is much more significance to this, the play's ultimate stroke of stage magic, than that it was done with mirrors. The character of the Player, and the actor playing that character, *have*, literally, acted death, and the meaning of this accomplishment lies to a considerable extent in its dimension as performance. "There's nothing more unconvincing," the Player has earlier confided, "than an unconvincing death" (77), and he might have added that there is nothing more difficult than a convincing one. This, then, is the most crucial point in the onstage career of the Player: At least, I found it the most exacting single task of the role. The actor must give living form to all he knows of death: bewilderment, fear, waves of physical pain; the fading of speech, of consciousness, and finally of breath. He must tax to the full his own observations (and thus his most painful personal experiences), as well as his powers of imaginative projection.

If the moment makes supreme demands on the actor, it can also evoke a peak of response from the audience. We are not duped to the extent that Guildenstern is; we do not actually believe that a man is dying onstage. We do, however, assume that a character called the Player is dying and that the actor playing him is bending all his abilities toward portraying that death. If the performance is a successful one, we pay it the tribute of our most serious attention. When the Player jumps to his feet again, we are shocked—not so much by the unexpected as by the sudden affirmation of what we already know. Simultaneously, both performer and character focus our awareness on the same truth: Through play, each has encountered the reality of death and accommodated it into the realm of human experience—as far as is humanly possible—by rendering it subject to artistic form.

Stoppard does not provide a formal resolution to the debate of Guildenstern and the Player. At the end, their opposing views, and the opposite approaches to existence they represent, are recapitulated side by side. The Player disappears into the gathering darkness on a characteristic note: "*(Dying amid the dying—tragically; ro-*

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mantically.) So there's an end to that—it's commonplace: light goes with life, and in the winter of your years the dark comes early ... " (124). As always, death brings out the poetry in him. It's commonplace, he says, but he expresses that commonplace lyrically. And the commonest fact of all, enacted "tragically, romantically," becomes something rich and strange, a miracle of art. Guildenstern's reply is equally characteristic: "No ... no ... not for *us*, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over ... Death is not anything ... death is not ... It's the absence of presence, nothing more ... the endless time of never coming back ... a gap you can't see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound ..." (124). Guildenstern, too, retains an eloquence at the end, as well as a sad, stubborn insistence on the truth as he sees it. Stoppard does not unduly weight the case against him. It is plain enough that if we side with the Player we follow much more in the way of faith than of reason—everything, as the Player himself has said, has to be taken on trust—whereas Guildenstern's despair is born of an uncompromising empiricism.

Yet it seems to me that the play's ending is suffused with an unmistakable, if unstated, sense of resolution. Ultimately, Guildenstern does die the death he has opted for. His repeated insistence on the meaninglessness of death (and thus of life) becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. He is, in fact, echoing an earlier phrase of his when the light unceremoniously winks out on him: "Now you see me, now you—*(and disappears)*" (126). In every sense, his own words are his epitaph. By contrast, the Player has shown us the possibility of a significant mastering of death and life through play. He has insisted that it is "enough" to be Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; that one's given name, even if a choice between interchangeable and objectively meaningless names, is enough with which to create one's own meaning. Finally, the play option is vindicated not only by the words and actions of the Player but also by the accumulated experience of the play itself in performance. The actors playing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, too, have acted death and life; and we ourselves, by our presence in the theatre and our assistance as audience, bear an active witness to the validity and centrality of play as an indispensable—perhaps *the* indispensable—human skill.

HELENE KEYSSAR-FRANKE

The Strategy of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Some five years ago, I witnessed a production of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* at the Alvin Theatre in New York City. I left the theatre with the sense that I had just attended a production which had "worked." To say this of a theatre production (or perhaps any work of art) is to express a feeling that the event was satisfying in ways which escape immediate or concrete explanation. Even when I reexamined the script of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* the reasons for the effectiveness of Stoppard's play seemed elusive. The script is, after all, blatantly derivative, not only in its reliance for frame on *Hamlet*, but in its collage of themes and theatrical devices so clearly drawn from an assortment of major modern playwrights. Even a first reading of the play reveals its concern with such issues as the absurdity of human existence, alienation, the reality and illusion of theatre, the significance of history, and these concerns and their modes of expression readily call forth Pirandello, Brecht, Beckett and many others.

Many plays, of course, succeed despite the absence of any claims to originality or innovation. Broadway has been filled for decades with Xerox-copied productions. My troubling over the response to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is both a concern with the effectiveness of this particular play and with how and why one makes judgments about one's responses to any drama. The term "worked" is helpful to these explorations because it emphasizes the activity of the play as opposed to a perception of a play as a static object whose meaning or theme we search out. The term, however, can be too limited if we do not augment it with a preposition; that is, I am not as much concerned in my criticism with how the internal parts of a play fit or work in relation to each other, but with how the play works at, towards, or on an audience. Although I believe it crucial to consider every artifact in terms of its workings on an audience, in drama (and certainly in music and dance as well) the physical movement through time and space before an audience whose physical presence asserts itself pressures us constantly away from synthetic statements about the nature or the idea of the piece.

I believe that what we mean when we say that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* "works" is that it has a potent and appropriate dramatic strategy, a lucid and meaningful grasp on the relationship of every moment of the play to an audience. I borrow the term strategy from Kenneth Burke, who speaks of focusing on the strategy of a work as the

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center of critical analysis and demonstrates this vividly in the brief essay, "Antony in Behalf of the Play."¹ Burke's crucial insight is his perception of the script as manipulator of both actors and audience. The playscript not only thus has a discernible meaning, but a distinct task or set of tasks.²

The event of a play, both for actors and audience, is not only one of acknowledging certain ideas or feelings, but of experiencing them in a unique sequence and relationship. If the reader can discover the sources and expressions of the playwright's control over that sequence, he will have discovered what I am calling the dramatic strategy of the play, and with this insight the reader will own the play in such a way that it exists for him as performance, in his imagination, if not finally on stage.

To search the script of a play for its dramatic strategy necessitates that we approach the play in an obvious way: that we look at what happens and at the given sequences in which events occur. We look at meaning, at sounds, at visual images, of course, but we cannot be satisfied with describing these, we must ask what these suggest in terms of the stance, of the actor and the effect on the audience, at each moment. "What happens?" is only initially and superficially a question about the script. It should immediately become a question of how its lines make the actors perform and the audience react. Distinctions between performance and audience reaction are often subtle and difficult to determine. Even more problematic than determining the difference between what is happening for an actor and what is happening for an audience is distinguishing between the spectator's spontaneous reactions and his reflections about those reactions. Further on in this paper, for example, I speak of the young tragedian, Alfred, as "winsome" which is a conclusion on my part about the appeal his vulnerability has had for me, rather than a description of my immediate reaction to his lines.

There is evidence in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* that Tom Stoppard is himself not only aware of a play as being a set of strategies, but is overtly concerned that the audience have this awareness. From the title of the play and its obvious relationship to *Hamlet*, through the emphasis on the Player and the number of speeches about theatre, Stoppard stresses that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a probing of the nature of the meaning and experience of theatre, past and present. This interest in the relationship of the play on stage to an audience is emphatically and provocatively expressed in a passage in Act Two. Guildenstern responds in "fear and derision" to the Player's declaration that what actors do best is to die and to kill:

¹ Kenneth Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living" and "Antony in Behalf of the Play," *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (New York, 1957), pp. 256-262 and pp. 279-290. I am indebted to Oscar Brownstein for bringing both Burke and the notion of strategy to my attention. My thanks also to Tracy Strong, Timothy Gould, Miriam Gilbert, Darwin Turner, Thomas Whitaker and Kenneth Burke for helpful conversations and criticisms as I sought my own strategy.

² Burke is, of course, not the only critic to have addressed himself to the strategies of drama or literature, but few drama critics have focused their attention on the relationships between audience and script which I urge in this paper. Among those writers who have been concerned with the strategies of drama, I have found the works of J. L. Styan, Harley Granville-Barker, Elia Kazan, Stanley Cavell and Thomas Whitaker particularly helpful.

Since writing this paper, I have also discovered the "Appendix" to Stanley Fish's *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, (Berkeley, California, 1972), which is an exceptionally articulate discussion of a strategic method.

The mechanics of cheap melodrama! That isn't death! (More quietly) You scream and choke and sink to your knees, but it doesn't bring death home to anyone—it doesn't catch them unawares and start the whisper in their skulls that says—"One day you are going to die." (He straightens up) You die so many times; how can you expect them to believe in your death?³

This passage, read with a sense of the entirety of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and with the acknowledgment that Stoppard's strategy must begin with the decision to use *Hamlet*, suggests his overall strategy for the play. Stoppard wishes to start a very particular whisper in the "skulls" of the audience, and to do this effectively he must catch them "unawares." Part of the effectiveness of Shakespeare's play lies in sensing that "The play's the thing wherein we'll catch the conscience of the king," initiates the haunting whisper of the personal reality of death, both for Claudius and for the audience. But the quotation from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* also suggests why Stoppard chose to rewrite and reemphasize *Hamlet*: for him, at least, the strategy of *Hamlet* works in a different way than he would wish, or simply does not work for a mid-twentieth-century audience. Stoppard turns from the grand hero to two supernumeraries, from the historical setting to a barren no-place, from a specific time to no-time. The essence of why he makes these changes, the core of his strategy, is there in the passage just quoted, but to perceive the how and the more elaborate what of his plan, it is necessary to turn to the events of the play itself.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go through the motions of waiting to play their parts in *Hamlet*, playing those roles and avoiding playing those roles. If they have a primary desire it is to escape death; if they have an antagonist, it is one of whom they are not fully conscious, the playwright or the "director" of that which forces or allows them to play their roles. This implies that what they need, what they should be striving for, is freedom of will. What Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover during the course of the play is that they are not free, that they cannot escape their roles, and that they therefore cannot escape death. The essence of Stoppard's strategy is to juxtapose scenes in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern operate outside of their roles in *Hamlet* to scenes in which they do enact them; this creates a sense of the possibility of freedom and the tension of the improbability of escape. For both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the audience it appears through Acts I and II that they may be existing or can exist outside of their roles in *Hamlet*; if this is true they may be free to escape the deaths implied by their Shakespearean roles. The trap for both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the audience comes in Act III: there they appear initially to be outside Shakespeare's script but, although the script has been enriched, the scene on the ship reveals that they are servants of that script, and that the ship can only sail in one direction.

Stoppard knows from the first moment where he wants his characters and us to go, but he does not allow his characters and audience that same knowledge. His control of both audience and actors begins, even before the opening lines, with the title itself. The audience for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* can be presumed to have at least heard that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are minor characters in *Hamlet* who die near the end of the play; the audience may even know from its own experience or from that of Claudius and Gertrude that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are constantly confused, each with the other. How much more the audience may know about *Hamlet* will, of course, vary considerably from spectator to spectator and will affect the complexity of response.

³ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (New York, 1967), p. 83. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

The knowledge which the spectator brings to the theatre seems to me more important for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* than for many plays, but Stoppard's strategy does not presume an exceptionally sophisticated audience. He does presume that *Hamlet* has a mythical place in our culture and will therefore function for an audience in much the same way that the tales of the gods did for a Greek audience.⁴

An audience is expected to come to this play, then, in a state of intellectual alertness, curiosity, and perhaps even nostalgia, and the actors know this about their audience. When the curtain opens, two actors appear on the stage, do not reveal for some time their identities in name or nature (although we probably assume them to be Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) but commence to play what appears to be an absurd game of coin-tossing with strikingly improbable results, and an equally absurd word game. The audience is not annoyed or lost, but curious and eager and immediately involved, on at least a simple level, with the problem of identity. The actors certainly expect this and take a stance of confidence and self-indulgence.

Once the play has commenced, Stoppard's strategy is not to satisfy the audience's curiosity but to enlarge it. We are told in the initial notes that Rosencrantz is not at all surprised that the coins always come up heads (his gain), that Guildenstern is not really concerned about the loss of money but aware of the peculiarity of the "luck." How is the audience to feel about these strange odds? Curious certainly, baffled too, but also increasingly ready to accept that the world on stage is not like any world we know, and that in this world, almost "anything can happen next," as Rosencrantz will assert at the end of Act II.

The effects of the game on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, both materially and intellectually, also give the audience a handle with which to approach the play's constant problem of discrimination between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Each character is appealing but in distinct ways. Thus, early in the play we can begin to separate the two characters even if we cannot name them. We envy Rosencrantz's winnings and admire his ability to accept, to take things as they seem to be; but our stronger sympathies are with Guildenstern, who not only loses his coins, but this early in the play is revealed as a "loser" because of his awareness of the problems in his identity and situation. Awareness breeds pain; the intensity and extent of that pain are not apparent in the first scene, but the signs are planted on the road.

The audience will see that both are seduced by games of chance, but we must learn that Rosencrantz will play with whimsy and blunt acceptance, whereas Guildenstern participates with increasing resentment and horror. Rosencrantz is too consistently the victor over his friend, but wins with much kindness and some embarrassment; Guildenstern recognizes and accepts the oddity and perhaps deceit in this but worries over its meaning. Rosencrantz questions and finds given answers momentarily sufficient; Guildenstern is a skeptic for whom the only answers are intolerable. For Rosencrantz, the

⁴ Whether this is indeed true, and how this might complicate or simplify our reactions to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, are intriguing questions but ones which go beyond the scope of this paper.

playing of the game, of the role, is its only meaning; for Guildenstern the possibility of meaning beyond the doing is a menacing source of concern. Both are young, but quickly approaching death. What is pregnant in this first scene will become potent: Rosencrantz will belittle and deny the evidence of his mortality while Guildenstern will confront and explore the notion of death in the most stark and relentless detail conceivable. They are men conceived on an existential pattern, but for Rosencrantz the protest against the loss of hope is a cry in the wind; for Guildenstern it becomes the full tragic perception.

These ways of distinguishing are notable because it is a matter of what happens to them, as well as what they do, which separates each from the other. It is also crucial that the audience discover some initial sympathy for Guildenstern since it is his whisper which must finally thunder in the ears of those before him.

This initial scene is a self-conscious game, and the audience is to be made aware both of the drama's playfulness and its self-consciousness. When Guildenstern says in his first line that "There is an art to the building up of suspense," or when Rosencrantz suggests a few speeches later that it's "Getting a bit of a bore, isn't it?" each is clearly talking about the play and thus forcing us to look at the play as a play. Stoppard wants to establish initially, and he will reemphasize repeatedly with lines and events of similar effect, that his play is not the same kind of experience as the witnessing of or participation in an event, even a dramatic or histrionic event in our daily lives, and that we are not to lose ourselves in the world of the play and become one with it. From the beginning, Stoppard asserts strongly that these men on stage are actors playing characters, distinct in their characters and worlds from us, that the play is a conscious creation, an illusion (or at least a separate reality), and a play. The cue which he gives the audience that this game is analogous to sport, when the score is tallied as "Seventy-six—love," which suggests a very strange game of tennis, clarifies further how the audience is to perceive the events on stage. Tennis provides an apt metaphor for the verbal volleying which occurs between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and for our experience of continually turning our attention from one to another with only moments of reprieve. No matter how absorbed one may become in the witnessing of a tennis match, it remains an event at which we watch a display of skills.

Once the spectator has become aware that she is supposed to sit back in her seat, she can begin to pay attention to the quasi-philosophical banter, to the cosmic epigrams and to the almost casual, forthright exposition of previous events. Initially, moreover, the characters on stage are given no graspable emotional life. We can listen to, laugh at, deny or accept Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's conversation about Fate, probability, the indistinctness and illusoriness of time and memory, without a sense that we are missing some hidden emotional tension, and we need not respond in a direct or intense emotional fashion.

If the message appears to be that the characters on stage are, because they are "only" actors playing parts, without clear or intense feeling, emotionally barren as well as situated in a barren no-place and no-time, we must eventually feel something about this very emptiness. My initial response to emptiness is anxiety, discomfort, but the characters' reminders to us that they are playing roles modify these feelings to a sense

that, "This is only a play—it's not *real*." That such a response on my part, or on the part of any spectator, is not accidental is made clear near the end of this first scene.⁵ After a lengthy, complicated speech by Guildenstern concerning the fortuitous, the ordained, and the "unsurprisingness" of preceding events, Rosencrantz, who has been cutting his fingernails, interrupts, as if he had heard nothing of Guildenstern's monologue, and comments "that the fingernails grow after death, as does the beard." This stimulates a brief exchange between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about beards, toenails, fingernails and death, which is notable only for the intense irritation it causes both characters. The mere mention of the word death causes a momentary intensity; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are becoming uncomfortably aware of the death-like quality of their characters and situation, but are able to put aside that anxiety because their real selves seem separate from the roles they play. For the audience and for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern it is the first moment of awareness that the two characters may not indeed be free, but it is a moment to be recaptured later, not sustained now. Without murder or screams, Stoppard has started the "whisper in [our] skulls that says—'One day you are going to die.'"

At this point the audience's responses to the play on stage are not so much reactions to the characters as concurrent with those of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Stanley Cavell's insight into Beckett's plays and their relationship to an audience suggests the kind of experience which Stoppard creates:

It is not that our relationship to Beckett's characters is more intimate, but there is no distance at all or no recognizable distance between them and us . . . We cannot see ourselves in his characters because they are not more characters than artist portraits are particular people. They have the abstraction, and the intimacy, of figures and words and objects in a dream.⁶

This is clearly a different experience from that which we feel when, in classic modern theatre, we speak of "identifying" with a character, if we mean too facilely by that process "being one with." In *Hamlet*, we do not precisely identify with Hamlet for we are not one with Hamlet, and we do not die with him. Rather, Hamlet is "present" to us, we must "acknowledge" him and thereby admit our kinship and our separateness.⁷ As Cavell says of our relationship to such characters of classic modern drama, "What is revealed is my separateness from what is happening to them; that I am I, and here. It is only in this perception of them as separate from me that I make them present. That I make them *other* and face them."⁸

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, however, both because of the continual assertions that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are actors and because of the minimal

⁵ Although Stoppard divides his script only into Acts, I occasionally refer to scenes in the French sense, as delineated by the entrance or exit of characters.

⁶ Here and in the forthcoming footnotes I cite particular passages from Stanley Cavell's "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," and "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*" in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, by Stanley Cavell, (New York, 1969), but I am indebted not only to the entirety of these two essays but to all of Cavell's writings contained in *Must We Mean What We Say?* specifically for my understanding of the terms "presence" and "acknowledgement," and for a fine comprehension of a strategic approach to drama. Cavell, p. 131.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 352-353.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 338.

presence of the kinds of human qualities which allow for acknowledgement, we can feel neither oneness with them nor separateness, but only the strange intimacy of a dream. What I am suggesting is that in a play in which we forget that we are in a theatre, in which the experience on stage becomes "real" in its eventful detail, we react to that happening; in a play in which the event on stage remains consciously a separate and distinct occurrence, we respond *with* its characters and momentum. In either case, the playwright induces helplessness, not to show us that we *are* helpless but, as Cavell asserts, "*why* we (as audience) are helpless. Classically, the reason was that pain and death were in our presence when we were not in theirs. Now the reason is that we absent ourselves from them."⁹ In Stoppard's strategy, the audience is not only understood as absent from pain and death, but is forced to the extreme of that absence by the play's assertion of its existence as theatre. We reach a point where we must acknowledge this very state of absence. "In such circumstances, a purpose of tragedy remains unchanged: to make us practical, capable of acting. It used to do that by showing us the natural limitations of action. Now its work is not to purge us of pity and terror, but to make us capable of feeling them again, and this means showing us that there is a place to act upon them."¹⁰

The discovery of this place, for both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the audience, begins in the second scene of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. We already have one audience watching the performance of one set of players; now new characters identified as players enter the stage creating an audience on as well as off stage. What this is to accomplish is suggested by Stoppard through a tale which can illuminate the episode but may also confuse the spectator. Immediately prior to the entrance of the Player and the tragedians, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hear music (a tongue-in-cheek reference to the birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music?) which inspires Guildenstern to relate a seemingly irrelevant story about the appearance or vision of a unicorn. What is remarkable in the story is that many men encounter each other and relate that they have seen the same vision. That this occurs, Guildenstern comments, means that

a dimension is added that makes the experience as alarming as it will ever be. A third witness, you understand, adds no further dimension but only spreads it thinner, and a fourth thinner still, and the more witnesses there are the thinner it gets and the more reasonable it becomes until it is as thin as reality, the name we give to the common experience. . . . "Look, look!" recites the crowd. "A horse with an arrow in its forehead! It must have been mistaken for a deer." (p. 21)

For the audience of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* the situation seems to be the same as for the witnesses of the vision of the unicorn: the more the stage is peopled with characters who have shared and will share the experience of *Hamlet*, and who can recognize Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the less abstract, the less fantastic, the less bizarre appears the scene on Stoppard's stage. With the entrance of the Player and Tragedians, Stoppard begins the process which will eventually allow the audience the partial understanding which is part of the psychic trap. "Look, look," we will be tempted and relieved to say, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not elusive ghost figures after all, they are ordinary men easily knowable in the "real" world of *Hamlet*."

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's encounter with the Players also extends for the audience the illusion of the possibility of freedom for the central characters. Compared to the Players, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear free to act: the latter are now in the position of an audience, but not a captive one; they can attend or not attend, demand, request, reject. The Players, however, have a repertoire of scenes to perform. They can only move from performance to performance; at this point in the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are functioning outside the script of *Hamlet* even though they are connected to that script by the very presence of the players from *Hamlet*. Thus they appear not only to be "free" as an audience is free, but free as actors to extend, alter, recreate their given roles.

The first effect of the entrance of the players, then, is *not* to create in the audience an even more bewildering sense of reality than previously; Stoppard's purpose is very different from that of Pirandello in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, or for that matter, from Shakespeare's in *Hamlet*. We are drawn back towards the comfortable, the old familiarities of theatrical entertainment, of "blood, love, and rhetoric" as the Player asserts. The audience is even allowed, in this first scene with the players, a moment of old-fashioned, sentimental pity, when the winsome young Alfred reveals that he has been sexually and professionally abused by both company and audience. The superficial familiarity of the melodramatic roles expressed by the players from *Hamlet* allows the audience to respond more openly to the harsh, satiric portrait of theatre and its members which the Player asserts in his speeches and the Tragedians substantiate in their very appearance. Yet the audience is being fed a delusion; it is not prepared at all for still another dimension in our already blurred perception of what is real, a dimension which will be crucial to Act III.

Immediately upon the departure from the stage of the Players, Stoppard moves his audience further into the "real" world of *Hamlet*. In the initial pantomime of Ophelia's encounter with Hamlet, as well as the subsequent scene of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's introduction to Claudius, both Gertrude and Polonius are humorous and informative. In essential action and in words these scenes are as they are in *Hamlet*, but they function in a manner similar to a cartoon. Our response to a cartoon has to do with both recognition and distortion. In this instance the audience is presumed to recognize at least that these are Shakespearean characters, if not precisely who they are or what they are doing. The distortion lies in the context, which may alter meaning but does not apparently alter content. The scene then proceeds to clarify for the audience earlier hints of a confusion of identities between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as well as their relation to Hamlet and their task in Elsinore.

We are not allowed, however, to remain in this increasingly recognizable and comprehensible world. The whisper of death is still inaudible; we are not yet ready to be "caught." To remind his audience that this play is not *Hamlet*, that a game of a different kind is still being played out, Stoppard returns to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are once again alone as they were at the beginning of the play. We and they are left waiting, expectant of the next intrusion, since we once again are left without the impact of event or personality or plot. To wait here is not to act, so our ability to believe in the freedom of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern turns to discomfort and uncertainty. Stoppard

emphasizes his strategy by having Rosencrantz say: "I feel like a spectator—appalling business. The only thing that makes it bearable is the irrational belief that somebody interesting will come on in a minute. . ." (p. 41).

Left alone, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can only play, this time with words alone. The emptiness, the aura of death which surrounds them is unbearable for them and unbearable, too, for the audience. To fill this void, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern decide to rehearse their interrogation of Hamlet by playing a game of questions. As in the first scene, there is no question but that we are to be spectators at a sport; not only is the terminology of tennis again used, but the exchanges are brief, fast, cleverly and skillfully manipulated. The game is a parody of Oxford philosophy, but while satirizing the forms of that approach, cannot escape calling attention to the seriousness, the meaningfulness which the questions of that school assume. The rule of the game is that every question must be responded to with another real question; no rhetorical questions or non-sequiturs are permitted. One loses when one answers a question. This is crucial to the appreciation of freedom in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, because the sense conveyed is that an answer is a box, an enclosure which stops action and creates the death of the speaker; questions are vital, freeing; answers are dead and enslaving. This is true for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; it is also true for the audience. Many of the questions in this scene are provocative, important philosophical questions, but if the spectator attempts in her own privacy to answer these questions, she will lose the sense of the game. She can only participate by following the sequence of questions and trying to formulate her own.

As in the first scene, Stoppard's principal strategy is like the seductive cape of a bullfighter, including within its folds other concerns and dependent for the complexity of its effects on the knowledge the audience brings to the theatre. The question game entertains by its sheer brilliance; it calls forth respect for intelligence but also awareness that intellectual games are lonely sport, often seeming to lead nowhere tangible or sufficient. The game also increases the audience's ability to differentiate intellectually and emotionally between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; Rosencrantz is able to get into the game, enjoy it as a space filler; Guildenstern is not absorbed by the game for more than a moment because he is repeatedly thrown into meditation or distress by the content of a question and because he is constantly aware of the difficulties in the meaning and intention of the game itself. As the question game becomes more specifically a rehearsal of the encounter with Hamlet, the audience becomes increasingly aware of Guildenstern's difference from Rosencrantz in that the nature of the former is to discriminate, initiate, contemplate, and imagine, whereas the habit of the latter is to describe and respond.

It is both ironic and appropriate that Act I concludes with the first and much-awaited encounter between Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and that the essence of this encounter lies in Hamlet's confusion of the identities of his old school chums. The final note at the end of Act I is light, for all three characters laugh at Hamlet's mistake: it is an old joke. For the audience, it is a new and better instance of the joke. We can share the experience of confusion of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's identities, but by this point we *may* also feel superior and somewhat separate from Hamlet because, unlike him, we have begun to discriminate: we already know Rosencrantz and Guildenstern better than he does.

That the beginning of Act II is a continuation of the closing scene of Act I not only indicates an uninterrupted flow of event, but a strategic continuity and evolution as well. Act I sets up the worlds of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Hamlet* as distinct and separate; the audience has distinct and distinguishable reactions to each. In Act II these worlds are more intensively and intimately juxtaposed. Scenes between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in isolation are again interspersed with scenes in which they interact with characters from *Hamlet*, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are alone for much briefer periods, and when they are left to themselves their conversation is far more concerned with the events of *Hamlet* than in Act I.

For the audience, Act II of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* brings no surprise, no demand for a new kind of reaction, but rather a settling into a pattern of reactions with a developing ease which arises out of a double sense of familiarity: we see more and more of *Hamlet* and that is ground we know how to view or feel confident that we are being provided a perspective on. The more apparent Shakespeare's *Hamlet* becomes, the more comfortable we feel. We have also experienced the uncertainties surrounding the identities of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sufficiently to accept as "natural" the opacity of their conversation and thus we are more directly entertained by their wit and satire. By the end of Act II, we can assume that we know all we can know of the purpose, situation, and desires of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. A continuous thread of ambiguity has been confirmed and in this confirmation rests a certain security. As Guildenstern says in another of his revealing fables:

A Chinaman of the T'ang Dynasty—and by which definition, a philosopher—dreamed he was a butterfly, and from that moment he was never quite sure that he was not a butterfly dreaming it was a Chinese philosopher. Envy him; in his two-fold security. (p. 60)

Like the Chinese philosopher we can be secure in our ambivalence, and sit back to enjoy the vicissitudes of the games.

Similarly, Stoppard stills our anxiety about the freedom of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The central characters seem to move easily in and out of *Hamlet*; there is no reason not to think that they cannot continue to do so. We can overlook that when in Act II they are playing their roles in *Hamlet*, those roles remain exactly as Shakespeare wrote them and if *Hamlet* is to continue ineluctably, then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will have to allow their roles to conclude their lives or their lives to conclude their roles. What we do not know in Act II is if the latter is possible; what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will not accept is that the former is necessary and inevitable.

Stoppard's manipulation of the audience into repose is, of course, another of his strategic tricks, and once again he tells us our proper response when, in a conversation on how to handle uncertainty, the Player says "Relax. Respond. That's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn" (p. 66). He does not yet want to "catch us unawares" but he must prepare us to be caught. In repose, we can absorb the increasingly frequent allusions to death and the definition of human identity without reacting strongly at each mention. We take in notions intellectually which become a fund to enrich our emotional response in Act III. When, towards the middle of

Act II, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discuss their ability to conceive of their own deaths, when they suggest that we can only imagine ourselves alive in a box or coffin, the intensity and concreteness of the focus push us, too, into visualizing death. Yet it is because death seems remote that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can discuss it so vividly and that the audience can contemplate their conversation because it sees itself as distant from the events on the stage.

By the end of Act II there are numerous hints that the remoteness from the actuality of death is about to be altered. Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Hamlet are, in fact, going to "change ground"; they are being sent off to England. The summer is coming to a close, there are no leaves, "It's autumnal." If the audience has settled into any form of complacency, Rosencrantz warns them clearly that this will not continue. He concludes Act II: "We've come this far. (*He moves toward exit. Guildenstern follows him.*) And besides, anything could happen yet." He, at least, still sees the future as open, freedom as a possibility. The tension for the audience is that in calling attention to the future, Rosencrantz reminds us of what we know happens in *Hamlet*, and although we may want to accept his naive assertion, we must recall that in Act II we have witnessed the essential events of *Hamlet* exactly as they were originally written.

If the closing lines of Act II seem somewhat self-conscious, they are purposefully so to prepare the audience for the immediate and significant changes in Act III. Although the darkness and emptiness of the scene when the curtain rises on Act III may recall the commencement of the play, the setting is not now no-place but very specifically a ship in the night carrying Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Hamlet to England. And, although we are again witnesses to a long, isolated conversation between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the substance of their dialogue reveals that they no longer exist at any point in a separate or abstract world, but have been absorbed entirely into the setting of *Hamlet*. They cannot get off this ship.

Throughout Acts I and II of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* there is, for the audience, always the will to believe in the possibility of escape. Stoppard could change the story line. We have given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern an hour's attention, and to be presented in the last act with the old storyline would seem an insufficient return upon our investment of interest. In Act III, however, Stoppard double-crosses the audience's expectation that he will change events. The openness of possibility, in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern trusted at least tentatively at the beginning of the play, and to which the audience has tenuously clung, has now been abolished. As Guildenstern says, "We are brought round full circle to face again the single immutable fact—that we, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing a letter from one king to another, are taking Hamlet to England" (p. 101).

The movement of events in Act III reveals just how completely Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are now limited or entrapped. They are not only unable to escape to another time, another place, but they are being manipulated inexorably towards death. And this death is no longer an abstract or intellectual notion, but the real and physical termination of each of their lives. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sense the turn events have taken; they are increasingly anxious during their encounter with the pirates and the

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disappearance Hamlet and troubled by their new confinement. It is not until Guildenstern reads the letter which they are to present to the King of England, however, that the totality of their imprisonment is acknowledged. It is not someone else's death, nor the idea of death which he is reading about, but the end of his own existence. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot recognize that they are nothing more nor less than characters created and controlled by Shakespeare to act out specific roles in Hamlet. As characters they cannot escape the playwright's plot; as actors they cannot remain on stage and escape their roles; as men they cannot stay in this world and escape death. This acknowledgement affects Guildenstern so intensely that, for the first time, he becomes passionate. Not only does he reveal anguish and terror, he is also provoked to his first and only personal act of the play: he attempts to kill the Player. But this final attempt to act out of character, and thus take on another character whose end would perhaps be different, necessarily fails. Within a life, within a play, there is space for play, but the end is set before we begin: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends. Rough-hew them how we will." (*Hamlet*, V.2.10) In acknowledging this, in knowing that they must and will fulfill the deaths planned for them, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern must accept their identities as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*; there can be no doubt as to who they are. If we, the audience, acknowledge our mortality, then we begin to know what it is to be man, and that what freedom we may have must be worked out within the parameters of this acknowledgement, not in ignorance of or denial of them.

The identity of man is defined by his mortality; the more profoundly one accepts the knowledge of one's finitude, the personal actuality of death, the fuller is one's identity, the more fully human one becomes. Without death, man is amorphous and uncertain; within death, man must take on character, feeling, and meaning. This is the dramatic outburst of Act III; it is the underlying assertion of the entire play.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's discovery of their Fate not only creates a new self-image for them, but deeply alters the way in which the audience can respond to them. The specific knowledge of the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern means that they will "disappear," and we cannot ignore that condition or respond to it coldly. We must feel something at that loss of presence, we must feel something at their loss of hope; the anguish and terror which we feel at the loss of presence is precisely what we must feel personally about death. If Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have to die, so do we. Less obviously, and more to Stoppard's particular purpose, if, in a world where other probabilities are radically altered, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot alter their ends, we in our ordinary worlds can do no more. The entire thrust of Tom Stoppard's strategy has been to make this understanding whole, profound and real for his audience, by capturing us in a world strange enough that hope and immortality seemed viable, only to reveal this world as no different from our own and thus unable to contain either hope or immortality. We are forced to acknowledge the way we wish to see ourselves and our world, and to acknowledge the final absurdity of that desire.

Whether or not this strategy works becomes the problem of the director, actors and designers who produce *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. To realize Stoppard's strategic conception, or that of any playwright, the director and his company should go much further than I have here before commencing to translate that strategy into

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theatrical terms of casting, movement, voice, images, sounds, lighting, make-up, etc. The basic outline of strategy must be detailed in every line of the play. This may seem obvious to many directors; I wonder, however, if the slighting of this approach to a script is not the cause of many of the disappointments which occur in simply reading a play or in moving a play from page to stage. How often have performances occurred where playwrights decry the production because it has not "been true" to their script or where, despite an excellent cast, appropriate set design, and the assertion of central themes, the audience remains unmoved in any direction? These are rhetorical questions, of course, because such failures do occur and most frequently, I think, when working with modern dramas in which strategy is often oblique or complex or simply new and yet where directors—because the material is modern—sometimes take for granted that the theme will "strike home."

With a few exceptions, plays are constructed to be expressed by actors to living audiences. To analyze a play, therefore, through the traditional paths of literary criticism and then to seek out theatrical metaphors for literary discoveries is to ignore until too late the essential existence of an audience. If we wait until opening night to acknowledge an audience, we are not truly acknowledging that audience at all. This is not to say that the only value in a production lies in its success with an audience, but certainly failure to perceive the strategy of a play is a failure to understand the dialectical function of drama.

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ADDITIONAL TOPICS FOR WRITING

These suggestions for paper assignments supplement the list of topics in the text on pages 1278-1280.

Topics for Brief Papers (250-500 words)

1. Cast the principal parts of some play you have read, selecting actors who are currently familiar from films or television. Justify the rightness of each of your casting assignments by referring not only to the actor's characteristics, but also to the text of the play itself.
2. How can The Dumb Waiter (or The Zoo Story) be called tragic-comedy?
3. Try to imagine a conclusion for a play completely different from the one the playwright gave it: The Glass Menagerie, for

1267-1280 (text pages)

instance, with a happy, Neil Simonized ending, or a version of "The Marriage Proposal" in which Lomov and Natalia remain single. Why would the play be the worse for it?

4. For students especially interested in television: select a play you have read that you believe would lend itself particularly well to the medium of television. Discuss how you would go about adapting it. What changes, if any, would you have to make? What problems would you encounter in producing it? Suggestion: A play whose action is confined to a small space will probably be most readily adaptable. ("The Workhouse Ward," Oedipus Rex, "The Marriage Proposal," Come Blow Your Horn, The Dumb Waiter, The Glass Menagerie, The Zoo Story, or The Real Inspector Hound.)

Topics for More Extended Papers (600-1,000 words)

1. In A Doll House, Othello, Mother Courage, or some other full-length play, discuss the relationships between the main character or characters and the minor characters, showing how the minor characters help illuminate the major ones.
2. Compare the role of the chorus in Oedipus Rex with that of either Tom, who comments on the action in The Glass Menagerie, or Birdboot and Moon in The Real Inspector Hound, who provide a kind of chorus commenting on the Muldoon Manor melodrama.
3. Compare and contrast two characters (or two situations) to be found within the same play: for instance, the characters of Alan and Buddy in Come Blow Your Horn; or Alf Doolittle, Dustman, and Alfred Doolittle, Gent.--Liza's father in Pygmalion, before and after his inheritance.
4. An assignment in creative writing: Write a scene of your own that might be added somewhere to a full-length play in the text. A play with an episodic structure, such as Mother Courage, might better admit such an addition than a tightly plotted play such as Come Blow Your Horn. Imitate as best you can the playwright's language and stage directions; keep the characters consistent with the rest of the play; try to carry on, if you can, the playwright's central theme. (None but your finest students should be encouraged to tackle this one.)

Topics for Long Papers (1,500 words or more)

1. The theme of reality versus the world of the stage in two plays of Tom Stoppard: The Real Inspector Hound and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.
2. Character symbols and allusions in two plays of Tennessee Williams: The Glass Menagerie and Night of the Iguana. (For some leads to offer students, see the discussion of Menagerie in this manual.)
3. For at least a month, keep a personal journal of your experience in watching drama on stage, movie screen, or television. Try to make use of whatever skills you have learned from reading and studying plays, and demonstrate how you have become a more critical and perceptive member of the audience.

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead essay

In his essay on "The Birth of Tragedy," Nietzsche argues that Hamlet's inability to act stems from his loss of illusion about the world. "Understanding kills action," he contends, "for in order to act we require the veil of illusion." Nietzsche believes Hamlet has "looked deeply into the true nature" of existence and understands that he can do nothing to "work any change in the eternal condition of things." Once this "truth and its terror" is seen, Nietzsche concludes, Hamlet becomes aware of "the ghastly absurdity of existence," and "nausea invades him." (Taking this view, the ghost in Hamlet becomes a fascinating figure—literally an illusion urging that Hamlet act meaningfully in a world whose meaning is crumbling around him.)

In any event, Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead plays ingeniously on this profound existential perception. Like Hamlet, Stoppard's reluctant heroes are called on to act meaningfully, but find they cannot, or at best can only blunder into action. And yet clearly they share none of the nauseated disillusionment Nietzsche ascribes to Hamlet. On the contrary, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seek throughout the play a reasonable, reliable basis for action—a starting point that would give structure and sense to their mission. They believe wholeheartedly in the illusion that they can make a difference by their action. Yet still they cannot act.

In a 3-4 page essay, I want you to discuss why Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot act effectively. How do they go about preparing for action? How are they constantly disappointed? In the absurd world of their play, who can act? and why? Turning Nietzsche around, how can understanding the meaninglessness of existence be the only basis for action?

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

Tom Stoppard

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Part 1

Introduction

Tom Stoppard

Tom Stoppard was born in Czechoslovakia in 1937, the younger son of Eugene Straussler, a doctor employed by a leading shoe company. Two years later the family moved to Singapore, and from there, in order to escape the Japanese invasion, Mrs Straussler and her sons were evacuated to India. Dr Straussler, who stayed behind, was killed. In 1946 Mrs Straussler married Kenneth Stoppard, who was serving with the British army in India. The Stoppards moved to England where Tom continued his education. From 1954 to 1963 he worked as a journalist, first for two West of England newspapers and then as a freelance.*

Although *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) was Stoppard's first major success, he had already tried his hand as a dramatist by writing plays for both television and radio; he has continued to write for both these media, often producing work of the highest quality. In 1966 he published a novel, *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*, which in its interests and imagery is clearly a close cousin to his early plays.

Stoppard is now firmly established, on the strength of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), *Jumpers* (1972), and *Travesties* (1974), as a dramatist of wit, inventiveness, and technical brilliance. All of these plays, as he has himself recognised, are broadly similar in structure and reveal the same concerns (with, for example, the physical nature of the stage, and with stage illusion). Rather than repeat these early successes indefinitely Stoppard has recently sought, taking the lead from his portrait of Lenin in *Travesties* and prompted by what he saw and heard during a visit to Czechoslovakia in 1977, to treat overtly political themes from the vantage-point of an expatriate East European dramatist sympathetic towards the sufferings of dissidents (including dissident dramatists) in Eastern Europe. *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1979), *Professional Foul* (1979), and *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979) are all, in their

*Stoppard's entry in *Who's Who* provides a basic outline of his career. Reference should also be made to: Ronald Hayman, *Tom Stoppard*, Heinemann Educational, London, 1977 (third edition, revised and expanded, 1979); Jim Hunter, *Tom Stoppard's Plays*, Faber & Faber, London, 1982; Felicia Hardison Londré, *Tom Stoppard*, Frederick Ungar, New York, 1981.

very different ways, examples of this new political explicitness. (The last-named is a pair of linked plays. The strange second half of the title is an allusion to the Czechoslovak playwright Pavel Kohout who, prevented by the authorities from staging plays in public, has adapted Shakespeare's *Macbeth* for performance in private homes. In English slang 'to be in cahoots' with someone is to be in collusion with him: thus Stoppard punningly suggests both the name of the dissident playwright and the atmosphere of secrecy and confidential co-operation in which he is forced to perform.) *Night and Day* (1978), though its setting is Africa, is similarly explicit in its political reference; in it Stoppard has drawn on his experience as a journalist in order to produce a serious discussion of press freedom. Despite its elaborate stage-set and its harking back to earlier work, * *Night and Day* is much closer to the standard 'well-made play' than anything else that he has yet written.

Stoppard, as will surprise no one who remembers his habit of grafting so much of his best work on to plays that are well established in the standard repertory, has also proved himself a spirited adaptor of foreign plays. *Undiscovered Country* (1979) is his version of a play by Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931), the Austrian dramatist and controversial man of letters. *On the Razzle* (1981) is a reworking of another Austrian play, this time by Johann Nestroy (1801–62).

Literary background: Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is the single greatest influence on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Without, at the very least, an elementary knowledge of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (c.1601) Stoppard's play cannot be understood.

In broadest outline *Hamlet* is the story of two brothers (one dead, the other living), of the woman who is wife to both, and of her son. Hamlet, king of Denmark, is murdered by his brother (Claudius) who marries his widow (Gertrude) and ascends his throne. Prince Hamlet, son of King Hamlet and Gertrude, is sickened by his mother's incest. (The marriage of a woman to her deceased husband's brother was considered to be incestuous in Shakespeare's England.) His father's ghost informs Hamlet of the murder and commands him to exact vengeance on Claudius without harming Gertrude. The rest of the play, the longest that Shakespeare wrote, is an intricate and in places obscure battle of wits between Claudius and Hamlet, in which Claudius tries to discover his nephew's intentions, while Hamlet seeks first to prove his uncle's

*In *Albert's Bridge* (1967) Albert sings a broken version of 'Night and Day', a popular song that provides both title and underlying symbolism for Stoppard's later play. Cross-references of this sort abound in Stoppard's work, as they do in the work of Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965) to whom Stoppard has acknowledged an indebtedness.

guilt and then to punish him at the right moment and in a fitting manner.

Something more detailed than a broad outline is required if we are to judge properly the use which Stoppard has made of Shakespeare's text. In the following summary of *Hamlet* italicisation indicates those parts of Shakespeare's play in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear.

Throughout the present work reference is made to, and quotations are taken from, the new Arden edition of *Hamlet*, edited by Harold Jenkins, Methuen, London and New York, 1982. The Arden edition is very full and goes beyond the needs of all save the most advanced students. Other, less elaborate editions include: *Hamlet*, edited by George Rylands, The New Clarendon Shakespeare, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1947 (and frequently reprinted); and the New Penguin Shakespeare edition, edited by T. J. B. Spencer and with an introduction by Anne Barton, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1980. Students who require step-by-step guidance of an elementary sort through the difficulties of Shakespeare's language may find helpful the New Swan Shakespeare (Advanced Series) edition, edited by Bernard Lott, Longman, London, 1969.

Act 1

Officers of the watch, together with Horatio, Hamlet's close friend, meet at midnight outside the castle of Elsinore to discuss a spectral appearance that has twice been witnessed. Horatio thinks the witnesses mistaken, but before discussion is far advanced the ghost, who looks like the late king, enters. He refuses to speak to them, and they leave in order to summon Hamlet. (I. 2) Claudius is seen despatching various affairs of state. He takes action to stave off a threatened invasion by Fortinbras, son of King Fortinbras of Norway who was killed in battle by Hamlet's father, in the year of young Hamlet's birth. Claudius greets Laertes, who is the son of Polonius, his chief minister, and then by means of hearty commonplaces seeks to reconcile Hamlet to his father's death, his uncle's rule, and his mother's remarriage. Claudius leaves satisfied that he has succeeded, though Hamlet's soliloquy which follows makes it clear to the audience that he has not. News is brought to Hamlet of the spectral appearance which he prepares to encounter at the next midnight. (I. 3) Laertes, who has come from France to attend Claudius's coronation, is about to return. He warns Ophelia, his sister, against placing trust in Hamlet's declarations of love, since, as heir to the throne, he is unlikely to be allowed to marry as he chooses. Polonius repeats the advice with all of the wordiness that is the mark of his character. (I. 4) Hamlet sees the ghost, follows it, and (I. 5) engages it in conversation. The ghost declares itself to be indeed the spirit of the late king, murdered by Claudius. It charges Hamlet to revenge the murder

without in any way harming Gertrude. Hamlet agrees, returns to his companions, whom he swears to secrecy, telling them that he may, in order to further his plans, assume a disguise of madness or eccentricity (the famous 'antic disposition' upon which so much discussion has centred).

Act 2

Ophelia tells her father of Hamlet's distraught behaviour. Polonius hurries off to tell Claudius. (II. 2) *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, childhood companions of the prince, have been hurriedly summoned by Claudius who asks them to discover the cause of Hamlet's strange conduct.* Polonius tells Claudius that Hamlet's madness has been caused by Ophelia's rejection of him and invites Claudius to eavesdrop on Hamlet's next conversation with her. All, save Polonius, leave the stage. Hamlet enters and has a riddling exchange with Polonius, which convinces the latter of the correctness of his diagnosis. He then leaves, and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter, in obedience to Claudius's request. In the conversation that follows Hamlet gets the better of them, learns that they have been sent for, and in return tells them nothing. They announce the imminent arrival of a troupe of travelling players just as Polonius hurries on stage to make the same announcement. Hamlet arranges for the players to include in their own performance a speech of his own composing. Once Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have left, Hamlet announces in soliloquy his plan of proving the king's guilt by means of a dramatic surprise.*

Act 3

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern report their lack of success to Claudius, who determines to spy on the next meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia. He exits in order to do so. Hamlet enters, speaks his most famous soliloquy ('To be, or not to be'), and, upon meeting Ophelia, speaks distractedly to her. Claudius, who overhears him, thinks that his madness is politically dangerous rather than the consequence of unrequited love, and decides to pack him off to England. (III. 2) Hamlet plans his exposure of Claudius: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are sent to fetch the players; Horatio is instructed to watch Claudius carefully. The court assembles to watch the play. Claudius's murder of King Hamlet is enacted in dumb-show and is then repeated in a spoken version. Seeing his crime thus represented, and realising that Hamlet is threatening him, Claudius hurriedly rushes off-stage, calling for lights. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are once more sent by Claudius to test Hamlet's madness and to plumb his intentions. Once again they fail. Polonius tells Hamlet that

his mother, Gertrude, wishes to speak to him. (III. 3) *Claudius tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they must accompany Hamlet on his voyage to England.* Polonius decides to hide behind a tapestry in Gertrude's apartments so that he can overhear her interview with Hamlet. Claudius, frightened and conscience-stricken, tries to pray. Hamlet sees him and decides to kill him, but is deterred by the thought that Claudius's soul will be saved from damnation if he is killed at prayer. For this reason Hamlet spares him. Claudius, unaware of the great danger that he has so narrowly escaped, declares that his attempt at prayer has been unsuccessful. (III. 4) Hamlet visits his mother. His conversation frightens her, and when she calls out, Polonius, hidden behind the tapestry, is mistaken by Hamlet for Claudius and is killed. Hamlet tries to convince his mother that her actions are wicked, and appears to be succeeding. At this point the ghost, visible only to Hamlet, enters. Hamlet's conversation with it is interpreted by Gertrude as evidence of his insanity. *The scene ends with Hamlet's declaring his distrust of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ('my two schoolfellows, / Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd') and his determination to watch them carefully on his voyage to England.*

Act 4

Gertrude tells Claudius of Hamlet's actions. *Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to recover Polonius's body and convey it to the chapel. (IV. 2) This they attempt to do, but fail. (IV. 3) They bring Hamlet to Claudius.* Hamlet tells him where Polonius's body is to be found, and is told that he is to voyage to England, attended by *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.* In an aside Claudius lets the audience know that he intends to have Hamlet killed in England. (IV. 4) Hamlet, accompanied by *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,* watches Fortinbras and his troops passing through Denmark on their way to attack Poland. He reflects on Fortinbras's ability to act in a crisis, superior to his own. (IV. 5) Ophelia is driven mad by Hamlet's treatment of her and by her father's death. Laertes returns to exact vengeance for Polonius's murder. (IV. 6) Hamlet sends a letter to Horatio, telling him of what happened during his voyage to England. The ship carrying him there was attacked by pirates with whom he has joined forces. (IV. 7) Claudius tells Laertes of the part that Hamlet has played in his father's death and Ophelia's madness. News being brought of Hamlet's unexpected return, Claudius and Laertes plot his death. Laertes is to challenge him to a fencing match but is to equip himself with a poisoned blade. Gertrude tells them both that the grief-stricken Ophelia has killed herself.

Act 5

Hamlet meets a gravedigger at his work, and exchanges jests with him. The corpse of Ophelia is brought in for burial. Hamlet and Laertes engage in an unseemly fight in her grave, an incident which stiffens Claudius's resolve to have Hamlet killed. (V. 2) Hamlet tells Horatio how, *suspecting that the sealed orders which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern carried bore him no good, he contrived to open the orders secretly, and change them so as to bring about the deaths of his former schoolfellows. He expresses no remorse over their deaths* ('Why, man, they did make love to this employment;/They are not near my conscience'). News is brought of Laertes's challenge, which Hamlet accepts. In order to ensure that Hamlet is killed he is given a blunted foil; Laertes is given one which has been dipped in poison; and Claudius poisons a cup of wine from which he expects Hamlet to drink. During the excitement of the contest Gertrude, ignorant of what has happened, drinks from the cup. Laertes wounds Hamlet, but is himself wounded by his own blade. He tells Hamlet of the death that awaits them both. Hamlet, at last stirred into action, kills Claudius. The play ends with the arrival of the ambassadors from England, anxious to tell Claudius that his orders (which they do not know that Hamlet has changed) are carried out, and that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. Fortinbras, who has accompanied the ambassadors onto the stage, views the general carnage, claims Denmark as his own, and orders that Hamlet be buried with full military honours.

A note on the text

During the period from May to October in 1964 Stoppard attended a course for young dramatists, held in Berlin and sponsored by the Ford Foundation. One of his contributions to the course was a one-act Shakespeare burlesque *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet King Lear* (a style of title modelled on American comedy films of the 1940s and 1950s). Though one of the course assessors thought the work 'a lot of academic twaddle',* Stoppard kept the piece by him. Extended and refined, with King Lear removed, and with a change of title, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* was performed at the Edinburgh Festival

*The assessor was Charles Marowitz who discusses the occasion in his *Confessions of a Counterfeit Critic*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1973, p. 123. Marowitz incorrectly places Stoppard's visit in the summer of 1965, some months after the first performance (in January 1965, also in Berlin) of Marowitz's own version of *Hamlet*. See also Charles Marowitz, *The Marowitz Shakespeare*, Marion Boyars, London, 1978; and Part 3 of these Notes.

Fringe in 1966.* The interest which it aroused there was so great that the National Theatre offered to stage it, and did so in April 1967 in a slightly modified version.

In May 1967 the London publishing house Faber & Faber published the play, in a text which reproduced in the main that of the National Theatre's April production. In 1968 the same publishers brought out a revised version of the play containing numerous minor changes and a different ending. This 1968 version, though strictly a separate edition, is frequently listed in library catalogues as if it were merely a reprint of the 1967 text.

The notes in the present volume follow the 1968 text (the only text with which readers today are likely to be acquainted or which they are likely to see performed) though from time to time reference is also made to the 1967 version.

*The Fringe is the semi-official adjunct to the annual Edinburgh Festival. See Alistair Moffat, *The Edinburgh Fringe*, Johnston & Bacon, London and Edinburgh, 1978, pp. 71-2 for a description of the first performance of Stoppard's play and for extracts (not always favourable) from the reviews.

Part 2

Summaries

of ROSENCRANTZ AND
GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

A general summary

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are instructed to report to Claudius, king of Denmark, by a messenger who rouses them from their beds by his fierce banging upon their shutters. On their way towards the court they meet a group of down-at-heel actors who are also travelling to the court where they hope to entertain the royal party.

Claudius tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they are to watch his nephew, the young Prince Hamlet, carefully and are to try to find out why he is behaving in a strange and threatening manner. This task they undertake with commendable persistency but without enthusiasm, skill, or success; events move rapidly and are beyond their control. The entertainment, rewritten for the actors at Hamlet's insistence, both outrages and frightens the king, who is further alarmed by Hamlet's killing of Polonius, one of the principal royal advisors. Claudius sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to bring Hamlet to him and decides that they should accompany Hamlet to England bearing sealed orders that will bring about his death.

In part Claudius's plans succeed. Hamlet is put on board ship with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as companions. They unseal their orders and learn that Hamlet is to be killed but do nothing to warn him. He, in his turn, secretly alters the wording of their orders so as to bring about their deaths. Then, during a pirate attack, Hamlet escapes, leaving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to travel alone to England and to their fated end.

Detailed summaries

Act 1 (pages 7-12)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sit spinning coins and betting on the result. Rosencrantz calls 'heads' more than ninety times, and each time wins the bet. Guildenstern is greatly puzzled by what is going on, while Rosencrantz is largely unconcerned and uncomprehending.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

sticks and all: (*colloquial*) sticks and everything else that is appropriate

Seventy-six love: Rosencrantz has won seventy-six times; Guildenstern has not won at all. *Love* (a corruption of French *l'oeuf*, 'the egg') is a term used in tennis scoring to indicate nought. Stoppard's rapid question-and-answer dialogue, which lends itself to analogies drawn from tennis, is derived from similar dialogue in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.^{*} Compare the following words in Beckett's play, spoken by Vladimir: 'Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you, once in a way?'

The law of probability: which would lead us to expect that, in an extended series of bets, the coins would be likely to come up tails as often as they do heads

examining the confines of the stage: this stage-direction, the significance of the wording of which would be lost in performance, nevertheless alerts the reader to one of the play's themes

six monkeys: Guildenstern, who fancies himself as a bit of a philosopher, alludes to a humorous illustration of the belief that the most complicated physical structures can be built up on the hit-or-miss principle provided that the principle is allowed to operate over vast spans of time. If six monkeys are seated in front of six typewriters they will eventually, by a merely random process of pressing keys, produce a text identical to that contained in the complete works of Shakespeare. Vast spans of time may be required because the monkeys will also produce many millions of millions of copies that will differ, sometimes massively and sometimes minutely, from the text of Shakespeare's works

Game?: Rosencrantz asks: 'Have I won the game?'. Guildenstern interprets him as asking: 'Were the monkeys game [that is, sexually willing]?'

rewarding speculation, in either sense: 'speculation' means (a) an interesting line of thought, and (b) a financially profitable deal

law of diminishing returns: a law which states that the first item that makes good a lack is more welcome than the second, the second more welcome than the third,

^{*}Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin (1906) but has for many years lived in Paris. He writes with equal distinction in both French and English. *En attendant Godot* (1952), translated into English by Beckett himself, is a major influence upon *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. See Part 4 of these Notes, pp. 55-6.

and so on. Thus, when one is thirsty, the first glass of water is more welcome than the tenth, and the hundredth is not welcome at all

You spun them yourself: Rosencrantz seeks to counter a charge of unfair play. It is not the possibility of being cheated, however, that is pressing upon Guildenstern's mind

Is that what you imagine?: Rosencrantz uses the word 'imagine' loosely; his 'I imagine' equals 'I suppose'. Guildenstern, worried by their descent into a world in which the law of probability no longer operates, accuses him of a more serious lack of imagination.

I'm afraid—: Once again Rosencrantz uses an expression in a common, casual, not very intense way. Guildenstern takes it more seriously and admits that he is afraid

redistribution of wealth: because Guildenstern has had to hand over money eighty-nine times

essence of a man... unremembered past: deep down, unknown to himself, Guildenstern is willing his own losses as a punishment for sins that he can no longer remember having committed

children of Israel: whom God, as related in the Bible, in Exodus, led safely out of Egypt, through the desert, and into the Promised Land

Lot's wife: who, in fleeing from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which God was destroying, looked back and was, as a punishment, turned into a pillar of salt (see the Bible, Genesis 19:26)

syllogism: a logical structure in which two propositions, known as premisses, lead to a conclusion. Thus, if all men are mortal (first, or major, premiss), and if Socrates is a man (second, or minor, premiss), we may safely conclude that Socrates is mortal

One, he had never known anything like it: reference to the 1967 edition suggests that 'had' is a misprint for 'has'. The 1967 reading preserves the sequence of tenses better

the first thing you remember: Guildenstern is asking about Rosencrantz's earliest memories. Rosencrantz misinterprets him as asking about those memories which first enter his head in response to the question. Rosencrantz then says, nonsensically, that he has forgotten the first thing which he remembers

I've forgotten the question: in the 1967 edition this exchange continued: 'GUIL: 'How long have you suffered from a bad memory?' ROS: 'I can't remember'

Act 1 (pages 12–16)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been 'sent for' by the king, though they do not know for what purpose. The sound of distant music is heard, and a small troupe of wandering actors appears.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

We were sent for: the first reference to Shakespeare's text, where (II. 2) Claudius greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with the words: 'The need we have to use you did provoke/Our hasty sending'

Syllogism the second: Guildenstern's syllogism is valid provided that we interpret his initial premiss as meaning that 'probability is a factor which *always* operates within natural forces whether or not it operates elsewhere' (that is, from its non-operation a conclusion follows, though none follows from its operation)

the probability of the first part: Guildenstern is asking Rosencrantz to assume that probably the laws of probability do not apply 'within un-, sub- or supernatural forces'. But in saying that *probably* they do not apply the assumption is being made that they do. However, if they *do* apply 'within un-, sub- or supernatural forces' then Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not under the influence of such forces since they now live in a world in which the laws of probability no longer apply. Much of the humour of the passage, which is more evident in performance than in detailed reading, comes from Rosencrantz's being quite unable to follow Guildenstern's contorted arguments

the fortuitous and the ordained: the individual coin is 'free' to fall on either its head or its tail; which way it falls is a matter of chance (is 'fortuitous'). But over an extended run coins will fall as often one way as the other, and this equitableness is 'ordained'. At this point there exist clear parallels between *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* and Stoppard's only, and very nearly contemporary, novel *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon* (1966). Whether things happen by chance or because they are part of a grand but as yet undiscovered design is a question which obsesses Moon, the novel's hero, who wants to know if 'there is something going on besides a lot of accidents'. He

plans (p. 139) to produce a wall-chart (a 'diagram of everything that counts') which will enable him 'to discover the grand design, find out if there is one, or if it's all random – if there's anything to it'. Both Moon and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern run up against the fact, which they never wholly recognise, of their being characters in someone else's fiction, condemned to make their way through a script over which they have no control and to discuss their freedom or lack of freedom in words which they did not choose and which they are not free to reject

the wind of a windless day: Stoppard is fond of reminding us that his characters are actors upon a stage. This stage is fixed within an enclosed building in which there is no wind, but which represents an outdoor location where the wind freely blows

the toenails on the other hand: the joke, which did not figure in the 1967 text, depends upon taking a colloquial expression literally. In *The Real Inspector Hound* the inspector's request that Lady Muldoon put herself completely in his hands is similarly misinterpreted ('Don't, Inspector', she replies, 'I love Albert') leaving the inspector to protest stiffly that she has not grasped his meaning. Jokes of this type have long been steady favourites in English comedy. In W. S. Gilbert's* *Foggerty's Fairy* (1889) there occurs the following very Stoppard-like piece of dialogue: 'TALBOT: Then there's the breakfast, and the carriages, and a new pair of trousers bought expressly for the occasion! MISS SPIFF: Don't distress yourself, I'll take them off your hands. TALBOT: They're not on my hands –'.

But then he called our names: these words are significant in terms of the overall development of the play; see below, p. 33, the note on the play's final stage-direction. 'That man, a foreigner, he woke us up' is Stoppard's sly allusion to himself

We better get on: (*colloquial*) we had better start moving. In the 1967 edition, in response to Rosencrantz's 'You might

*William Schwenck Gilbert (1836–1911), a prolific dramatist, is now principally remembered as the librettist of the Savoy operas, for which Arthur Seymour Sullivan (1842–1900) provided the music. Gilbert's Shakespearean burlesque *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (first staged 1891) is a possible influence upon Stoppard, and is discussed in Part 3 of these Notes.

well think', Guildenstern says: 'Without much conviction; we better get on'. The words also recall 'We're getting on', spoken by Hamm, a character in Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* (1958). There is a certain appropriateness about having Hamm's words recalled in a play based on *Hamlet* but indebted to Beckett

We are entitled to some direction: another of Stoppard's theatrical jokes.

In addition to the obvious meaning this is also a reference to the work of a theatrical director

A man breaking his journey . . . mistaken for a deer: Guildenstern means that an unusual experience, when confined to a single person, can easily be explained away. When the experience is confirmed by a second person, however, the first person accepts it as being both 'real' and unusual. With every subsequent confirmation it becomes less and less unusual. In *Jumpers* (1972), Stoppard's first full-length play after *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Dotty, the female lead, protests that seeing photographs of men walking about on the moon would be like seeing a unicorn on the television news-programmes. Neither the moon nor unicorns can have their former emotional impact after they have been made common by television or the press

Act 1 (pages 16–25)

The players, anxious to make money in hard times, offer the full use of the members of their company to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Eventually, after repeated misunderstandings, the offer is declined.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

we grow rusty: 'Do they grow rusty?', Hamlet asks Rosencrantz (*Hamlet* II.2.335) who, in Shakespeare's play, assures him that they do not

We can give you a tumble: the first of the Player's long series of sexual innuendoes

plirated from the Italian: Italian *novellas* (short novels) were a rich source of material for Elizabethan dramatists. *The Murder of Gonzago*, the play with which Hamlet tests Claudius's guilt, is, he assures Claudius, based upon a story that is 'extant, and writ in very choice Italian' (*Hamlet* III.2.256)

his name's Guildenstern, and I'm Rosencrantz: in *Hamlet* II.2.33-4 Claudius says: 'Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern.' Gertrude adds: 'Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz.' The changing of the order of the names is most probably an example of the Elizabethans' love of formal patterning in language or is perhaps Gertrude's way of registering that neither Rosencrantz nor Guildenstern has priority over the other. It has, however, been interpreted by some directors as evidence that Claudius addresses each by the other's name. It is this interpretation which Stoppard chooses here and elsewhere (especially pp. 27-8) to develop

I recognized you at once—: either Rosencrantz interrupts the Player before he has had time to finish his compliment, or the Player quickly adds 'as fellow artists' when Rosencrantz challenges him to make good his flattery. In either case the humour depends upon the fact that most sentences begin in ways which allow more than one conclusion to be reached

performance ... patronage: the Player is saying that the work of art (the play) requires someone to perform it, and someone to pay the performers. Both the players and those who pay them ('gentlemen') are thus 'fellow artists'

Don't clap ... old world: 'Don't clap too hard - it's a very old building' are words spoken to an unenthusiastic audience by Archie Rice, as a part of his comic routine, in *The Entertainer* (1957), a play by John Osborne (b. 1929). There is also a recollection of Miranda's speech in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611): 'O' wonder!/How many goodly creatures are there here!/How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,/That has such people in't!' (V.I.182)

transvestite melodrama: women were not allowed to appear upon the Elizabethan stage. Young boys, dressed in women's clothes, impersonated them

Getting warm, am I?: (a) 'Am I describing what you wish to see performed?' and (b) 'Am I becoming sexually titillating?'

A nest of children: in *Hamlet* II.2.336 Rosencrantz tells Hamlet that the travelling players have lost popularity to 'an eyrie of children, little eyases, that cry out ... these are now the fashion' ('eyrie' = nest; 'eyases' = young hawks). Shakespeare is alluding to a company of

young actors established at the Blackfriars' (indoor or 'private') theatre in London in 1600

There's one born: alluding to the proverbial saying: 'There's a fool born every minute'

stoop ... bent: words which indicate that the Player is offering Rosencrantz the sexual use of his company. 'Bent' is slang for 'homosexual'

I have influence yet: 'yet' means 'still'. The player takes it to mean 'but' and thinks it begins a new clause; hence his question. A similar joke occurs in *The Real Inspector Hound* where one character says, 'It's wonderful how you country people really know weather', only to receive the reply: 'Know whether what?'

Rape of the Sabine Women: Romulus, legendary founder of Rome, peopled his city by detaining in it by force the wives and daughters of the neighbouring Sabine tribe. This enforced detention became a popular subject in pictorial art, but what the Player is offering Guildenstern is clearly a very seedy presentation of the same. In view of the bawdy double-meanings that here abound 'uncut' is probably meant to suggest that Alfred is uncircumcised

taking either part: adopting either the active or the passive role in homosexual love-making

It could have been ... rabble of prostitutes: Guildenstern believes that it is fate, not chance, which is controlling their lives. He is looking for a portent, for some occurrence that will indicate to him what he is supposed to do. Of the fated and significant encounters that he had imagined this meeting with the sordid players is the least dignified, the least suggestive of a high course for him carved out by his controlling fate

trade: a cant term for (paid) homosexual activity

every exit being an entrance somewhere else: partly a sly allusion to the structure of Stoppard's play, and also the grossest of his play's homosexual innuendoes

The PLAYER spits ... from where he stands: in the 1967 edition the Player's disdain had been made vocal. After spitting at the coin he says: 'Leave it lying there. Perhaps when we come back this way we'll be that much cheaper'

we could create a dramatic precedent here: once again Stoppard plays around with his audience's awareness of itself as an audience and of the play as play (Guildenstern is

directed to look 'at the audience'). Guildenstern says that Alfred and he could commit an indecency never before seen upon the English stage, and could thus regard themselves as innovators

Matri, patri . . . : matricide, patricide (or parricide) . . . , the killing of a mother, father, brother, sister, and wife

vice versa: gods aspiring to maidenheads. There is also a pun on 'vice'

we'll let you know: the established phrase used in casting sessions as a tactful indication that the applicant has been unsuccessful. Guildenstern thus indicates, using appropriate theatre language, that he does not require Alfred's services

Act 1 (pages 26–39)

As the players are about to perform their play they are interrupted by the first of the extended extracts from *Hamlet*. Claudius, after displaying uncertainty as to which of them is which, sets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the task of finding the cause of Hamlet's increasingly strange behaviour. Once left alone the two plan how they are to proceed (without ever proceeding). To help them in their task they play a trial game of questions and answers, but manage only to confuse themselves further. Hamlet enters and, as Act 1 ends, they are about to try out their non-existent skills on him.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

OPHELIA runs on . . . followed by HAMLET: the 1967 text added the following: 'Note: The resemblance between HAMLET and the PLAYER is superficial but noticeable'

OPHELIA has been sewing: this stage-direction closely paraphrases Ophelia's speech (*Hamlet* II.1). The rest of this section should be compared with *Hamlet* II.2

We'll soon be home and high: this, and the nonsense which follows, is intended to indicate that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are nearing hysteria. Rosencrantz, in particular, is upset by Claudius's inability to remember his name

why don't you make up your mind: Rosencrantz is prepared to be known as either Rosencrantz or Guildenstern, provided that he is thereafter known consistently by whichever name is chosen

Nor did we come all this way for a christening: a half-reference to 'The Journey of the Magi' (1927) by T. S. Eliot (1888–1965): 'were we led all that way for/Birth or

Death? There was a Birth, certainly,/We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,/But had thought they were different'. (The Magi were the wise men who visited the Christ-child in the stable at Bethlehem. Christening, or baptism, is the first and greatest of the Christian initiation ceremonies, at which – though it is not an essential part of the service – candidates are formally given Christian names.) That Stoppard has Eliot's poem in mind is made clearer a few lines further on when Guildenstern mentions both birth and death.

There is also a possible allusion to *The Importance of Being Earnest* (first performed in 1895) by Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) in which much of the comedy involves changes of characters' names and in which the two male leads independently arrange to be christened Ernest. There are extended allusions to Wilde's play in *Travesties*.

At least we are presented with alternatives: each knows that he is *either* Rosencrantz *or* Guildenstern

Give us this day our daily mask: a reference to one of the petitions of the Our Father ('Give us this day our daily bread'), the prayer taught by Christ to his disciples (see the Bible, Matthew 6 and Luke 11). The theme of disguise is prominent in *Hamlet*

a dying fall: another Shakespeare allusion: 'That strain again! it had a dying fall' (*Twelfth Night* I.1.4). Compare also T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1917): 'I know the voices dying with a dying fall/Beneath the music from a farther room'

Elephantine: like an elephant, an animal that traditionally never forgets. It is not in the length of Claudius's memory but in what it will prompt him to do that Rosencrantz is interested

a royal retainer: a royal retainer is (a) a paid servant to a king, or (b) the fee paid to such a servant in order to secure his services

A short, blunt human pyramid: in *Jumpers* Stoppard makes his actor-acrobats construct a human pyramid

I feel like a spectator: Stoppard's playing around with our usual notion of theatre (so that, for instance, a theatre becomes a building into which audiences go to be watched by actors) is taken much further in *The Real Inspector Hound*, in which we watch two people watching a

- play. They are seated on the opposite side of the stage from us, as though we were backstage
- We could play at questions:** play a game in which the players are allowed to ask each other only questions, and in which they are penalised for statements, exclamations, repetitions, etc. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is a play about playing; about actors playing parts, and people playing games, and about people who are the playthings of forces which they do not understand one, nil. The scoring system is loosely based upon that used in lawn tennis
- One-love:**
- Whose serve?:** 'to serve' is to propel the ball into your opponent's part of the court at the start of each unit of play in tennis, table-tennis, and related games
- Game point:** Guildenstern means that whoever scores the next point wins the game
- non sequiturs:** (*Latin*, it does not follow) a stage in an argument, or the conclusion to one, that is not deducible from the preceding stage or stages is known as a *non sequitur*
- Match point to me:** the match consists of three games, each containing three points. The first player to reach three points wins the game; the first to reach two games wins the match
- How should I begin?:** J. Alfred Prufrock, in T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' asks: 'And should I then presume?/And how should I begin?'. Eliot's poem contains many allusions to *Hamlet*
- Statement:** failing to understand the play-acting which Guildenstern is suggesting that they undertake, Rosencrantz reverts to the game that they were playing earlier
- He slipped in:** Shakespeare's Hamlet accuses Claudius of having 'popp'd in between th'election and my hopes' (V.2.65), by which he means that Claudius has ascended the Danish throne in defiance of approved constitutional procedures and has thus deprived Hamlet of a position that rightfully belongs to him. Stoppard's Rosencrantz interprets 'slipped in' bawdily
- Would you go so far?:** Rosencrantz asks: 'Would you go so far as to suggest that your mother is guilty of incest and adultery?' Guildenstern, in the character of Hamlet, assumes that the question is: 'Would you go so far as to commit incest and adultery?'

Good lads, how do you both?: once again *Hamlet* II.2 should be consulted. In the 1967 text Stoppard indicated that the scene should end 'overtaken by rising music and fading light'

Act 2 (pages 40–45)

The attempt to discover the secret of Hamlet's melancholy has proved unsuccessful.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

- S'blood:** an oath; an abbreviated form of 'By Christ's blood'
- flourish:** fanfare
- Gentlemen:** that is, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet tells them that they are welcome and then offers to shake hands with them
- The appurtenance . . . than yours:** Hamlet says that there are actions ('fashion and ceremony') appointed by good manners to accompany a spoken welcome. He observes these customary actions, by shaking hands with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, so as to assure them that they are not less welcome than the players, whom he intends to greet enthusiastically in this manner
- in this garb:**
- hawk from a handsaw:** perhaps Hamlet is claiming he can distinguish between two birds (handsaw = heronshaw, or heron) or between two tradesmen's tools (hawk = a square board used by plasterers) or perhaps his words are to be taken as they stand as a mark of his feigned madness. Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no clearer understanding of Hamlet's precise meaning than have modern commentators
- swaddling clouts:** clothes in which babies were tightly wrapped
- Roscus:** Quintus Roscius Gallus (d.62 BC) was the most famous comic actor in ancient Rome
- close to the chest:** an image from card-play. By holding his cards close to his chest a player lessens the chances of their being overseen
- all down the line:** once again the imagery is taken from tennis, in which a ball struck into the opponent's court so as to land as close as possible to the boundary line is likely to prove a winning shot
- on the wrong foot:** In tennis parlance, to catch one's opponent on the wrong foot is to have him prepared to move in the wrong direction and unprepared in consequence to

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move to where the ball lands. Tennis (though not in its modern form) was a well-liked game among Elizabethan courtiers, but it is its highly formalised character, dependent on rules and conventions, that appeals to Stoppard

He murdered us: a humorous exaggeration of a kind much used in modern sports reporting, but ironical in view of what the audience knows is going to happen

Pragmatism: reliance upon experience and practical possibility rather than upon principles worked out in advance of, and used in order to decide upon, action

He studies the floor: this stage-direction is more strictly such than most, since it directs the audience's attention to the stage. Taken together with the earlier reference to the draught it serves to emphasise that though Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's position is unlocalised ('You seem to have no conception of where we stand') they are all the time on the stage of a public theatre

a shambles: a mess; originally a place where animals were butchered

Act 2 (pages 45–53)

Hamlet orders the players to prepare a performance of 'The Murder of Gonzago' into which a speech of his own composing will be inserted. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern renew their acquaintance with the players, who are hurt and verigeful after their last encounter.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

Follow that lord: that is, Polonius

So you've caught up: Guildenstern means that the Player has at last reached the court. (By contrast, such is the nature of Stoppard's stage illusion, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have reached it without having had to travel.) The Player's cold reply seems to indicate that he interprets Guildenstern's words as meaning: 'So you've got even with us (for not attending to your previous performance)'

every gesture, every pose: the reading 'every prose', found in some copies, is a misprint

peeped through his fingers: in the players' 'transvestite melodrama' (p. 17) Rosalinda is represented by a male actor: hence 'peeped through *his* fingers'

obscene: that is 'obscene' which takes place off-stage. The term derives from the ancient Greek theatre in which most action was merely reported as having happened elsewhere

with a vengeance: as a figure of speech this means, roughly, 'and no mistake!'. Guildenstern's remark that it is an idiomatic expression, not one to be taken literally, confirms the interpretation of 'So you've caught up' given above

Classical: the Player means, ostensibly, that Hamlet likes serious, established drama. Rosencrantz, carrying on the camp badinage which characterised his earlier conversations with the Player, assumes him to mean that Hamlet shares the sexual preferences of the peoples of the ancient (Classical) world. Presumably he has the Greeks in mind

losing your heads: (a) making fools of yourselves, and (b) being executed

We don't know how to act: one of the points in the play in which a word ('act') has reference both to the world of the theatre and to the world outside the theatre

nothing . . . honoured: Anderson, the Professor of Ethics in *Professional Foul* (1977) – a much more obviously serious play than *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* – holds to a point of view markedly similar to that put forward by the Player. Human rights, Anderson argues, are fictions which we are obliged to treat as if they were truths

he's in love with his daughter: Stoppard is here revelling in the notorious difficulties to which a careless use of pronouns can plunge the English speaker. The Player means that Polonius thinks that Hamlet is in love with Polonius's daughter. Rosencrantz thinks that he means that Hamlet is in love with Hamlet's daughter. He then misinterprets Guildenstern's explanation, and so supposes that Polonius is in love with Ophelia

a show-stopper: another verbal tease. A 'show-stopper' is a song, or a dance-routine, or a piece of comic business that is so successful that the performance is halted to allow for applause. But it is not only success that stops shows. *Jumpers*, Stoppard's first full-length play after *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, begins with a show-stopping routine of the latter sort

“Hey you, whatsyername! . . . there!”: Rosencrantz’s words are likely to set up two echoes in an audience’s mind: (a) of the messenger, banging upon the shutters and calling out their names, and (b) of Christ’s words to the dead Lazarus: ‘he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth’ (see the Bible, John 11: 43–4)

“Saul of Tarsus yet!”: all early Christians were Jews. Stoppard mimics conventionally Jewish turns of phrase – ‘yet’, ‘Tarsus-Schmarsus’, ‘already’. Compare *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*: ‘Jackson-schmackson, thought Moon who sometimes wanted to be a Jew but had only the most superficial understanding of how to go about it’ (p. 28). Saul of Tarsus was known as Paul after his conversion to Christianity (see the Bible, Acts 13: 9)

A Christian, a Moslem and a Jew: this joke follows on from the reference to Saul of Tarsus, one of the most famous of all religious converts. In the joke the Moslem is a Jew who has been converted to Islam. His Jewish questioner calls him by his pre-conversion name. The Moslem then refers to his friend, formerly a Moslem but now a convert to Christianity, by his pre-conversion name. A similar, and similarly lame, joke occurs in *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*: “‘What’s your name, O’Hara, your Christian name?’/“Abendigo.”/“You’re a convert?”/“My whole life I am a convert.”” (p. 50)

Act 2 (pages 54–9)

Claudius is informed of the players’ arrival and of Hamlet’s interest in their work. He plots to eavesdrop on his nephew’s conversations with Ophelia. While the players are rehearsing their play we hear of the result of Claudius’s spying and of his determination to send Hamlet to England.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

o’erraught: overlook
closely: privately (that is, without making any public fuss)
Affront: meet (compare ‘confront’) – not ‘offend’ or ‘assault’
Why can’t we go by them?: another reference to the conventions of the stage. The acting area does not move, nor do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ever leave it. We

agree to accept that this fixed area represents first one place, then another. If we did not do so and supposed instead, as some classical theorists have insisted that we should, that the stage represents the same piece of countryside or court throughout the play, the effect would be one of everybody’s coming to visit Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and of an unnatural concentration of activity within one small area

making his quietus: the reference is to Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy (‘To be, or not to be’) in which he contemplates suicide (*Hamlet* III.1.56ff. especially l. 75)

No point in looking . . . whites of his eyes: a confusion of two sayings: (a) ‘Never look a gift horse in the mouth’ and (b) ‘Don’t shoot until you see the whites of his eyes’. The first saying instructs the recipient of a gift not to question its value: it would be proper to assess (by inspecting its teeth) the age of a horse which you were thinking of buying but improper to do so if the horse were a gift. The second saying means ‘Save your ammunition until you are sure of your target’, but can also be used metaphorically

orisons: prayers

The PLAYER lifts . . . leaps away: Rosencrantz assumes that once again the player is standing on his dropped coin

I put my foot down: in part a literal description of what the player has done, but also a colloquial phrase meaning ‘I asserted my authority’

When Queens . . . passed down in the blood: a more forthright version of the same joke appears in *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*, p. 67: ‘the Malquists in common with other families of equal style and breeding excrete and procreate by a cerebral process the secret of which is passed down in the blood’

avuncular: having the (pleasant) characteristics of an uncle

Act 2 (pages 59–72)

The players continue their rehearsal, watched by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who do not understand that their own deaths are being shown to them. Claudius enters and sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in search of Hamlet, who has murdered Polonius. After yet another inconclusive meeting with Hamlet they learn that they are to accompany him to England.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

- You're not getting across!:** if the players were 'getting across' (making their point) Guildenstern would know what he was supposed to think
- chaos on the night:** a comic reversal of the theatrical slogan: 'It'll be all right on the night'
- "just desserts" and "tragic irony":** the players specialise in death scenes. There are plenty of these, including scenes in which the wicked get their just deserts ('desserts' is a misprint) and scenes in which the innocent die as a result of cruel ironies of circumstance
- The bad end unhappily . . . what tragedy means:** in the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde's (1854–1900) *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) Miss Prism describes her only novel as one in which 'the good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means'
- a beginning, middle and end:** according to the Greek philosopher and literary critic Aristotle (384–322bc) 'a tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself . . . which has beginning, middle, and end' (*De Poetica*, Chapter VII). Birdboot, the drama critic in Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*, says of the play that he is reviewing that 'it has a beginning, a middle and I have no doubt it will prove to have an end'
- I'd prefer art to mirror life:** compare Hamlet's speech to the players: 'O'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature' (*Hamlet* III.2.20ff.)
- Lucianus:** Lucianus is the name of the character in *The Murder of Gonzago* whose murder of his uncle conveys to Claudius Hamlet's desire to threaten him
- arras:** a tapestry wall-hanging, used as decoration and also to exclude draughts
- oedipal embrace:** Oedipus, king of Thebes, was, according to ancient legend, separated from his parents as a young child. When he grew up, without being aware of who they were he killed his father and married his mother. The 'Oedipus complex' is the name given by the Viennese psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) to the unconscious male desire to repeat the crimes of Oedipus. One of Freud's disciples, Ernest Jones (1879–1958), was of the opinion that

- Shakespeare's Hamlet evidenced the complex, and thus both hated and envied Claudius (who had done what he had himself secretly wished to do)
- hoist by their own petard:** blown up by their own bomb. Hamlet uses the phrase (III.4.202ff.) to refer to his intention to destroy Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by altering the letter which they are carrying to the English king
- A slaughterhouse:** a word that recalls 'shambles' (p. 44)
- eight corpses:** as is pointed out in the final note in the present section (see p. 33) the 1967 version of the play has a different ending. In that version the two ambassadors list the names of the eight people who have been killed, thus recalling this line
- the whisper in their skulls:** Stoppard here recalls the opening lines of T. S. Eliot's 'Whispers of Immortality': 'Webster was much possessed by death/And saw the skull beneath the skin'. John Webster (?1580–?1625) was a dramatist noted for his scenes of death, sensuality, and violence
- a sheep – or a lamb:** a reference to the proverb: 'as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb' (meaning that, where penalties do not discriminate between a greater and a lesser offence, one might as well be guilty of the greater)
- to suspend one's disbelief:** the English poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) wrote, in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), of 'that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith'. His words, when applied to the drama, suggest that spectators are willing, while a performance lasts, to suspend (but not to dispense with) their knowledge that what is taking place on stage is an acted representation of reality rather than reality itself. Stoppard's Player complains that, when his actor really died, the spectators thought that he was merely acting
- Friends both . . . haste in this:** this speech (compare *Hamlet*. IV.1.32–7) in which Claudius gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a genuine task to do was added by Stoppard at the request of Laurence Olivier, director of the National Theatre
- ROS's trousers slide slowly down:** Stoppard, with characteristic diffidence, has described *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as being 'slightly literate music-hall perhaps' (Hayman, *Tom Stoppard* (1978), p. 5). The vaudeville

element in this comic routine is obvious: the literary element is derived from Samuel Beckett. At the end of *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon try to work out how they may best hang themselves. Estragon removes the rope which serves him as a belt, and his trousers fall down. Thus the end of the play reveals man's own latter end. Stoppard refers to Beckett by name ('Wham, bam, thank you Sam') at the close of *Jumpers*. He also refers to 'the clown's indignity of fallen trousers' in *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon* (p. 145)

they've done with us: 'they've done with us' = 'they have finished with us', but is misinterpreted by Guildenstern who asks: 'What have they done with us?'

Act 3 (pages 73-96)

It is dark. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, aboard ship bound for England, open Claudius's letter to the English king and discover from it that Hamlet is to be killed. When they fall asleep Hamlet replaces Claudius's letter with one of his own, sentencing its bearers to death. Next morning Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find that the players, fearing the displeasure of Claudius, have stowed away. Pirates attack. Everybody hides, and Hamlet, under cover of confusion, makes his escape, leaving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern once again unsure of how to proceed. The audience, however, knows that ahead of them lies England and death. The play ends with the reports of the ambassadors from England, delivered as the stage slowly darkens.

NOTES AND GLOSSARY:

Are you there? Well, that's cleared that up: the mistakes that are made when one is unable to see are humorously (and appropriately) exploited in Stoppard's radio play *Artist Descending a Staircase* (broadcast in 1972) in which it is the radio audience which is kept in the dark

In out here?: 'somebody might come in' suggests the stage of an enclosed theatre (where the actors who play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern really are); 'out here' suggests the open air and the open sea (where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are supposed to be). 'In out here?' combines both suggestions

Nice bit of planking: Rosencrantz draws attention to the wooden stage which represents the ship's deck

game of tag: a children's game in which one child tries to touch others who run away from him. Once a child has been touched (or tagged) it is his turn to act as pursuer

Other side, I think: Guildenstern wants Rosencrantz to vomit over the side of the boat that is not into the wind. Later (p. 88) Hamlet spits into the wind, with predictable results

in peril on the sea: words taken from the refrain to the hymn 'Eternal Father, strong to save' by William Whiting (1825-78)

cue: words or actions which indicate to an actor that it is his turn to enter onstage or to begin speaking

Will he be there?: Rosencrantz thinks that the king mentioned by Guildenstern is Claudius. Guildenstern corrects him

we're finished: dramatic irony. The audience knows that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to be killed

You've got it: Guildenstern means: 'You have understood the situation'. Rosencrantz once again misunderstands: hence the confusion which follows

cartographers: map-makers

clutching at straws: to keep afloat by clutching at a straw is a proverbial illustration of desperate measures taken in extremity. Because sun-baked bricks were made by mixing mud and chopped straw Rosencrantz's mind, which has itself been clutching at straws throughout the play, moves to a still more absurd version of the proverb. The same joke appears in *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon* (p. 52) where Moon thinks: 'I clutch at straws but what good's a brick to a drowning man?'

As Socrates . . . put it: Socrates (469-399bc), an ancient Greek teacher and philosopher, was sentenced to death for, allegedly, corrupting the intellects, and hence the morals, of the young. In the time before his sentence was carried out he meditated much upon his own impending death and upon death in general, though he seems never to have reached the conclusion which Guildenstern ascribes to him. In his *Apology*, written by his disciple Plato (c.427-348bc), Socrates argues that 'we shall see that there is great reason to hope that death is good . . . either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or . . . there

is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another'

ventages: stops: Guildenstern is quoting Hamlet's speech (*Hamlet* III.2.350ff.)

All in the same boat: this colloquial expression which is literally true here is a typical Stoppard witticism

Are we all right for England?: Rosencrantz means: 'Are we on the right course for England?' The Player interprets him as meaning: 'Are we going to be acceptable in England?'

a second husband: the Player's allusion is to words spoken in *Hamlet* (but not recorded in Stoppard's play) by the player-queen: 'In second husband let me be accurst;/None wed the second but who kill'd the first . . . A second time I kill my husband dead,/When second husband kisses me in bed' (III.2.174ff.)

We can do what we like: Shakespeare, into whose play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are so firmly locked, has no scene set on board the ship carrying Hamlet to England. Thus, if we grant Stoppard's basic conceit, we may suppose that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are indeed free to do and to say what they will, unconstrained by the need to follow details of Shakespeare's play. Of course they are also, but without their knowing, locked with equal firmness into Stoppard's text

delusions of imprisonment: compare: 'Denmark's a prison' (*Hamlet* II.2.244)

camels, chameleons: compare *Hamlet* III.2.370ff.

amnesia: loss of memory

paranoia: an obsessive fear that one is being plotted against or otherwise persecuted

myopia: short-sightedness

at his age: hints thrown out by Shakespeare suggest that Hamlet is thirty years old

talking to himself: one of the few places in which W. S. Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (see footnote above, p. 16, and see also Part 3 of the present Notes) may have influenced a detail in Stoppard's text. In Gilbert's burlesque it is Hamlet's habit of soliloquising that especially distresses Gertrude

the PIRATES attack: compare *Hamlet* IV.6.10ff.

not a pick up: Stoppard's direction indicates that Rosencrantz's 'Dead?' is not an attempt at supplying the word that

the Player is after. Rosencrantz merely wants to ask whether Hamlet is dead

Not from his mouth . . . truly deliver: in the 1967 edition this speech is printed, following the received text of *Hamlet*, as blank verse

Polack: Polish

overtaken by dark and music: the original ending, as represented by the 1967 text, is different; it was altered during rehearsals at the National Theatre. Instead of the stage being darkened Stoppard followed Shakespeare's text through to its conclusion. Then he added the following scene. The two ambassadors remain, alone, on stage, counting the corpses mentally, and naming them (Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet, Laertes, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Polonius and Ophelia). Offstage there is a sound, and a voice calls out, indistinctly, two names. In response to this summons, deliberately reminiscent of that which aroused Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the ambassadors leave to find out what is going on. The music that we associate with the players is faintly heard, the house lights come up, and the play ends with an empty, fully lit stage.

Part 3

Commentary

THERE ARE FOUR WAYS of getting to know a play well: by seeing it in performance; by discussing it with friends (and, sometimes better still, with those who are not your friends); by judging it in the light of other, related, plays; and by means of a close line-by-line inspection of its text. Neither performance nor the sort of discussion here envisaged is possible in print. What follows is comparison and analysis.

Travestying Shakespeare

Shakespeare's plays, performed straight or in versions adapted to meet a director's vision of them, dominate the modern stage, are the backbone of commercial, subsidised, and experimental theatre alike, and have an honoured place in television, on the radio, and in the cinema.

The many ways in which Shakespeare is brought to the attention of modern audiences are bewildering. There are Shakespearean ballets and contemporary-dance versions; Shakespearean operas and musicals; productions in all the major languages, including some which 'translate' his words into modern English; productions in mime (for everyone) and in sign-language (for those who cannot hear); productions using puppets. His plays are performed by vast companies in theatres which are relics of the Victorian and Edwardian periods, and by scratch companies on makeshift platforms in schoolrooms, prisons, or outside in the rain. Some productions are surpassingly dull, others fill the stage with character, and action; and colour, but all testify to the central place which Shakespeare holds upon the Western stage.

This unquestioning acceptance of Shakespeare's immense worth, so that any attempt upon his work, however routine or ill-conceived, is assumed to be safe box-office, is not something about which those really interested in the theatre can be entirely happy, for it may simply be evidence of an uncreative aesthetic conservatism (of liking blindly what one has been told is good). But it is a fact, and one which some modern directors and playwrights have exploited in order to bring into prominence their own political or social points of view. Edward Bond's *Bingo: Scenes of Money and Death* (1974) deliberately sought to anger playgoers by its portrayal of a Shakespeare who glimpses in his plays a freer, better order of living, but who in his dealings with the people around him suppresses these insights and reverts to the cruelties of

conduct that were standard and acceptable in his day.* Howard Brenton in *Thirteenth Night*, a title which is itself a Shakespearean allusion, has reworked *Macbeth* almost but not quite beyond recognition until it becomes a commentary on the state of politics, and in particular on the future of socialism, in twentieth-century Britain.†

Such explicitly political revamping of Shakespeare is likely to be modern, but it is wrong to suppose that thoroughgoing adaptations of his work are exclusively of recent origin. One special sort, the 'burlesque' or affectionate parody, was especially popular in the Victorian period when it helped to counter without in any way destroying the otherwise excessive veneration in which Shakespeare's name was held.‡ (Nor was Shakespeare alone in being treated in this way; Queen Victoria herself was the subject of humorous, and not always affectionate, music hall songs.) Such burlesques assume as a matter of course that Shakespeare's text is at least moderately well known. Because of its immense fame *Hamlet* attracted a larger than usual number of comic adaptations, many of which are listed, after serious editions of the play, in the catalogue of the British Library under the heading 'Travesties' (itself, surely not by coincidence, the title of one of Stoppard's later plays).

A Victorian burlesque *Hamlet*

The first of the travesties listed in the British Library catalogue, though a very late example of *Hamlet* burlesque, is W. S. Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, the only burlesque version of *Hamlet* with which Stoppard is likely to have been acquainted.** There is not much, however, that suggests any great spread or depth of influence. Gilbert's piece is relentlessly trivial and its distortion of Shakespeare's plot is extreme: Stoppard, by way of contrast, leaves Shakespeare's plot intact. From Gilbert's version the intense emotional pressures that prompt *Hamlet* both to take action and to delay taking action are missing

*Edward Bond (b.1934) is also the author of *Lear* (1972), one of the most ambitious dramatic reworkings of a Shakespeare play yet undertaken.

†Howard Brenton (b.1942). His other plays include *The Churchill Play* (1974), *Epsom Downs* (1977), and *The Romans in Britain* (1980).

‡These burlesques, including Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, are best read in *Nineteenth Century Shakespeare Burlesques*, introduced by Stanley Wells, 5 volumes, Diploma Press, London, 1977. These volumes reprint thirty-three burlesques, ten of which are travesties of *Hamlet*.

***Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* first appeared in print in 1874 but was not staged until 1891. The most convenient modern text for those who cannot consult the 5-volume *Nineteenth Century Shakespeare Burlesques* is in *Plays by W. S. Gilbert*, ed. by George Rowell, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982.

entirely; his dark family troubles are swept humorously away. Claudius is Hamlet's father, Gertrude's husband, nobody's murderer, and the undisputed king of Denmark. His only fault is that he is a dramatist, and Hamlet's strangeness consists of an irritating habit of talking to himself at great length and with undue formality. Gertrude, wishing to reduce her son to serviceable prose, calls to her aid his boyhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, little realising that the former is Hamlet's rival for the hand of Ophelia, and is plotting his rival's downfall. His plan is to persuade Hamlet to perform a little known and grossly incompetent five-act tragedy, written by Claudius in his youth and so distasteful to him in his maturer years that he has pledged to have whoever revives it executed. The plan works and Hamlet is disgraced. But instead of being executed (the only thing which dies is Claudius's play) he is sent to England where, Ophelia explains to the court, men with his difficulties of temperament are usually held in the highest esteem. Thus, as is appropriate in a light entertainment staged to raise money for a good cause, everything ends happily.

In which respects, if any, has Gilbert influenced Stoppard? Despite its title, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* are not in the forefront of Gilbert's burlesque: the honour still belongs to Hamlet. And yet the title may well have suggested to Stoppard the possibility of moving peripheral characters to the centre of the stage while having *Hamlet's* more prominent characters wheel about them. Here and there, also, Gilbert has a Stoppard-like joke (Claudius ruefully admits that his play was a success only by virtue of its succeeding the play which preceded it) and once or twice there is the odd phrase or incident that may have lodged in Stoppard's mind. But the chief respect in which Gilbert's and Stoppard's pieces are similar, their heavy emphasis upon theatre and theatricality, may well reflect not the influence of the former upon the latter but rather their common origins in Shakespeare's play.

A modern collage *Hamlet*

Gilbert's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is affectionate parody: its being so is one of the things which it has in common with Stoppard's play. There is nothing which anyone would think affectionate about a much more recent Shakespeare travesty, Charles Marowitz's *Hamlet** (1965), a work which by a curious coincidence had, like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, its origins in Berlin in the middle 1960s (see above, 'A note on the text').

Marowitz's version cuts and shuffles Shakespeare's text, sometimes, for its own ironical purposes, shifting a speech from one character to

*The *Marowitz Shakespeare*, Marion Boyers, London, 1978, includes a text of Marowitz's *Hamlet*.

another. (It is Gertrude, not Hamlet, who says of the elder Hamlet in this version: 'He was a man, take him for all in all / I shall not look upon his like again.') But though Marowitz's recension can look to hostile eyes like a random affair of violent transitions indulged in for their own sake, it is really produced according to a plan and in careful support of its adaptor's moral outlook. Indeed there could hardly be a clearer example of a director's reworking Shakespeare's text in order to give prominence to his own points of view.

Marowitz admires Shakespeare's play for its energy and its simple compellingness in the theatre, but hates it ('hate' is not too strong a word) because it seems to him to have made attractive to us a sort of personality which in his opinion is contemptible and dangerous. Hamlet, for Marowitz, is the type of liberal spirit who, when called upon to act decisively in situations which require action rather than delicate moral argument, cannot do so for fear of violating his own moral sensibility. But the price which such a liberal pays for holding himself intact is enormous: he becomes a mere puppet, with no part to play of his own prompting in the affairs of the world.

Such a view of Hamlet's character, though rarely expressed with such force, is not in fact new. Samuel Johnson, in the eighteenth century, declared Hamlet to be throughout the play 'rather an instrument than an agent'; and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in the early years of the nineteenth century, spoke of a Hamlet who 'finally gives himself up to his destiny, and, in the infirmity of his nature, at last hopelessly places himself in the power and mercy of his enemies'.* What is new is the ruthlessness with which Marowitz cuts up Shakespeare's text in order both to compel an audience to share his view and to make clear his own contempt for Hamlet's character. In Marowitz's version the contrasts between Hamlet and Fortinbras and between Hamlet and Laertes (the first contrast barely developed by Shakespeare; the second developed to Hamlet's advantage) both work to Hamlet's deep discredit. At one point the Ghost so despairs of having Hamlet avenge him that he adopts Fortinbras as son in his place. And though, in the everyday sense of the term, Hamlet is unable to act (much of Marowitz's version consists of Hamlet's *imagined* actions), in the theatrical sense of the term all that he can do is act: he is self-consciously the actor, doing in play what he will not do in reality, and not doing even that well, so that his speeches are reduced to an impotent rhetoric which is booed by his fellows on stage at the same time as they applaud Laertes's forceful speech and action.

*Samuel Johnson (1709-84), poet, critic, lexicographer, and editor of Shakespeare's works. By *agent* Johnson means 'one who acts on his own behalf' (not 'one who acts on behalf of another'). Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) was the most eminent poet-critic of the Romantic period.

Clearly as a balanced view of Shakespeare's play Marowitz's version will not do at all: to push an audience's sympathies away from the conscience-stricken Hamlet towards the hyperactive Laertes is to miss the fact that Laertes too, in his dealings with Claudius, is rather an instrument than an agent and blindly serves purposes which in his anger he fails to divine. But as a professedly unbalanced view of Shakespeare's play, true in some of its details however wildly exaggerated its emphases, Marowitz's version will do very well indeed. The brusqueness with which Shakespeare is treated is matched by his adaptor's dismissive treatment of his own audience. Any theatre audience, Marowitz contends, has already settled into a pattern of expectation well before a word is spoken on stage: an audience at a Shakespeare play may have had that pattern set for them years in advance and will have bought their tickets and occupied their seats in the belief that those expectations are to be fulfilled to the letter without in any way being challenged or revised ('Audiences know what to expect', the Player tells Guildenstern, 'and that is all that they are prepared to believe in' – p. 64). Theatre-goers are, Marowitz suggests, as sensitive to what is passing before their eyes as a stopped clock is to the passage of time. The remedy required by both is that they should be given a good shaking to set them ticking again. Shaken, but once again in working order, an audience which has watched the Marowitz *Hamlet* will be more acute and much more wary in its future dealings with Shakespeare's play.

There is no point in accusing Marowitz of arrogance. Of course he is arrogant ('dogmatic' is his word); but that is part of a deliberate policy of annoying his audience. This hostility towards an audience is also not new – there is evidence of it from the Elizabethan period for instance – but its theoretical justification is more recent. Such hostility, however, is hardly to be met with at all in Stoppard's altogether gentler works. Stoppard contents himself with allowing Rosencrantz a protest at the inertness of his audience at that point in the play where, in order to demonstrate the 'misuse of free speech', Rosencrantz shouts 'Fire!'. The audience, naturally, does not respond. Rosencrantz looks out 'with contempt' and, acknowledging the members of the audience directly, tells Guildenstern that 'They should burn to death in their shoes' (p. 44). But the effect of this protest is almost entirely one of amusement. It is worth recalling that Stoppard has become a force in the commercial theatre, something which Marowitz has never been and something which he probably would not wish to be. Clearly, despite the closeness in time of their composition and their common origins in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Stoppard's and Marowitz's plays are very different works with little in common.

Stoppard's other *Hamlet*

Recently Stoppard has returned to *Hamlet* and has produced a reworking so condensed as to make Marowitz's version seem prolix and conservative. Stoppard's new *Hamlet*, originally designed for performance on a bus, is now the second half of the first part of *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979), a set of linked plays every bit as extraordinary as its extraordinary title.

Dogg's Hamlet is set in a school somewhere in England: at least an audience will assume that the school is English because its headmaster, Professor Dogg, has ordered building materials from Leamington Spa (which here serves as the prototype of a standard British town of comic normality). It is the school speech-day; there is to be a prize-giving, and afterwards the pupils are to perform *Hamlet*. Nothing could be more English, nothing more invitingly normal than this: it is the stuff of a thousand English comedies. But the schoolboys, their headmaster, his wife, and the lady who is to present the prizes speak an extraordinary language (known as Dogg). Dogg and English have a common word-hoard, but attach different meanings to their shared vocables (for instance the numbers *one* to *ten* in Dogg are: sun, dock, trog, slack, pan, sock, slight, bright, none, tun). There arrives from Leamington an English-speaking lorry-driver, delivering materials with which to build a platform for the prize-giving: he can neither understand nor be understood, and there is great confusion and some violence of a minor sort (chiefly caused by the inconvenient fact that 'Useless, git [term of abuse]' in Dogg means 'Good day, sir' in English). Eventually the platform is built; the prize-giving takes place; and *Hamlet* is performed – twice: once in a fifteen-minute version and then as an encore in under two minutes.

Cahoot's Macbeth, the second half of Stoppard's double-bill, has a different setting. Here we are to watch *Macbeth* being performed in someone's living room. (Stoppard, after visiting Czechoslovakia in 1977, learned that certain actors – among them the playwright Pavel Kohout – having been prevented from acting by the state authorities had taken to giving illicit performances of *Macbeth* in flats in Prague.) The play proceeds normally, though in a highly condensed version, until a police inspector bursts into the room. Despite his wise-cracking manner (by a horrible irony it is this policeman who provides the evening's comic relief) he threatens the actors with arrest and imprisonment for acting without authority. Performing Shakespeare without state approval, he explains, is simply a way of ignoring and thus of undermining the authority of the state. He also makes it clear that he is prepared, with official connivance, to twist the language of the statute-books to any length in order to get a conviction. (Of the words of one

statute he argues: 'Who's to say what was meant? Words can be your friend or your enemy, depending on who's throwing the book, so watch your language' (p. 59). These are the crucial words in Stoppard's play and the key to his purposes.) Having taken everyone's name and address the inspector leaves for a short while, but within a few moments a second interruption occurs when the lorry-driver from *Dogg's Hamlet* enters the room. Once again he has driven from Leamington (his last speech in the play suggests that it has been a long drive) and once again he is trying to deliver building materials. But there is a difference: now he too speaks Dogg and soon all of the actors performing *Macbeth* begin to speak it also. The inspector calls again, to complete his work of harassment, and is the only one unable to understand what is being said. In response he becomes increasingly frustrated and threatening ('If it's not free expression, I don't know what is' (p. 75). This is an irony, since he certainly does not know what free expression is.) The performance ends in manic confusion – the lorry-driver building yet another platform; the actors spouting *Macbeth* entirely in Dogg language; the inspector piling building material of his own between them and their audience. The last (suitably ambiguous) words go to the lorry-driver: 'But I should be back by Tuesday'. Is this the cry of the expatriate Briton seeking to return to his beloved Leamington, where policemen know their place, and where that place is neither the theatre nor the best living-rooms? Or are they words meaning heaven-only-knows-what in Dogg?

This is an odd play certainly, but, with Stoppard, it is wise to assume that the odder the play is the better it will be. There are, indeed, solid reasons for thinking *Dogg's Hamlet*, *Cahoot's Macbeth* better than *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* despite the earlier play's far greater acclaim. In particular the later play is much the more economical, with none of that freewheeling discussion of whatever interested Stoppard at the time that so much disfigures parts of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Yet it is precisely in relation to economy, considered as a dramatic virtue, that we need to raise a fundamental question about *Dogg's Hamlet*, *Cahoot's Macbeth*. Why are we treated to a shortened version of *Hamlet*? There is no obvious answer. The first part of *Dogg's Hamlet* introduces us to Dogg-language; we need to know about this language in order to follow the last part of *Cahoot's Macbeth*. The schoolboys' *Hamlet*, however, is performed throughout in English; a lady in the audience shouts 'Marmalade' at one point – roughly the equivalent of 'Bravo' – but that is the only irruption of Dogg into the piece.

When we learn that the shortened *Hamlet* existed earlier as a separate project we may begin to suspect that Stoppard has simply rough-stitched it in place in order to make a longer play. He is quite capable of such outrages: *New-Found-Land* is an extremely long and extravagant

soliloquy arbitrarily punched into the middle of *Dirty Linen* (1976). Moreover, considered in isolation, Stoppard's fifteen-minute *Hamlet* is not very interesting; it lacks Marowitz's fire, and perhaps simply reminds us that, though you need talent and energy to write a play, you need only a pair of scissors to cut one. But if we put the shortened *Hamlet* back into the context which Stoppard has provided for it and consider it in relation to *Dogg's Hamlet*, *Cahoot's Macbeth* as a whole we can begin to see why it is where it is and why it must be there.

Stoppard begins our evening with a lesson in Dogg-language. He then gives us a Shakespeare play (*Hamlet*), an interval, another Shakespeare play (*Macbeth*), and a final burst of Dogg-language. Our evening thus has a V-shaped structure; its second part is the mirror image of its first. The lorry-driver speaks English in the first half, Dogg in the second; ordinary conversation is carried on in Dogg in the first, in English in the second half; Shakespeare is performed in English in the first, but (eventually) in Dogg in the second. These common elements differently arranged create a far-reaching difference in mood. The first part is set in a school, and Dogg, though a serious language to those who speak it, has for an audience the air of an extended schoolboy-joke; a language in which you may safely greet your headmaster with the words 'Useless, git' is every schoolboy's dream. Within this innocent world Shakespeare's plays are performed by amateurs to whom his words are a foreign language. They perform him badly to dutiful applause – but they perform him without danger. The only one at risk in this production is Shakespeare himself, his longest play despatched in two minutes flat.

In *Cahoot's Macbeth* innocence has been lost and everything is darker in consequence. Shakespeare is being performed by professionals, men and women to whom an overweening state denies access to their legitimate rewards. He is being performed, furthermore, by men and women who stand in the very greatest danger. Their attitude towards what they are doing is thoroughly workmanlike, for putting on Shakespeare's plays is their trade. They do not perform his works because they believe them to contain insights without which the world must remain forever blind: they perform him because they have been told not to do so. Their performances to a frightened handful of spectators are acts of defiance that are the essential constituents of freedom. (Their spokesman is forced to say: 'I'm afraid the performance is not open to the public' – p. 56.) But their plight, as Stoppard presents it, and his presentation humanises their plight, is that they are workmen denied gainful employment, tradesmen denied access to their trade. It is as though Stoppard is commenting on, and revoking, an earlier witticism – 'We're actors, we're the opposite of people' – spoken by the Player in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (p. 47).

Finding themselves in their conflict with the inspector in a world in

which language is flexible though party attitudes are not, the actors take refuge in a linguistic evasion, finishing their play in a language (it really is the language of freedom) which the inspector cannot understand but whose rhythms are recognisably those of *Macbeth*. Stoppard's play ends with this small triumph for the actors, but it also ends, as any play true to the facts of state repression must, with the police inspector, instrument of that repression, ridiculous but still menacing and undefeated.

Comedy or tragedy?

What sort of play is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*? Is it a comedy? Or a tragedy? Or the sort of play that cannot properly be described as either the one thing or the other? Most people who go to see it do so expecting that they will be made to laugh: by reputation the play is a comedy, though (as many who have seen it would wish to add) it is a comedy freighted with sadness.

Judging whether a play is comic or tragic by how audiences answer simple questions (Did you laugh? Did you cry?) has not seemed to most theorists of the drama a very satisfactory way of proceeding, and from the earliest times attempts have been made at distinguishing between comedy and tragedy on principle. The Greek philosopher and critic Aristotle (384–322BC), in his *De Poetica*, sought, for example, to define tragedy as drama in which spectators are moved to pity and fear by watching enacted before them the misfortunes suffered by a man (neither vicious nor depraved, and of high social standing) because of some 'error of judgement' on his part.* Though Aristotle is certainly not denying the emotional impact of tragedy – that it produces pity and fear is an essential element in his account of it – it is, nevertheless, in his view the *fall* of the tragic hero which prompts us to feel these emotions: plot, he says, is 'the first and the most important thing in Tragedy'. We decide whether a play is tragic or not by looking at the curve of its plot.

Unfortunately the second book of the *De Poetica*, in which Aristotle discussed comedy, is lost, and what he might there have said has to be guessed at from hints thrown out elsewhere. He seems to have believed that comedy shows us men who, unlike tragic heroes, are worse than the average man through their possession of bad qualities (greed, cupidity, unseemly doting upon young girls) which we may properly ridicule. Later amplifiers of his account have sometimes thought that comedy, in Aristotle's view, is a moral enterprise which exalts virtue by ridiculing those vices which are appropriately ridiculed: a play which ridiculed misfortune that was unrelated to vice or that was far in excess of the vice to which it was related, would be cruel rather than comic. At one point,

**The Works of Aristotle*, edited by J. A. Smith, W. D. Ross et al, 12 volumes, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1908–52, vol. XI.

however, Aristotle argues that comedy may be distinguished from tragedy by a mechanical examination of its plot, for he writes of one tragedy that it has a subplot which 'belongs rather to Comedy' since it shows the bitterest enemies 'walking off good friends at the end, with no slaying of any one by any one'.

What emerges with great clarity from the foregoing account is that in Aristotelian terms *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is neither a tragedy nor a comedy. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are incompetent, unfortunate, and all at sea (Stoppard's Act 3 makes this last point in visual terms): to ridicule them would be cruel. But, on the other hand, they do not have the stature of tragic heroes; nor is it easy to see of what error of judgement they are guilty. Their view of their condition is partial certainly: they never know that they are characters in a play, nor (unlike their audience) do they have any knowledge of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. But how could they be told that they are characters in a play? They cannot leave the play in order to look down upon it from the outside, and any message brought to them within the play they interpret, reasonably enough, as just another particle of experience, indistinguishable from the other particles of experience which make up their lives. They are, in short, the victims of ineradicable ignorance: but, if they are indeed victims, in what sense may they be considered guilty?

In the Middle Ages there emerged a simpler view of the distinction between comedy and tragedy than that given by Aristotle. We decide whether a play is the one thing or the other solely by looking at what happens at its close: comedies end in marriage, tragedies in death. It is the view to which Stoppard's Player subscribes wholeheartedly: 'Tragedy, sir. Deaths and disclosures' (p. 17). On this view *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a tragedy. This conclusion, however, conflicts both with the expectation of the modern playgoer and with his experience.

Perhaps the problem of deciding what sort of play Stoppard has written is compounded for us by our having unduly restricted the number of categories to which it may be assigned. There is precedent within *Hamlet* itself, which can never be far from our minds, for a generous expansion of the available categories: 'tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, . . . tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral' (II.2.390). But this list, put together by the gabbling Polonius, is too generous: it madly divides and proliferates genres until a point is reached where, though the compound term may *describe* a play admirably, it ceases to be able to *classify* it. If we worked in the spirit of Polonius we should end up having to argue, almost scene by scene, that a play is tragic here, but comic there, occasionally pastoral (sometimes when comic, and sometimes when tragic), and in parts historical as well.

We appear to have reached an impasse, and yet there is a way forward

along the least auspicious path. Tragedies end in death; comedies in marriage. Tragedies simply end (they are, Aristotle says, imitations 'of a complete action'); comedies end in new beginnings. Marriage implies children, and children repeat the pattern of their parents' lives, begetting in their turn children who repeat the pattern once again. Comedy, in short, is cyclical.

At one point in Act 3 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are debating whether to tell Hamlet of Claudius's plans to murder him:

ROS: We're his friends.

GUIL: How do you know?

ROS: From our young days brought up with him.

GUIL: You've only got their word for it.

ROS: But that's what we depend on.

GUIL: Well, yes, and then again no.

(pp. 82-3)

'Yes, and then again no': it will be to our advantage if we can acquire a little of Guildenstern's nicely judged scepticism when we try to answer the following fundamental question – how do we know that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die at the end of Stoppard's play? Because of the play's title? But how do we know that the title is telling us the truth? Because they die in Shakespeare's play? But Stoppard's play is not Shakespeare's, and Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern precisely because *Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are characters in Shakespeare's play whereas Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not*. There is a paradox here, and one which is remarkably difficult to spell out, but it is Stoppard's founding paradox upon which he constructs the entire edifice of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* purports to be a representation of occurrences in the real world: whether those events really happened or are known to be fictional does not, in respect of the present argument, matter at all. Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are presented to us as though they are real courtiers, set real tasks by a real king. Of course in one sense (it is common sense) they are characters in a play, but that is not how Shakespeare presents them. With Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the case is quite different: doubtless they think they are real human beings, and they have not read the play in which they have such minor parts, but nevertheless it is as characters in that play that they are presented to us. (This point is sometimes easier to understand if we think in visual terms. A picture of a tree is not a tree, but neither is it the picture of a picture of a tree. Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are pictures of real people; Stoppard's are pictures of pictures.) Stoppard's purport is thus radically different from

Shakespeare's. In the sense indicated above Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are really people, who really die. But Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are characters in a play. Can characters in a play really die? Consider the following exchange between Guildenstern and the Player:

GUIL: Aren't you going to – come on?

PLAYER: I am on.

GUIL: But if you are on, you can't come on. Can you?

(p. 25)

A similar argument applies to death. You cannot die unless you have first been alive. Can characters in a play really be said to be alive? A character is only a plan: certain words in a certain order, delivered in a certain tone of voice, and with certain accompanying gestures and movements. The plan is realised in performance, whether by an actor or by a reader, and the character may then be said to 'come alive': once the realisation is over we might even agree to say that the character is dead. This is a highly metaphorical death, however, and furthermore applies to all characters in a play whether or not they represent someone who dies. And it is a death from whose grip the character is resurrected at the next performance. By changing the status of Shakespeare's characters, by making Rosencrantz and Guildenstern characters in a play who really are characters in a play, Stoppard has denied them access to all save this metaphorical death. He has made their lot inescapably cyclical.

ROS: Is he dead?

PLAYER: Who knows?

GUIL (*rattled*): He's not coming back?

PLAYER: Hardly.

ROS: He's dead then.

(p. 90)

Guildenstern returns to the point very near the end of the play: death, he reflects, is 'the endless time of never coming back' (p. 95). But that it is a point that does not apply to him is made clear by his very last words: 'Well, we'll know better next time. Now you see me, now you — (And disappears).'

In the 1967 version the cyclical nature of the play was still more obvious: perhaps, indeed, it was altered because it was too obvious. A messenger bangs upon a door and calls out two names. The next performance is about to begin (like Beauchamp's loop of tape in Stoppard's radio play *Artist Descending a Staircase* (broadcast 1972): 'this entire sequence begins again'). There will be no better luck next time, for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are as firmly fixed into their text as is the coin that comes down heads ninety-two times. The title deceives

us: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not dead. Theirs is no tragedy – the play in which they are trapped is remorselessly cyclical, and is, as no one has seriously doubted, a comedy of sorts, though heavy with inevitable sadness: 'so shall you hear of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts, of accidental judgments, casual slaughters, of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause, and . . . purposes mistook fallen on the inventors' heads.'

Part 4

Hints for study

Getting to know the play

Getting to know a novel or a poem is so much a matter of reading and re-reading the text that people often assume that the text *is* the novel or poem. But the text of a play is not the play itself, since most plays, and certainly *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* falls within this category, are designed to be seen in performance. Of course plays designed for reading rather than for acting have been written by poets and novelists, but Stoppard is not a poet or novelist who also writes plays: he is first and last a man whose natural medium is the *theatre* – and a theatre, as the Greek origins of the word put beyond doubt, is a place where people go to *see* things. Only in performance are the differences between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern readily apparent; in reading the play to yourself, particularly in reading those sections which consist of the rapid exchange of short speeches, it is easy to lose track of who is speaking to whom. Though a part of Stoppard's point is that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not easily told apart, their complete fusion into one which can easily occur in single-person reading, especially silent reading, does not suit his purposes at all. In a stage performance such a fusion and confusion could only occur if a director had identical twins in his company and were perverse enough to use them and to dress them identically. (It will be worth your considering here whether you agree that a director would be wrong to use identical twins, identically costumed. Which arguments in favour of and which against the practice would you assemble? Consider, for instance, the effect of that scene, pp. 34–5, in which Rosencrantz cannot remember whether his name is Rosencrantz or Guildenstern, upon spectators who cannot tell the actors apart. Furthermore, how well would Stoppard's very slight characterisation, his making Rosencrantz more stupid than his friend but also a bit nicer, stand up in such circumstances?)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is often performed by college students (it is a play in which very young actors may take all of the parts without incongruity of effect) and by amateurs generally. Nevertheless the chances are high that most people who study the play, and this is very true of those studying abroad, will not have had an opportunity of seeing it on stage. What is to be done?

Though some study, concentrated revision for instance, is a solitary activity most is not, and indeed study of the drama is often best when it is most sociable. Very few students need to study alone; it should be possible for most readers of the play to get together with others in order to stage, in however elementary a fashion, their own performance. (Remember that if your performance is a public one you must obtain the permission of Mr Stoppard's agents. You will find their names printed on the back of the title-page of your edition of the play.) Even a simple reading round the class will serve to clarify matters greatly, but it is better to try to achieve a 'proper' performance, in which actors move about within a designated play-area. Such a performance need not be at all elaborate: a very basic version can be staged with only three actors – one will be Rosencrantz, one Guildenstern, and the third will have to be everyone else. If more actors are available they can easily be fitted into a performance (as additional courtiers and attendants if no speaking parts are available: in the play's first professional production more than twenty-five actors were used, many of whom can have had nothing to say). More elaborate still would be a performance with a stage-set and costumes. The construction and making of these will also serve to increase your knowledge of the play and make use of the talents of those students, often among the best, who find acting a burden.

Above all, throughout the process of putting on the play, actors, extras, and stage-hands should be encouraged to talk about what they are doing. If they are encouraged then interesting questions, of far-reaching significance, will often be raised in the most casual manner. Perhaps you have more actresses than actors in your class and want to give some of the men's parts over to women; but should you, as has happened in at least one amateur production, allow Alfred to be played by a girl? Whether or not a polished performance is the result of all these deliberations is of no great moment: what matters is the increased likelihood of everyone's seeing the play not as marks upon a page but as spoken words, as movements across a stage, as first one grouping of actors and then as another. What may well have seemed merely dull in reading (the opening scene, for instance) will suddenly take on life: what had seemed insignificant will be found to have point and purpose; stage-directions, which in a printed version are a part of the text itself, will disappear in order to carry out their silent task of marshalling the action.

A few students, because of the time at which they are obliged to study or because of the remoteness of their homes, may be unable to join with others in this sort of activity. Even they, however, must not rest content with a simple reading of the play. At the very least they should read it aloud, seriously attending to variations in emphasis and intonation as they do so (Stoppard's stage-directions are useful in this respect). A better idea is to construct a simple model theatre (it need be nothing

more difficult to obtain than a table-top) within which figures can be moved about. Such a model, though a poor substitute for seeing the play in a performance, will allow it to be experienced as a series of happenings in space as well as in time, for it is the spatial aspect of theatre which a mere reading of a text, however patient that reading may be, cannot suggest adequately. If a model theatre and toy actors smack uncomfortably of playing with dolls, you might comfort yourself by trying to consider how well this image of a doll that is played with by a force which it is powerless to resist sums up what is happening in Stoppard's own play – itself, as the preceding notes will have made clear, a work for the theatre that never forgets that a play is a game and that *homo sapiens* is *homo ludens*.

A note on examinations

The essential point to be made about examinations, at whatever level you encounter them, is that they are best regarded as the natural conclusion to a course of study. A question on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is designed to test the quality of your understanding of the play, developed over a long period of time. It is not designed to allow you to display how much of the text you have managed to commit to memory in the preceding few days.

Preparing for an examination is not a special sort of activity, undertaken after you have finished reading Stoppard's plays and no longer have to think about them. Preparation, moreover, is not an activity that you should confine to the last few weeks or days of your academic term. Above all, those frenzied last-minute revision stints which so many students inflict upon themselves are best avoided. All save the most aggressively competitive students are likely to be harmed by them, and they frequently destroy all hope of a student's ever again enjoying the work upon which he is being examined. In English studies the mere swot is at a disadvantage. There are no formulas to be learned, or lists of irregular verbs to be mastered, and committing to memory a few striking scenes or snatches of dialogue, though sometimes a useful revision exercise, is not sufficient to guarantee success in an examination.

This last point needs to be looked at more carefully since many students think that an examination is designed to test their knowledge of an author, and think in addition that 'knowing an author' equals 'being able to recite the words that he has written'. An examination, however, is properly designed to test the *quality* of your understanding of an author's work, and merely reciting his words, however accurately, will not satisfy the requirements of such a test. What matters is whether the words which you cite support and illustrate and help to advance your

argument. If they do not do so they are irrelevant, and ought not to be included. It is within the examination room itself that you will need to recollect those parts of Stoppard's play that are relevant to your answer: the danger in learning lists of quotations by heart a few days before the examination is that you will include them in your answer merely because you know them, without regard to their relevance.

Many students, who in the ordinary course of events have no difficulty in thinking clearly on quite complex matters, are nevertheless worried when they are told that they will have to think during an examination. This worry frequently leads them into the grip of one of the unhappiest of all malpractices: question-spotting. Reading past examination papers in order to see what sort of questions are likely to be set is a wise use of your time, but do not forget that you are sitting this year's examination, not last year's. Your examiners have the right to set questions which they think proper and the duty to avoid setting questions which simply reproduce those of former years. Examinations test your responsiveness to the question that is in front of you; your ability to answer last year's question will impress no one. Never prepare answers in advance.

What lies behind question-spotting and answering in advance is the fear which many students have that under examination pressure their minds will go blank as soon as they put pen to paper. For most students, however, there is no real danger that this will happen provided that preparation has been thorough, relaxed, and of the right kind. Such preparation takes time and cannot be hurried but since it is indistinguishable from a serious and interested study of your text, whether in the library or in the theatre, it is pleasurable and rewarding in itself, quite apart from the benefits which it confers in the examination room.

Preparing and presenting an essay

It is probably fair to assume that most readers of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* who are working to acquire academic qualifications will at some time be asked to write at least one essay of about fifteen hundred words. A week or a fortnight will be given for the completion of the task and direct access to the principal text and to secondary authorities will not be prohibited. What preparation does such an essay require? How is it to be written? What should it contain?

We may usefully begin by distinguishing between general preparedness and special preparations. Having read the play carefully several times, having seen it staged, or having taken part in it (as outlined above) will result in most students being generally prepared to write an essay. Sometimes such general preparedness is all that is required. Usually,

however, an essay question will invite consideration of specific aspects of the play that may have escaped the attention of even a well-prepared student. In these circumstances it is best to read the play once again, with the question firmly in mind, carefully noting incidents and speeches and turns of phrase that will be *relevant* to an answer.

Many students have great difficulty in distinguishing what is relevant from what is not, and yet, in the vast majority of cases, all that is needed in making the distinction is a little common sense. The clue to what is relevant is usually contained in the question itself. For example: 'Assess the influence of Samuel Beckett upon Stoppard, with special reference to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Waiting for Godot*' (which like many essay 'questions' is not, strictly speaking, a question at all) invites discussion of Beckett's influence upon Stoppard. It does not invite you to discuss, however enticing the topic may seem to be, the extent or nature of Shakespeare's influence. If a reference to Shakespeare is to appear in an essay produced in response to this question it should do so only in passing. A useful way of mentioning him, without wasting time and without losing sight of what is principally required, is by means of such an opening sentence as: 'Although Stoppard's indebtedness to Shakespeare is both obvious and wide-ranging throughout *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, of great significance also (though less obvious, and more difficult to assess) is the influence of Samuel Beckett.'

Different people will answer the same question in different ways and there are often legitimate differences of opinion over what a good answer should contain. There is, however, broad agreement among markers over what an essay should *not* contain. Bear the following points in mind:

- (a) Very few questions (and no good ones) require a student simply to tell again in his own words the plot of a play. Use plot summary sparingly and only when the question cannot be answered without such summary.
- (b) Quotations from primary material (from the text of Stoppard's play and from any other play with which you are comparing it) should usually be brief and ought only to be included when they have a definite part in forwarding the argument of your essay. Decorative quotations, introduced merely to indicate your knowledge of the text, should be avoided.
- (c) When deciding whether or not to include quotations from secondary material (from books or articles about Stoppard) the most stringent tests of relevance should be applied.
- (d) When you introduce your chosen quotation avoid hackneyed formulas: 'As Professor *Blank* has said in his stimulating/

penetrating/important study of' Secondary authorities frequently set a bad example themselves in this respect.

- (e) Choose observations that are worthy of quotation. Do not, for instance, write: 'As Professor *Blank* has reminded us, "William Shakespeare is the greatest influence on Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*".' *Blank* may very well be correct, but he will not thank you (nor will anyone else) for granting prominence to such perfectly routine observations.
- (f) Do not quote what you do not understand, and never fall into the trap of supposing that it must be worth quoting *because* you do not understand it. Not all academic authors write clearly or well: there is no advantage to be gained from solemnly introducing into your essay material which will disfigure it while its presence there will call your own good judgement into question.
- (g) Direct use of secondary material (quotation) must always be acknowledged directly. In a classroom essay the author's name, the title of the book, and a page reference should follow the quotation in parentheses. Failure to acknowledge quotations, and, worse still, failure to indicate that they are quotations, is a serious matter which often leads to an essay being rejected in its entirety. Indirect use of secondary material should also be acknowledged – by means of a list of 'Books Used' (avoid 'Bibliography', a pompous and inaccurate term in this context) at the end of your essay. Where the details or direction of an argument, though not the wording itself, are borrowed from another author specific acknowledgement of the borrowing is proper and in more advanced essay work it is essential. In short, acknowledge indebtedness openly, but do not confuse the nervous accumulation of secondary authorities with sound scholarship.

Some trial questions

1. '*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a play which has its greatest impact in performance.' Discuss.
2. Outline the influence of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* upon Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. (Younger students should note that they are unlikely to encounter this question, or one like it, unless *Waiting for Godot* is another of their set texts.)
3. 'Slightly literate music-hall perhaps' is Stoppard's own description of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Is it a good description?
4. Outline the relationship between 'enjoying Stoppard's plays' and 'taking them seriously'.
5. 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.'

Comparisons of the world to the theatre are part of a very ancient tradition. What use does Stoppard make of such comparisons?

6. Why do you think that Stoppard chose to attach his play to *Hamlet* rather than, for example, to *Timon of Athens* or *Coriolanus* or *King Lear*?
7. Describe the main differences between Shakespeare's use of the English language and Stoppard's, paying particular attention to those scenes in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in which *Hamlet* is extensively quoted.
8. 'Much of our pleasure in comedy comes directly from our sense of the artist at work; much of our attention is directly fixed upon the dramatist as well as upon his characters.'
Discuss with reference to Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.
9. Has your reading of Stoppard's play enriched your understanding of *Hamlet*?

A specimen essay

'*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a play which has its greatest impact in performance.' Discuss.

Most novels invite us to consider people in relation to each other and rely upon a precise use of words in order to describe or illustrate such relationships. The dramatist relies upon a precise use of words too, but he has at his disposal resources that are unavailable to the novelist. Of these much the most potent is the physical presence of the actor. The bodies of great actors are eloquent even when they are standing still (there are so many ways of standing still), and when they move they give graphic expression to those relationships which the dramatist seeks to illuminate. We frequently speak of art as being 'moving': we mean that whatever art we are considering (a symphony, a painting, a novel, poem, or play) has a powerful emotional effect upon us. 'Moving' here is a metaphor, but one reason why the drama is so frequently moving in this sense is that it is the art medium in which physical movement plays so large a part.

'Actions speak louder than words' we often say: good dramatists know this and seek to employ gesture and posture and position as carefully as they employ words, for together words and actions can have an impact greater than either can have alone. Here, for instance, is a passage from the opening scene of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in which Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are betting upon the toss of a coin:

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 GUIL: Your capacity for trust made me wonder if perhaps . . . you, alone (He turns on him suddenly, reaches out a hand.) Touch. (ROS clasps his hand. GUIL pulls him up to him.) (More intensely.): We have been spinning coins together since – (He releases him almost as violently.) This is not the first time we have spun coins! (p. 10)

Even in reading this passage we may find it moving, but its true effectiveness is only to be experienced in performance. The rows of dots, for example, which in reading indicate a pause are in performance the pauses themselves. The stage-directions become actions not words, and the simple contact of hand and hand is there for all to witness – a universal symbol of friendship (we speak of 'hands across the sea') which is also a universal example of friendliness. The whole incident is 'touching' – another word which, like 'moving', describes the world of our emotions in terms derived from the world of action.

Though more delicate than many others this not the only instance of Stoppard's employing action to great effect. Only at the end, when they go to their deaths, do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern manage to leave the stage. They are prisoners in Shakespeare's plot, condemned to tread the boards as prisoners tread a wheel; their freedom is physically proscribed in a way to which words alone cannot give adequate expression. Immediately after Claudius tells them to seek out Hamlet and recover the body of Polonius (p. 65) Stoppard shows us that they are prisoners by the way in which he has them move about the stage, pacing its edges but never crossing them. They march, full of resolve (they march; they do not walk), to opposite ends of the stage; their resolve collapses; they halt; they march towards each other; they halt; they wheel around, and march, and halt, and wheel, and march, and halt again. They dance out their confinement, or sculpt it in air by the motions of their limbs, and we see them doing it. 'Seeing is believing' we say; no one ever says 'reading is believing'.

Words, too, are actions, not just meanings. When we speak them we give physical expression to them: they are sound-waves passing through the air. Consider the following passage, typical of many in the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern toy with the idea of removing the Player's ability to give physical expression to his words:

GUIL: So you've caught up.

PLAYER (coldly): Not yet, sir.

GUIL: Now mind your tongue, or we'll have it out and throw the rest of you away, like a nightingale at a Roman feast.

ROS: Took the very words out of my mouth.

GUIL: You'd be *lost* for words.

ROS: You'd be tongue-tied.

Certainly a reader faced with the whole passage (pp. 45–6; only a third of it is quoted here) might well wonder, taking his cue from the passage itself, whether it might not profitably be cut. In silent reading, two voices reduced to one, the passage is sluggish, but in performance, spoken at top speed with admonitory and near-hysterical stabbings-forward of the finger, these words are physical weapons of assault.

The dramatist's medium is not words alone (a play is not a poem) but words spoken by people who move about upon a stage. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* has its greatest impact in performance because only in performance is it presented to us in the medium for which it was conceived.

A specimen examination answer

Outline the influence of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* on Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Stoppard, both when being interviewed and in his plays themselves, has admitted an indebtedness to Samuel Beckett. Nowhere is this indebtedness more readily apparent than in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Waiting for Godot is a tragicomedy (Beckett's own description of it) in which two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, spend the whole of the day, as they must spend the whole of their lives, waiting for the mysterious Godot. Unlike characters in the conventional well-made play, Vladimir and Estragon tell us very little about themselves (indeed they seem to know very little about themselves). Their speeches are short (many are fewer than ten words long) and Beckett does not seek to give them easily identifiable speech traits. Their situation is obscure: each evening upon an open road near a tree they wait for Godot, whom they have probably never met (the *certainly* that they have never met is denied them: 'he's a kind of acquaintance . . . we hardly know him . . . we don't know him very well . . . I wouldn't even know him if I saw him'). They more than half-suspect that he will never come to meet them, or that they will miss him, and that their waiting will have been in vain. They wait upon a stage (Beckett never seeks to pretend that it is not a stage) fighting off boredom by playing games: their cross-talk, so much a feature of the play and one which Stoppard freely adopts, is a sort of game; they call each other insulting names, half in earnest and half in jest; they fool about with their hats in an ancient circus-clown routine; they pretend to be other people; they flirt with suicide. But all the time they seek to pass the time – representatives of a humanity which waits, half-afraid that the end will come, half-afraid that it will not.

As this summary suggests, there is much in common between

Stoppard's play and Beckett's. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two Elizabethans passing the time in a place without any visible character. They too speak short speeches, are not easily told apart, play games to idle away the time, banter ceaselessly, and rely on the entrance of others upon the stage for both amusement and impetus. And it is not only in their relationship to their basic situation that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern resemble Vladimir and Estragon: they resemble them also in their relationship with one another – each partner in both pairs is at once carping and conciliatory, for partner is tied to partner in an interdependency that admits of friction but not of fracture.

Both pairs wait in imperfect awareness of what goes on, and both wait upon the boards of a public stage. Stoppard has borrowed (the borrowings are so explicit that they must be an allusion) Vladimir's and Estragon's references both to the boredom of their situation, which is also their audience's boredom ('This is becoming really insignificant'), and to the physical presence of the audience (Estragon looks out at them: 'inspiring prospects', he mutters. The auditorium is 'that bog').

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and *Waiting for Godot* are related: that much is demonstrable. But the nature of the relationship is not so easily established. However, one thing is certain: Stoppard is no more trying to repeat Beckett's play than he is trying to repeat Shakespeare's. *Waiting for Godot* is a tragicomedy; *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is not. Both dramatists, in providing their moving-pictures of the world, repeat the ancient comparison of world and theatre ('All the world's a stage') but Stoppard, by means of a device that carefully preserves his play's comic standing, gives to his audience an advantage which Beckett, in every way the sterner playwright, denies to his. We know *Hamlet*, but we do not know who Godot is (God perhaps, or Death perhaps, but whatever we think Godot is we have to add 'perhaps'). And Stoppard brings his play to its close with a theatrical flourish that the austerer Beckett will never allow. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern live on in ceaseless repetition, born again at the start of each performance. And yet each performance, though a foregone conclusion (there will be no 'better luck next time'), is for them a fresh start; for Vladimir and Estragon, in contrast, there are no fresh starts – indeed no fresh anything: one has feet that smell, the other breath that stinks. Day follows day, each one like all the others in every essential respect, distinct enough only to confirm and strengthen its inescapable boredom. Vladimir and Estragon live out their whole lives in paralysed anticipation of what, if it comes, they may not even recognise. 'We learn something every day, to our cost', the Player tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard's comedy: if that line had appeared in Beckett's tragicomedy we should not so easily have put it laughingly to one side.

Part 5

Suggestions for further reading

The text

The text of the play referred to in these Notes is:
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Faber & Faber, London, 1967; revised edition 1968.

Other works by Stoppard

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The author of these notes

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Use your own lined paper. Write in blue or black ink.

1. State your philosophy on man's position in the universe. Consider as you write some of the following: (a) What is a human being?, (b) Why are we here?, (c) Where are we going (as a species)? (d) Are we essentially tragic figures or not?
2. One important Aristotelian word is "anagnorisis." It means recognition. Modern critics have taken the term to mean also the terrible enlightenment that accompanies such a recognition: "To see things plain - that is anagnorisis," Clifford Leech has observed, "and it is the ultimate experience we shall have if we have leisure at the point of death. . . . It is what tragedy ultimately is about: the realization of the unthinkable."¹

Analyze the "anagnorisis" in "Oedipus Rex", "Hamlet", and "Rosen-
crantz and Guildenstern Are Dead", telling how in each case the
reader (audience) is purged (moved to pity and/or fear).

Then choose the one play that illustrates most clearly your own
view of the human condition and tell me why it is a tragic play.

¹ Secondary source: X. J. Kennedy's Introduction to Literature.
Primary source: Tragedy (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 65.

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Man's position in the universe can be likened to that of a small screw in a complicated machine. On its own, the screw serves no purpose, it is wasted. But as part of the great machine, it holds together two other parts, it completes the plan. Eventually though, the screw, like man, will pass through its period of usefulness and get tossed into the proverbial scrap-pile to be replaced by a new screw.

How can the existence of a screw be tragic? To play upon an old cliché, it's tragic only the screw. We as men are saddened at the prospect of our own triviality, but the cosmos won't even notice our passing.

Oedipus' anagnorisis is that the gods truly do have power over him. This realization causes him to pass through two stages, that of humiliation and that of rebirth. The humiliation is caused by his own previous disregard for the warnings that foretold his fate: Tiresias' prophesy, Jocasta's account of Laius' death, and, especially, the word of Apollo himself. Because Oedipus places himself above these omens, above his true place as a man, he is struck down all the more violently by the anagnorisis. "I stand revealed--born in shame, married in shame, an unnatural murderer."

Afterwards, however, Oedipus begins to learn from his fate. He is reborn in his views of his own purpose. "I was saved--for some strange and dreadful end." He finds his place, above some, below others, and lives out his life there.

The purgation of the observer of Oedipus' fate must be divided between that which affected the play-goer of Sophocles' time and the modern reader. For the ancients, the king was set higher than the people by the gods; he was divinely favored. Therefore, for such a favored man as Oedipus to be subjected to such tortuous humiliation was confusing--and fearful. "Oedipus, savior of our city...you were honored above all men...and now--is there a man whose story is more pitiful?" If Oedipus could be struck down, what could happen to the average man? Sophocles' message was interpreted as "Beware, hold your faith."

But the modern reader cannot sympathize with the fall of royalty. He is struck to pity because Oedipus was striving for individuality; and nothing is more sacred to modern man than his own distinctiveness. For our time, Sophocles warns, "Don't try to be master in everything."

Hamlet's tragic recognition is that of the evil instilled in man. He is melancholy at the play's climax not because of his father's death, not because he had done little to avenge it, but because none of those whom he trusted (except Horatio) had been true.

Ophelia, whom he did once love, lets herself be used as a lovely trap. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, once long-time friends to Hamlet, are now spies for Claudius, and are those chosen to escort their friend to his death. Through these

circumstances, Hamlet turns against those he once held dear, cursing Ophelia and sending Ros. and Guil. to their deaths, all without guilt. But instead with a business-like apathy, "They did make love to this employment (Claudius'). They are not near my conscience; their defeat does by their own insinuation grow." Even in killing Claudius, Hamlet is not vengeful, but disgusted at the King's ruthlessness and murdering ambition. "Here you incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane!" he cries as he completes his last act. He dies, still melancholy, because he has found himself virtually alone in his virtue.

That feeling of isolation is passed on to the reader, both Elizabethan and modern, and is the basis of "Hamlet"'s success as a tragedy. The reader readily shares in Hamlet's search for truth, and, sadly, likewise finds very little. Shakespeare tells us, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" and in the souls of mankind.

The anagnorisis of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hits closest to home and is therefore the most haunting. The two, throughout the play, cannot understand their part, nor if they even play a part in what is happening around them. Guildenstern searches for a meaning in life while Rosencrantz searches for life in Guil's meaning. The final recognition made by the two is that their part is not only vague, but unavoidable, "There must have been a moment...where we could've said--no. But we missed it," and that the meaning in life is actually a life with no real meaning, "we are little men--we don't know the ins and outs of the matter. There are wheels within wheels etc...."

This above all terrifies the modern reader. He must have a choice. He must be in control of his life, and there must be a goal. But as the player, the one character who's found his place, states, "For all anyone knows, nothing is." That, then, is the purgation of the audience: they're going nowhere, and nothing matters.

"Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" most closely relates to my personal view of man's place. Through Ros. and Guil., Stoppard represents us all, some battling to take hold of something solid, some innocently enjoying the ride, on our way from existence to non-existence. The tragedy in ROS AND GUIL is that, though they differ in how they travel through life, they both approach death as an unfair alternative that could have, and should have been avoided. Going back to the initial definition of tragedy as an explanation for evil in the world, the tragedy in ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD states that the evil of the world is caused by man's struggle against the inevitable, death.

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead essay

In his essay on "The Birth of Tragedy," Nietzsche argues that Hamlet's inability to act stems from his loss of illusion about the world. "Understanding kills action," he contends, "for in order to act we require the veil of illusion." Nietzsche believes Hamlet has "looked deeply into the true nature" of existence and understands that he can do nothing to "work any change in the eternal condition of things." Once this "truth and its terror" is seen, Nietzsche concludes, Hamlet becomes aware of "the ghastly absurdity of existence," and "nausea invades him." (Taking this view, the ghost in Hamlet becomes a fascinating figure—literally an illusion urging that Hamlet act meaningfully in a world whose meaning is crumbling around him.)

In any event, Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead plays ingeniously on this profound existential perception. Like Hamlet, Stoppard's reluctant heroes are called on to act meaningfully, but find they cannot, or at best can only blunder into action. And yet clearly they share none of the nauseated disillusionment Nietzsche ascribes to Hamlet. On the contrary, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seek throughout the play a reasonable, reliable basis for action—a starting point that would give structure and sense to their mission. They believe wholeheartedly in the illusion that they can make a difference by their action. Yet still they cannot act.

In a 3-4 page essay, I want you to discuss why Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot act effectively. How do they go about preparing for action? How are they constantly disappointed? In the absurd world of their play, who can act? and why? Turning Nietzsche around, how can understanding the meaninglessness of existence be the only basis for action?

STUDY GUIDE

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by Tom Stoppard
(Grove Press, 1981 Printing)

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Act I Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

1. How does the coin flipping game indicate that "the time is out of joint," as Hamlet says it is in Shakespeare's play? What makes this game "boring"?
2. Guildenstern says, "At least we can still count on self-interest as a predictable factor I suppose it's the last to go." What does this "faith" indicate about the quality of the human condition presented in the play? (14)
3. Guildenstern posits four theories about the meaning of the unusual fall of the coins. What are they? What are the limitations of this kind of speculative reasoning? What is a syllogism? What academic disciplines use the syllogism? (16)
4. Guildenstern asserts, "The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear." Do you agree? What advantage does the examination of human phenomena through literature have over science and philosophy? (17)
5. Stoppard satirizes logical reasoning in this scene. In what way does Hamlet's employment of this kind of thinking help or hinder him in Shakespeare's play?
6. Guildenstern reveals that he and his friend are on a journey because they were "sent for." (18-19) What ironic or abnormal circumstances are associated in this passage with being "sent for"?
7. What double meaning is there in Guildenstern's comment, "We are entitled to some direction"? How is the story of the man who sees the unicorn connected to Guildenstern's desire for direction? How do human beings determine reality, according to this passage? Are the usual methods reliable? (20-21)

The Players

1. The player declares, ". . . we grow rusty . . . by this time tomorrow we might have forgotten everything we ever knew . . . We'd be back where we started—improvising." What implication does this comment have for this play's examination of the nature of the human condition? (22)
2. How are "performance" and "patronage" the same in this play and in *Hamlet*?
3. What kind of drama do these player's perform? Stoppard, like Shakespeare, criticizes the popularity of sensationalized drama? What does each writer imply about players and their audiences? about human beings in general? (22-27, 33)
4. Why are the times "indifferent" to the player but "bad" to Rosencrantz?

5. The players and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have in common being out of control, being victims of fate and chance. Why?
6. Why is Guildenstern angered by the obscenity of the players? What is he searching for in their performance? Why does Rosencrantz see the times as "indifferent"? (27)
7. The player says, "We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else." What does he mean? How is the statement related to the fact that the play is based on characters who are in a play? to the fact that both of these plays explore the problem of penetrating illusions and defining reality? Consider the role of Alfred, who must play female parts. How is this theme of exits and entrances that border on each other acted out in the scene? (34-37, for example) How is the theme of Hamlet's "transformation" connected?
8. How does Guildenstern use the coins to trick the Player?
9. What kind of play do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern request?
10. The play they get is the intersection with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act II, scene i, a scene in which the king and queen interchange their names as if they are two sides of the same person. Are they?

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern engage in a sequence of banters that recapitulates the themes that have been hinted at in the first two sections of Act I.

1. Consider the problems of language and meaning: confused cliches, questions without answers and answers without questions, rhetoric, words without meanings and meanings without words, language as a game-word play.
2. Consider the problems of action: orders and obedience, choice, actions and their results, play acting, games of action, the spectator who is a viewer of actions, consistency, illicit actions, the issue of inaction for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and for Hamlet.
3. Consider the problems of masks and illusions, of family relationships and responsibilities, of immortality and death. What is the situation in *Hamlet* when that play intersects with this one again at the end of Act I?

Act II

1. Act II begins with the continuation of the scene from *Hamlet*. What roles have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern assumed in Shakespeare's play by the time of this scene? What problems are they having with this role in Stoppard's play? Are their characters different in the two plays?
2. They are playing the question and answer game again. How is the game

connected to Hamlet and his problem? Why can they not understand him?

3. Why does Guildenstern suggest that "pragmatism" may not offer any solutions to their problem? Is he correct? (58)

4. What does Guildenstern mean when he says, "Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are . . . condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one—that is the meaning of order. If we start being arbitrary it'll just be a shambles: at least, let us hope so. Because if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we'd know that we were lost." (60) How is memory connected to the problems of order and foreknowledge?

5. When the Player rejoins them, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are concerned about their loss of words, while the Player is concerned about his loss of an audience. How do these losses undermine their sense of identity? What philosophies do they suggest in order to cope with the sense of instability they feel? They advocate trust, but what is it they trust? What attitudes are revealed toward language, questions, madness, passion, reasons, death, eternity? How does Rosencrantz react when the *Hamlet* play "enters" again? (73)

6. What effect is created when the Player begins rehearsing the scene of the play that will be acted before the king and queen in *Hamlet*? Guildenstern asks a question that critics have often asked about "The Murder of Gonzago" in *Hamlet*—"What is the dumbshow for?" What is the player's answer? yours?

7. Look at the scenes in *Hamlet* that are suggested—Hamlet with Ophelia, the player-king's Pyrrhus and Priam speech, Claudius's determination to send Hamlet to England. What themes are developed in these scenes?

8. Look at the Player's statement of aesthetic values: "There's a design at work in all art—surely you know that? Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral, and logical conclusions Between 'just desserts' and 'tragic irony' we are given quite a lot of scope for our particular talent." What implications are suggested for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's destinies since they are mere characters in a play, or doubly so? What problems of identity and meaning in life are suggested by the exchanges about playacting, death in playacting, and the intersection of this play with Hamlet? (80-91)

9. As Act II comes to an end, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are aware of change, a change in circumstances and a change of the seasons. What is suggested by the autumn leaves and cold weather?

Act III

1. It is dark when Act III opens. Where are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What is symbolized by the dark and the sea journey? Are they "free" because they are on the boat? What is the significance of the letter they carry? Discuss their language play in this scene. What themes are recapitulated from Acts I and II?

2. What evidences are there of their lack of direction? How are they "slipping off the map"? How would suicide "put a spoke in their wheel"?

3. What reactions do they have when they discover the letter orders Hamlet's death? How do they rationalize their "betrayal"? What are Guildenstern's arguments for obeying orders and not defending Hamlet? (110) Why do they feel "on top of it now"?
4. Compare the themes of logic and poetry in the two speeches, p. 112.
5. Why do the players appear on the boat? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sum up for the players and the audience all the events of Hamlet's circumstances in his play. Then Rosencrantz concludes, "All we get is incidents! Dear God, is it too much to expect a little sustained action?!" What does he mean?
6. When the pirates attack and Hamlet disappears, the despair of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern increases. Why? How will they deal with their problem? Why do they refuse to "act"? What do they discover by reading the letter?
7. How does Guildenstern analyze their situation? What is the answer to his question, "Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths?" What universal implications does the question have?
8. What contrast does Guildenstern make between the experience of "actors" and his own experience? What is the significance of the "playacting" of death?
9. Death is accompanied by darkness and cold. How is death defined by Guildenstern? Is it true that "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said-no"?
10. With what scene from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* does Stoppard's play end? What is signified by the actors, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, disappearing from the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and this transformation of Stoppard's play into Shakespeare's?
11. Discuss the similarities and differences in the themes of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Stoppard's play. What is his purpose in alluding to a past work of literature?

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD. By Tom Stoppard. New York: Grove Press, 1967. 95¢. A Study Guide for the play available: Grove Press, 80 University Place, New York City 10003.

Among those many who have recognized the profound universality of *Hamlet* stands a young modern British playwright who oddly enough is less concerned with the universality of Hamlet than with the universality of the two insignificant persons of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Tom Stoppard's insights and observations are profoundly simple. In his hands, the preferably ignored obvious becomes increasingly uncomfortable, hysterically funny, and painfully real: men are born, live, and die.

The uncertainty which emerges early in the action (action cannot be used here in its traditional sense as we will see later) is maintained, augmented, but never dispelled. It is the one thing we can be certain of. Ros and Guil are unsure of their own identities, not simply in existential terms but in a literal one. This dramatic technique is familiar. The figurative becomes the literal, and therefore more poignant and more absurd. Stoppard not only stresses the anonymity of Ros and Guil in their failure to remember their own names, but also depicts their impotence in their confrontations with the Environment. Ros and Guil do not know who they are; nor do they know the when, where, or why.

Ros and Guil have been summoned to the Danish court at Elsinore to "glean" from Hamlet what "afflicts him." In their attempts to "lead him on to pleasures" they learn nothing. Claudius becomes increasingly impatient. Hamlet to him seems to be reeling on out of control. Ros and Guil are dispatched to England with Hamlet in their company. The letter they bear contains Claudius' instructions to the English King to. . . . But this is an old familiar story. Why retell it? Hamlet dies. Ros and Guil are executed as a result of Hamlet's little stratagem. No one laments their deaths.

But one might question now whether we are talking about *Hamlet* or *R and G*. For what has just been described pertains to both plays, though in entirely

different ways. With respect to *Hamlet*, we have described a rather small part of the plot. But with respect to *R and G* this small part is the action. Earlier I hesitated to use the term action, for it seems highly inappropriate to speak of action which consists chiefly of two characters waiting to find out what will happen next. The parallel here with Becket's *Waiting for Godot* is inescapable. The strange tragicomic world we see on stage is recognizable as our own. To the high school or college student this recognition becomes a shocking and sometimes profound discovery.

To understand *R and G* the student does not need to know more than the basic plot of *Hamlet* which, if need be, can be read to him. Students seem to know immediately what Stoppard is talking about. The students know Ros and Guil—know them well. To them Ros and Guil are alone—they have no role, no function, no authority, no control over anything that affects them. Furthermore, they are uncertain about their future. The myriad of people and events that surround them perplex them, taunt them, and alienate them. They seem perpetual spectators—they never participate. They ask questions and receive no satisfactory answers. In essence their plight is no different from the plight of the average student.

Students seem to be in general agreement about certain things. For them, the family, the church, the school, hold less significance. But with the loss of traditional values, the ensuing uncertainty is a necessary consequence. If we pursue this line of reasoning, we can draw parallels with modern history. This will provide students with

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historical perspectives and help them, in part, to account for some of their own feelings of frustration and despair. Also, some insight can be brought to bear on that nature of contemporary drama, and we can pose to the students a question dealing, for example, with why Stoppard's play must necessarily be twentieth century.

If the student can be helped to see the drama on one level as a viable commentary on *la condition humaine*, he has made an important step toward becoming a literate individual. We might at this point want to probe the nature of drama even further. For example, one could take Tom's speech from *The Glass Menagerie* in which he promises us reality under the pleasant guise of illusion, rather than illusion under the guise of reality. How does the fantasy on stage differ from that off? Who the actors? Who the audience? The player who comes with his troupe to entertain the court remarks:

We keep to our usual stuff, more or less, only inside out. We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else.

And what of the world, of what we call reality? To Guil it is a phenomenon "spread thinner and thinner" by successive witnesses until "it is as thin as reality, the name we give to common experience." It is unsurprising, non-miraculous. It is the overpowering awareness of mortality:

Before we know the words for it, before we know that there are words, out we come, bloodied and squalling with the knowledge that for all the compasses in the world, there's only one direction, and time is its only measure.

Before Ros and Guil die, they seek to know the answers to all the unanswerable questions that men have asked. To get students to ask one good question is far better than have them answer a dozen trivial ones. *R and G* forces the student, indeed anyone, to question. Once we have the questions we might then ask why they are so

difficult to answer, and why we, especially, as twentieth century men, have such difficulty.

Finally, we might consider whether against such overwhelming odds there is not some hope of a way out. Just before the end Guil speculates:

There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it.

Despite the pathos here, or whatever else we may choose to see, there is also a nobility in the implication that perhaps after all the choice remains with the individual. Of all the things man may turn from, he may not turn from himself and be alive.

To the teacher or the would-be *literati* seeking in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* a way onto the Elizabethan stage through the back door, I warn that his entrance may leave him as perplexed and alone as Mr. Stoppard's two young *non-protagonists*. He might also find that his journey has been costly beyond belief in terms of what he has missed. A view which sees a dramatic work as a means of access to another work is extremely limited, for it fails to see the dramatic work as an access to life. Good art does not transfigure good art; it transfigures life. It is more important for us and our students to see the realness of *R and G* than its Hamletness. While one could conceivably teach *R and G* as an approach to *Hamlet*, it should not be the primary or even secondary motive for doing so, for we run the risk of destroying both plays for students—thereby gaining nothing. I do not mean to suggest that *R and G* should become the new substitute for *Hamlet*, nor that we consign *Hamlet* forever to the dusty archives which seem to become daily the final resting places for an ever increasing number of "classics." But some willingness to experiment coupled with a knowledge of our students and our own situations, will prove far more profitable than our blind adherence to the "medicinal" method of teaching literature. *Hamlet* is not good for all students. It even makes some sick. The teacher must swallow his pedantic pride and teach to and about the real world. Properly handled, *R and G* can help him do that, perhaps even admirably. If it does lead the student to *Hamlet*, so much the better.

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**ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN
ARE ALIVE IN THE CLASSROOM**

by James E. Quinn

Critics call it "*Hamlet Inside Out*"; others claim it's a modern "parable of little Everyman"; but most agree that Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is an exciting, witty, and provocative play. Like the successful *Westside Story*, the plot is borrowed from Shakespeare, specifically, a view of the double-crossed friends of Hamlet, who are passing their time in route to Elsinore to check up on Hamlet's "affliction," which includes a modern *Murder of Gonzago* and their eventual trip on the ship that is returning Hamlet to England. Along the way, British playwright Stoppard takes us on a satiric run through the child-like antics of the secondary messengers — from coin flipping to "philosophical disputations." With all the comic confusions, play on words, exits and entrances, one is caught up in a fast but funny pace, from start to finish. On the surface the play is a picture of minor class life, with all its uncertainty and confusion. But Stoppard's pair, whose lives are "fixed and formalized," grow to tragic capacity as they later ponder their own mission, fate, and uncertain future. Throughout they are unaware of the fate to which they have been subjected. As the thirty-one-year-old playwright suggests, they are "bewildered by the parts they must play." Indeed, their uncertainty and confusion becomes ours.

TE 001 701

After a run of many months in London (the first production in April, 1967), 421 performances on Broadway, a Grove Press paperback edition, and numerous reviews, I felt the work deserved consideration in the classroom. Besides I was looking for a short contemporary play, one that appeals widely, and something comic and fresh. Its impact, to put it mildly, was ecstatic. Our discussions were lively and relevant. Some saw the play as tragedy, some comedy, some neither, but none was indifferent. As a result several attended a nearby performance.

Before discussing the play, I found it prudent to review such concepts as: tragedy, comedy, satire, irony, characterization, staging, Elizabethan history, and, of course, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (I should think *R & G* would make an interesting companion study). From the teacher's view, it might be well to know that Stoppard is not an Englishman but born in Prague of Jewish parents (his original name was Straussler) and spent time in Czechoslovakia, Singapore, India, and England. His physician father was killed when the Japanese invaded Malaya in W W II. His mother later remarried a British Army man named Stoppard, and Tom was brought up in Yorkshire, attended local schools, and in 1960 began to write plays for television. While in London, he published a novel, *Lord Malmquist and Mr. Moon*, and with the assistance of a Ford Foundation grant, and several rewrites, the Oxford Theater Group presented *R & G* at the Edinburgh Festival in 1966.

Before attempting the play, I read several reviews, a few of which are listed in a brief bibliography here. In addition, the following topics may be used for either discussion or composition, depending on time and purpose:

GENERAL

1. *R & G* as a definition of: Death, Boredom, or Conformity
Modern Tragedy
20th Century Satire
Modern Comedy
2. *R & G* as a study in: Dialogue
Point of View
Futility
Class Struggle
Ambivalence
Escape From Reality
The Path of Least Resistance.

Logic

Failure to Act

Minor Characters (Player, Tragedians)

3. R & G: Victims of Circumstances
 A View of Modern Denmark
 A Play on Words
 Life's Waiting Game
 A Play With No End
 A View of Elizabethan Life
 A Satire on Religion
 Another Little Man Tragedy
 The Indecipherable Dialogue
 A Social Case Study
 The Use of Stage Directions
 A Need For Answers
 The Role of the Audience
 A Satire on Directions
 The Thin Line of Tragedy & Comedy
 A Play for All Ages

COMPARISON

1. R & G: Modern Hamlet or Anti-Hamlet
 And the Two Tramps in Becket's *Waiting for Godot*
 And *Six Characters in Search of an Author*
 An Abbott and Costello Comedy
2. *Hamlet's* And R & G's Play Within A Play
 R & G: And the Adult's World of Decisions (Indecisions)
 Coins and the Law of Probability
 Two Half Men and Milton's Poems *Allegro* & *Il Penseroso*
 And the Song "The Games People Play"
 And the Two Thugs in Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*
 The Stage Version vs. the Reading Version.

CHARACTERS

1. R & G's Alfred as Player Queen Claudius: A Study in Modern Guilt and the Strolling Players.
2. Strolling Players as: Actors & Pragmatists, Prophets & Profiteers, Foils of R & G

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MISCELLANEOUS QUOTES

"Life is a terrible gamble."

"What good's a brick to a drowning man?"

"Life in a box is better than no life at all"

"Wheels have been set in motion and they have their own pace, to which we are . . . condemned."

"Our names shouted in a certain dawn . . . a message . . . a summons . . . there must have been a moment, at the beginning, when we could have said — no. But somehow we missed it."

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Kroll, Jack. "R and G," *Newsweek*, October 30, 1967, 90-92.

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1. MANY of the speeches in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead are identical to those found in Hamlet although the order and time sequence have frequently been changed (ie nunnery scene and play within a play are in proximity in R&G). Identical speeches occur on the following pages in R&G Pp 25-27, 37-39, 52-53, 54, 56-57, 66-67, 72.
2. Characters are frequently the same: some maintain the same characteristics i.e. Hamlet remains unable to make a decision in R&G), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern remain interchangeable one with the other but while they are frankly treacherous and evil in Hamlet they become unwitting dupes of the king and fate in R&G. There is a preoccupation with death by the main character in both plays. Death references occur in R&G on the following pages Pp 12-13, 50-51, 60-61, 89-90, 78, 79.
3. Situations - Many of the situations are also similar in the two plays. For instance the players are present in both plays, all males in both plays, and in both plays put on a play within a play. They are much more comic in R&G however and in R&G Hamlet, too, assumes the status of a play within a play.
4. Chance Theme - The theme revolves around the question: Is there such a thing as chance? (This is made obvious in the gambling sequence) Related to this is the idea that one's fate cannot be changed once set in motion and that you do not have a chance. You can't miss chances to make choices because there is no chance and there are no choices. This is similar to one of the principal themes in Hamlet: once something is set in motion (the revenge) it cannot be halted until it reaches its conclusion. There is a parallel between the boat that moves Rosencrantz and Guildenstern along to their fate and the play that moves Hamlet along to his. The parallel incident in R&G would be the shipboard voyage. Their choice in the matter of their fate seems to have been ended when they obeyed the messenger's call. This theme is recurrent in the play. References can be found on: Pp 7-12, 16, top of 29, 30-32, 42-43, 51.
The freedom of the boat is merely an illusion for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (i.e. Guildenstern says (P 73) "One is free on a boat. For a time. Relatively." but later (P 89) he realizes "We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current."
5. Double Entendres: There are many 'quibbles' in both plays -- most in R&G have one off-colour meaning and, as such, are very funny. I.E. tumbler-tumble (P 16) 'He slipped in' (p 35), Lying down (P 57).
Quibbles do much to bring out the questioning or 'interrogative' mood in both plays (see #3 below "Questioning Motif") as well as contributing to the humour. R&G uses mixed metaphors to further the comedy. (i.e. (P54) "No point in looking at a gift horse)
6. Confusion of Identity Motif: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to tell themselves apart. Most of the other characters also find them difficult to differentiate between. This motif recurs throughout the play and has two dramatic purposes: 1. comedy, 2. plays a part of chance and fate theme inasmuch as Stoppard seems to be saying -- it doesn't matter who you are, your fate, as is the fate of all mankind, is death. (ie P 34 "What could we possibly have in common except our situation") This is a more minor motif in Hamlet but is especially obvious in the graveyard in V.i. 'Playing' or 'pretending' is, however, a major motif in Hamlet.
Everyone seems to be playing at something -- the Court, Claudius (playing at being King), Hamlet, the players. This idea is echoed in R&G by the players, by Guildenstern's pretending to be Hamlet, by the pretended death of the player etc. (see #4 above). There is a parallel also in the effect of the play within a play on the main characters -- King is rattled by the first but Hamlet is more so and R. and G. are rattled by the second.

7. Some characters occur only in R&G i.e. Alfred. His purpose seems to be mainly comic. Some characters assume different guises i.e. principal tragedian (Player) becomes Hamlet at times (see P 24) immobilized and unable to act. Guildenstern pretends to be Hamlet on Pp34-35 (See Truth and Illusion motif #9 below).
3. Questioning Motif: This is very much a part of both plays. In R&G it becomes obvious in the questions game. If you give any answers you lose. It is also present in the questioning of Hamlet by R and Guildenstern. Maynard Mack sees Hamlet as a "pre-eminently in the interrogative mood" and this mood is very much a part of R&G.

9. TRUTH AND ILLUSION MOTIF:

This becomes very important in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and is also of importance in Hamlet. The question in Hamlet is: how much of the madness is real and how much is feigned?. In R&G everything is brought into question. As Rosencrantz says (P 28):

I used to remember my own name - and yours, oh yes. ! There were answers everywhere you looked.

Guil: You did ... All your life you live so close to the truth, it becomes a permanent blur on the corner of your eye

Guil: Give us this day our daily mask

The Player makes the most important statement regarding this theme on P 45 beginning "There we were - demented children..."

Even the points of the compass are open to question in the play. No one knows in which direction South lies for instance. The reference is to Hamlet's speech which occurs in both plays "I am but mad north northwest". Day and night with the obvious symbolism inherent in them are also open to question as in P 71. (See also below #12 Symbolism)

10. Preoccupation with death or mortality:

This is very much a part of Hamlet in a. emphasis on human weakness

b. subjection of humanity to fortune and c. failure of man

There are parallels to these three ideas in R&G - a. human weakness - player's preoccupation with the decadent and off-colour (pp 16-17), reference to death of Hamlet Sr. and quick re-marriage of the Queen (P 35).

b. subjection of humanity to fortune (see #4 above)

c. failure of man - corruption of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is essentially innocent in R&G whereas they are seen as treacherous and evil in Hamlet.

ease with which action can be lost in "acting" is a recurrent idea in both plays

- fatalism of main character (ie Hamlet in Hamlet and R&G and R&G) is a part of this theme. The main characters inability to act is closely related to the motif of fate. Both Hamlet and R&G are unable to act. T

- This is never more obvious than on P 63-64 beginning :

Guil: Well, that's a step in the right direction
or on P 58 when he says:

"The bad end unhappily , the good unluckily"

11. Parallels: Other parallels include the repeated references to the ghost in both plays (i.e. P 51 - rapping on floor), the parallel idea in both plays that death is a leveler making all people ultimately equal, and the recurrent idea that questions the reality of death -- or at least the nature of this reality.

12. Symbolism: In R&G this is very much a part of the motifs:
 ie ship - a conventional symbol - journey of life This is tied also to the conventional symbol that water = life. For instance when R & G are assured of their fate (death) they speak of being left "high and dry"

The light-dark motif is also a conventional symbol. Light = life and dark = death but although at the end R & G have gotten it straight ghat the beginning of life and hope is in the dawning:

Guil: Our names shouted in a certain dawn ... a message ...
 a summons... There must have been a moment, at the
 beginning, where we could have said - no (P 91)

and at the end is she sunset

Ros: That's it, then is it? The sun's going down...(p 91)

the play is full of confusion as to which is which at a particular time.

Deann Barrera

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English 220

MWF 8:00am

Great
Journal,
missing
imitation

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

(Pg. 14) This is not the first time we have spun coins!

Does Guildenstern realize that they are doomed to repeat the same fate over and over? Because they are characters in a play, there is no other end for them except for what the playwright has in store for them. Unfortunately, even though it may be a brilliant play, there is not much room for variation from production to production.

Good

(Pg. 15) I forget. Mind you- eighty five times!

Why is it that Rosencrantz is oblivious to the fact that they are not in reality? He doesn't remember the past, there is no past for him. Only the things that have happened in the present are clear. Why doesn't it seem odd to him that he has no memories past what happened that morning?

Maybe because he remembers nothing different

(Pg. 15) I'm afraid it is.

Is he aware of his death? Is he aware that the events of this day are going to be cataclysmic and disrupt everything he has ever believed in? After the play ends, and someone else puts it on, does he remember any of the previous production or does he have to go through these discoveries all over again, with no idea of the outcome?

I think he has inkling of this

(Pg. 17) I have no desires. None.

Why doesn't he have any desires? Why does Rosencrantz say that he is happy? Does he know what happiness is? Why don't they have any goals or families or anything that normal people do?

Funny, but true
Because they weren't written that way

Why don't they see this as abnormal?

(Pg. 22) I'm sorry- his name's Guildenstern and my name's Rosencrantz.

If you look at the stage direction, it says that he makes this correction without embarrassment.

Does this happen often? Why? I think it may be because in Hamlet, they were such minor characters, that it didn't matter if they were mixed up. They were interchangeable. Both served the same purpose, and it didn't matter who was who.

✓ sure

(Pg. 34) It was tails.

What does this mean? What does it foreshadow? Is it a warning to expect the unexpected? Or

when you least expect it, expect it? Or maybe that things are not always what they seem? Maybe it is saying that Fate is a random thing. It is not predictable and anything can happen.

maybe
it means
the play
is starting

(Pg. 37) I want to go home.

Where is home? What is home? Does he have a home or is he just saying that because that's what people say when they want to be in another place? He doesn't remember anything about his past, how does he know that he has a home?

(Pg. 38) I remember when there were no questions.

I think Rosencrantz is saying that everything used to be easy then. Everything was spelled out for them and they didn't have to make any decisions about what to do or why they had to do it.

(Pg. 38) There were always questions.

I think Guildenstern is just saying that in life, there have always been questions. In general. The reason I bring this up is because they seem to be acting or speaking from two different planes a lot of the time. It seems to be only coincidence that together, their conversations make sense.

excellent

(Pg. 39) Give us this day our daily mask.

This is a great line. An unusual spin on a traditional phrase. Why does he say mask? Is it because

Yep! They are actors " " they play their roles to Gertrude and Claudius
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he and Rosencrantz are acting also? Putting up facades that shield the real characters from the audience? If so, why do they do this?

(Pg. 40) Till events have played themselves out.

As soon as the play is over, they can rest again before they have to go back on stage and re-enact the whole thing. They'll be alright as long as they can get through the production. If something were to happen and they couldn't get through it, well, that would be another story and I guess they wouldn't be alright.

(Pg. 41) Words, words. They're all we have to go on.

Without the script, they would be lost. I wonder if they are aware of the outcome? Or are they similar to the audience in the way that they are waiting to see what will happen next?

(Pg. 43) What's your name?

Great
Guildenstern is trying to figure out who he is and why he is even here. But he can't do that without knowing his name. He and Rosencrantz are extensions of each other. Maybe that's why they get each other confused.

(Pg. 45) Immortality is all I seek.

Why does he say this? Is he aware of his death? Or is he still unaware that he is not part of reality? In unreality, there is no mortality, kind of like an Alice in Wonderland thing.

(Pg. 45) Give us this day our daily week...

What does he mean by this? What is the importance of this phrase? Why is necessary to twist it like he does?

(Pg. 50) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are talking about Gertrude's relationship with Claudius. I love this part, it is so funny. He slipped in, his body was still warm, so was hers, too close, for comfort, etc, etc...

(Pg. 51) To sum up.

After the questioning, it is perfectly clear to these two why he is acting afflicted. They don't understand why it is so hard to see why he is so upset. But maybe, they believe that their explanation is too easy and there has got to be something else.

(Pg. 68) Stark, raving sane. Again, they can not see why everyone is being so blind about Hamlet. The answer seems so perfectly simple. Perhaps, because they are simple and open with each other, they don't understand all of the different masks a person can wear and see past the facade of Hamlet's contrived lunacy, into himself.

(Pg. 82) Well if it isn't!

Why doesn't he recognize himself? Maybe it is denial. Maybe it would really confuse him, knowing that he was dead, but then not dead. He definitely isn't in Heaven now.

(Pg. 85) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern take the places of the two dead spies on stage.

Why? And why are they not dead? Why are they able to come back and continue trying to "glean what afflicts" Hamlet? I think they should concentrate on themselves first.

(Pg. 123) Player is killed.

Yet, we see that it was only an act again. Nothing permanent can happen to these people. Mortality is an idea, but not something that can actually come to pass. The only thing that can kill a character is the playwright. When the characters don't follow the script, they still can't cause the play to deviate from what the author intended.

Good

This play is about Fate vs. Free Will. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tried to figure out what was happening to them and how they could avoid it. They attempted to deviate from the script and create their own lives. But Fate, or the playwright, or whatever, won't let them go.

They are doomed to stay in the same place for the rest of their lives, forever playing out what somebody else has dictated. So, for them, there is no Free Will, only Fate.

Or maybe this is a play about Reality and Unreality. In that case, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem to be stuck in the middle of these two planes. They are in a reality that says they have to go find out what is wrong with their childhood friend. Nothing is unusual about that request. People die, that is a reality. But, they soon find out that only certain people are allowed to die. It might just be predestination, but things don't work logically. All of Rosencrantz's experiments work for him, but fail with somebody else watching. All of their questions are futile, because they don't solve anything. Logic that would normally work in one place, won't. It refuses to prove itself. Absolutely poetic

I'm not sure what this play is saying about Life. Maybe it is saying that other people dictate what you do. Maybe it is that you should question everything, although it might not get you anywhere. Or that art tells us a lot about life and if we pay attention to it might prepare us to deal with future situations.

What's in it for the Player? I think that he might be God. There is an argument that he isn't because he doesn't seem to have the power to do anything about the situation. But I think he gave them a situation and wants them to figure out how to deal with it. Because of the fact that he explains things that would otherwise leave them confused, it makes me believe that he is some sort of higher power or being. He seems to try and direct them or narrate them along, like he does with his own Tragedians. I think he is also an audience of sorts, waiting to see how they are going to react to the next situation.

Although they are supposed to be dead, they never really are. You can always bring the play back and do it again. You can always vary it to some degree, but you can never really change

exactly

/ I like this

yep

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it. This means that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are doomed to repeat this forever.

perfect
I think they have a limited vision because they are limited characters. They didn't have a very big part in Hamlet and therefore, don't know much about what happens in the court. They weren't privy to any inside information and had to find out what they could on their own. Because they were such trivial characters, and are now major characters, the trivial issues play a big part in this play too.

Deann,
Excellent Journal!
(Can I get a
copy)
Thoughtful, open,
creative,
thorough,
powerful,
confident,
mg.

THE MESSY ROOM

a dialogue between mother & daughter
(based on a true story)

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- M • Deann, when are you going to clean up your room?
- D • When do I have to have it done?
- M • Don't you think it's a mess?
- D • Aren't I living in it?
- M • Can you even see the floor?
- D • DO I care?
- M • Don't you?
- D • When are you going to stop bugging me about this?
- M • When is it going to be cleaned?
- D • Can't it wait?
- M • Do you want to be grounded? /Ker j
- D • Can I have at least a week?
- M • What do you think your father's going to say?
- D • Is he home yet?
- M • When did he leave?
- D • Did he go to work today?
- M • Isn't he sick?
- D • Has he ever missed a day?
- M • When will he get home?
- D • Am I supposed to know?
- M • Do you know what he is going to do to you?
- D • What does he have to do with the state of my room?
- M • Who owns it?
- D • Don't I?
- M • Who pays for it?
- D • Okay, okay. I'll clean my room!

d

e
ers
ry
erk

True
Because they weren't
written that