

THE S. MARK TAPER FOUNDATION PRESENTS
A NOISE WITHIN'S REPERTORY THEATRE SEASON

STUDY **GUIDE**



ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

OCTOBER 7-NOVEMBER 18, 2018



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Pictured: Stephen Rockwell and JD Cullum. Photos by Craig Schwartz.

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Alicia Green
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Pictured: Donnlia Hughes, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2016. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

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CHARACTER MAP

Rosencrantz

A childhood friend of Hamlet who is now a gentleman. He tends to trust the outcome of events and does not think particularly hard about his experiences.

Guildenstern

A childhood friend of Hamlet who is now a gentleman. He tends to think a bit more critically about his experiences and questions events.

Gertrude

Hamlet's mother and the Queen of Denmark. After her late husband's death, she remarried to Claudius.

Claudius

Hamlet's uncle and the King of Denmark. After his brother's death, he married Gertrude, his brother's widow, and ascended the throne.

Hamlet

The Prince of Denmark. His recent strange behavior concerns Claudius, his uncle, and Gertrude, his mother.

Polonius

Advisor to Claudius and Gertrude.

Horatio

Hamlet's good friend from Wittenberg University.

Ophelia

The daughter of Polonius. She and Hamlet have romantic history.

Laertes

The son of Polonius. He kills Hamlet in a duel. He does not appear in the action of the play, but his body appears onstage in the final scene.

Player

The lead actor in a band of traveling tragedians. He and his troupe are on their way to perform a play in Elsinore.

The Players

The band of traveling tragedian actors.

Alfred

An actor in the group of tragedians. Alfred does not want to be an actor, and often plays the female parts in the tragedians' productions.

SYNOPSIS

As the play opens, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are betting on the outcome of flipped coins. Guildenstern has bet that the outcome of each flipped coin will be tails, and Rosencrantz has bet that each outcome will be heads. Rosencrantz is on a winning streak—the coin has landed heads up seventy-six times in a row. This begins to frustrate Guildenstern who knows that the laws of probability and logic should prevent such a streak. As they continue to flip coins, the two begin to remember how they arrived to where they are—a place described as one “without much visible character.” Rosencrantz recalls that a messenger had woken them up with an urgent royal summons. While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had set off in a hurry, they could not now remember where they were going. As they try to determine which direction they were heading, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hear music, and a band of tragedians enter.

Upon seeing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the leader of the tragedians, the Player, introduces himself and his troupe. The Player is ecstatic to have an audience, since times have been difficult for actors as of late. The Player lists all of the types of shows he and his troupe are capable of performing, including ones in which Guildenstern and Rosencrantz could participate. However, the tragedians will not perform for free. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are caught off guard, and the tragedians pack up to head off. Before they leave, Guildenstern stops the tragedians in a wager for how many times a coin, when flipped, will turn up heads. The tragedians eventually lose the bet and run out of money. In payment, Guildenstern proposes that the tragedians put on a play.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern then arrive in Elsinore, rather suddenly, where they see Hamlet act strangely to Ophelia. Gertrude and Claudius emerge to greet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and to ask them to figure out what has caused Hamlet’s recent erratic behavior. The two begin to brainstorm some of the reasons Hamlet might be distraught, and soon realize that Hamlet has quite a few reasons to be upset and acting strangely—Hamlet’s father died suddenly, his mother married his uncle, and his uncle ascended the throne. Hamlet then greets Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and welcomes them to Elsinore.

As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continue their conversation with Hamlet, Polonius announces that the Players have arrived. These players are the same tragedians Guildenstern and Rosencrantz met on their way to Elsinore. Hamlet asks the Player to put on a production of a play called *The Murder of Gonzago*. After the Player agrees to perform the play, Hamlet sets



“Boat, near Venice” by Edward William Cooke, 1858, Tate Collection

off, and the Player tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern how hurt he and the tragedians were to find that the two had left in the middle of the performance the tragedians had put on when they met Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on the road. As actors, the tragedians need an audience in order to exist. The Player tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he must learn new lines Hamlet has written for him for the play. As he leaves, the Player advises Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to relax. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern determine that Hamlet appears to be sane, considering his circumstances, and brief Gertrude, Claudius, and Polonius on Hamlet’s plan to put on a play that night.

The Players begin to rehearse the silent mimed portion of the play they are about to perform. Two spy characters in the mime closely resemble Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but as the two watch the rehearsal, they cannot place the resemblance. The two spy characters die, and Claudius is heard shouting for lights to come on and for the tragedian’s play to end. Claudius then enters to tell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that Hamlet has killed Polonius and that they must escort Hamlet to England and deliver a note to the King once they arrive. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern abide.

On the boat to England, Rosencrantz panics, believing he has lost the letter that they need to deliver to the King of England when they arrive. After finding the letter, the two role play how the King might react to their arrival. During this role play, they open the letter and discover that in it, Claudius has instructed the King of England to execute Hamlet. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Hamlet’s childhood friends, they are at a loss for what to do. Should they disobey their orders or help their friend? Eventually, Guildenstern suggests that they leave well enough alone, and the two fall asleep. As they sleep,

SYNOPSIS CONTINUED...

Hamlet replaces the original letter with the orders for his execution with a new letter.

The next day, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rise to the sound of distant music. Rosencrantz determines that the music is coming from inside a barrel on the ship's deck. When he opens the barrel, the tragedians emerge. Their performance in Elsinore had angered Claudius, and they stowed away on the ship. As they talk, the ship is attacked by pirates and great confusion and chaos ensues. When the attack is over, they notice Hamlet has disappeared. Angry, Guildenstern produces the letter that he and Rosencrantz are supposed to deliver to the King when they arrive in England. In the midst of his anger and his role play with Rosencrantz as to how the King might respond to their arrival, Guildenstern reads the letter only to find out that now, the letter demands for the immediate execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

The Player tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that death is common. However, Guildenstern does not believe the tragedians know anything of death, and stabs the Player. The Player acts out a death only to reveal that the knife Guildenstern had used was fake. The rest of the tragedians begin to act out gruesome deaths that mirror the deaths in the final scene of *Hamlet*. As the tragedians finish their performance, Rosencrantz disappears. Guildenstern is left alone onstage until he, too, disappears into darkness.

In Elsinore, Horatio stands among the corpses of Hamlet, Laertes, Claudius, and Gertrude. An ambassador enters to tell Horatio that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. ♦

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: **TOM STOPPARD**

Tom Stoppard was born as Tomáš Straüssler on July 3, 1937 in Zlín, Czechoslovakia. His parents were Martha Becková and Eugen Straüssler, who worked as a doctor for a shoe manufacturing company. In 1939, when Stoppard was two years old, Hitler's forces invaded Czechoslovakia. Stoppard had Jewish relatives, and in order to escape discriminatory laws aimed at restricting the freedoms of racial and ethnic minorities, his family fled to Singapore. However, in 1942, Japan invaded Singapore, and Stoppard's family were once again faced with the decision to flee or to stay. Stoppard, his brother, and his mother fled to Darjeeling, India, while his father remained in Singapore to work. Stoppard's father died in Singapore not long after his family evacuated.

In India, Stoppard attended Mount Hermon, an American school. There, he learned English. In 1946, while in Darjeeling, Stoppard's mother met Kenneth Stoppard, a major in the British Army. The two married, and the family moved to Derbyshire, England. After the marriage and the move, both Tom and his brother assumed Stoppard as their last name.

Stoppard continued his education in England until, at the age of seventeen, he landed a job as a reporter at the *Western Daily Press*, a newspaper in Bristol. In 1960, six years after beginning his career as a journalist, Stoppard moved to London to pursue a career as a playwright. During his first year in London, Stoppard wrote his first play *Walk on the Water*. This play caught the attention of Kenneth Ewing, who became Stoppard's agent. Stoppard continued to write periodically for newspapers and magazines for a time. In 1963, Stoppard saw an uncut production of *Hamlet* at The Old Vic theatre in London directed by Laurence Olivier and starring Peter O'Toole. Ewing mentioned that it would be interesting to explore what happens to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when they travel to England in a play.

In 1964, Stoppard wrote a one-act play called *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear* for a writers' conference in Berlin. Stoppard eventually developed the one-act into the full-length script, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, which premiered in performance at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. There, it received great critical acclaim. Upon hearing about the production, Kenneth Tynan, the literary manager



Tom Stoppard

at London's National Theatre, requested the script. In 1967, The National Theatre produced *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* at The Old Vic Theatre, and Stoppard became the youngest playwright to have a play performed at the theatre. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* transferred to Broadway later that year and won the Tony Award for Best Play.

After the success of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, Tom Stoppard continued to write plays to great critical acclaim. In 1972, his play *Jumpers* premiered at The National Theatre, and in 1974, his play *Travesties* premiered with the Royal Shakespeare Company. *Travesties* then transferred to New York in 1975, where it won the Tony Award for Best Play.

In 1977, Stoppard began to write stories centered on human rights and the treatment of Czech dissidents during World War II in his plays *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, and *Professional Foul*.

Since then, Stoppard has established himself as a writer whose fusion of intellectual thoughts and theories with emotion packs a powerful punch. This fusion is seen particularly in his 1993 work, *Arcadia* (which was staged at A Noise Within in 2016).

Stoppard, whose most recent play, *The Hard Problem*, premiered in 2015 has and continues to distinguish himself as one of the most prolific contemporary playwrights. ♦

TIMELINE: TOM STOPPARD

- 1937** Tom Stoppard is born as Tomáš Straüssler in Zlín, Czechoslovakia.
- 1939** Nazi German forces invade Czechoslovakia. Stoppard and his family flee to Singapore.
- 1942** Japan invades Singapore. Stoppard, his mother, and brother flee to Darjeeling, India. Stoppard's father remains in Singapore where he later dies.
- 1946** Stoppard's mother meets Kenneth Stoppard, a major in the British Army. They marry, and the family moves to England. Tom and his brother assume Stoppard as their last name.
- 1954** Stoppard leaves school and begins to write for the *Western Daily Press* in Bristol.
- 1958** Stoppard begins to write for the *Bristol Evening World*.
- 1960** Stoppard moves to London to pursue a career as a playwright and writes his first play, *Walk on the Water*.
- 1962** Stoppard begins to write as a theatre critic for *Scene* magazine in London under the pseudonym William Boot.
- 1963** Stoppard sees an uncut production of *Hamlet* directed by Sir Laurence Olivier at The Old Vic theatre in London.
- 1964** Stoppard writes a one-act play entitled *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear* at a writers' conference in Berlin.
- 1965** Stoppard marries Josie Ingle, a nurse.
- 1966** Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is first performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.
- 1967** *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* premieres at The Old Vic theatre in London. Stoppard becomes the youngest writer to have a work produced at The Old Vic. The play transfers to Broadway later that year. It is the first play to transfer from The Old Vic to Broadway. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* wins the Tony Award for Best Play, Best Scenic and Costume Design, and Best Producer.
- 1972** *Jumpers* premieres at The National Theatre in London. Stoppard divorces Josie Ingle, and marries Miriam Moore-Robinson.
- 1974** *Travesties* premieres with the Royal Shakespeare Company in London.
- 1975** *Travesties* transfers to Broadway.
- 1976** *Travesties* wins the Tony Award for Best Play.
- 1990** Stoppard adapts *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* into a screenplay and directs the film version of his play which stars Gary Oldman, Tim Roth, and Richard Dreyfuss.
- 1992** Stoppard's marriage to Miriam Stoppard ends.
- 1993** *Arcadia* premieres at The National Theatre in London.
- 1996** Martha Stoppard, Tom Stoppard's mother, dies.
- 1997** Stoppard is knighted as Sir Tom Stoppard.
- 1998** Stoppard co-writes the screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love* with Marc Norman.
- 1999** Stoppard and Norman win the Oscar Award for Best Original Screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love*. The film wins eight Oscar Awards in all including Best Picture.
- 2014** Stoppard marries Sabrina Guinness.
- 2017** *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is revived at The Old Vic theatre on the 50th anniversary of the play's premiere.

HAMLET: THE BACKDROP TO *ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD*

In a lot of ways, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is a retelling of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. While the lives of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when they are offstage in Shakespeare's work is foregrounded in Stoppard's work, the action of *Hamlet* drives the action of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. In fact, an understanding of Stoppard's play seems to rely on an understanding of *Hamlet*. Below is a summary of the key plot points in *Hamlet*.

Before the play:

- Hamlet's father died rather suddenly.
- Claudius, Hamlet's uncle, married Gertrude, Hamlet's widowed mother.
- Claudius ascended the throne in Elsinore.

Act One

- A ghost is seen walking around the castle's battlements. The ghost looks like Hamlet's late father.
- Hamlet confronts the ghost. The ghost tells Hamlet that his death was not natural—he was murdered by his brother, Claudius, who now wears his crown.
- Hamlet vows to avenge his father's murder and decides to put on a front and act crazy in front of his parents and their advisor.

Act Two

- Polonius determines that the source of Hamlet's madness is his love for Ophelia.
- Claudius and Gertrude summon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two of Hamlet's childhood friends, to watch over Hamlet and to figure out why he has been acting out.
- Players arrive in Elsinore, and Hamlet asks them to perform a play for the court whose plot resembles the way Claudius murdered Hamlet's father and assumed power.

Act Three

- The Players perform *The Murder of Gonzago* for the court. The play upsets Claudius, and Hamlet determines that the ghost was telling the truth about Claudius's actions.
- Hamlet accidentally murders Polonius, thinking he is killing Claudius.

HAMLET (in 3 Panels)



Act Four

- Claudius arranges for Hamlet to be sent to England, and to be executed upon his arrival there. He sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to escort Hamlet.
- Ophelia goes mad after her father's death and drowns in a river.
- Hamlet finds out that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have a letter saying that Hamlet should be executed when they arrive in England. Hamlet switches that letter with one that says Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should be killed when they arrive.
- Hamlet sends word to Claudius that he has returned from England—pirates attacked the ship he was on, and he was able to escape.
- Ophelia's brother, Laertes, conspires with Claudius to kill Hamlet.

Act Five

- Hamlet returns and Laertes challenges Hamlet to a fencing duel.
- The two duel—Laertes' sword has been dipped in poison so that it will easily kill Hamlet.
- Claudius poisons Hamlet's wine.
- Laertes scratches Hamlet with the poison sword. Hamlet scratches Laertes with the poison sword too.
- Gertrude drinks from Hamlet's cup and dies.
- Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poison sword and makes him drink from the poisoned cup.
- Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet die.

“BRING OUT YOUR DEAD!”

TOM STOPPARD AND THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD IN *ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD*

BY DR. MIRANDA HADDAD

Tom Stoppard's first major hit, the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, was initially performed at the Edinburgh Festival fringe in 1966, well before British comedian and Monty Python member Eric Idle, sounding very bored, exhorted the plague-stricken townspeople to “Bring out your dead!” in the 1975 film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Yet it is difficult to imagine this film without Stoppard's play and the literary and theatrical traditions that contributed to it. In many respects, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (aka *RosandGuil*) enabled not only the Monty Python show and movies, but also the work of many other comedians, playwrights, and screenwriters as well, from the comedy sketches of Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie, to Stoppard's own 1998 Oscar-winning screenplay *Shakespeare in Love*, and continuing all the way to Quentin Tarantino; *The Corinnetto Trilogy* (including *Hot Fuzz* and *Sean of the Dead*), written by and starring Simon Pegg and Nick Frost; the zany *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*; and even the supremely silly *Mystery Science Theater 3000* series.

Playwright Tom Stoppard was born in Czechoslovakia in 1937 and fled the country with his family on the eve of the Nazi occupation, ultimately settling in Britain, where he has been knighted and is now regarded as one of Britain's greatest cultural heroes. It is notable, however, that Stoppard's first major success was a play that takes aim at a text that may well be the most iconic and famous work by Britain's most iconic and famous playwright: *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare, written in approximately 1603. Moreover, the entire premise of *RosandGuil* is essentially a joke based on a single line that is spoken at the very end of *Hamlet* (Act 5, scene 2, line 411, Folger Library edition), when the Ambassador from England arrives at the Danish court to announce that “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead,” only to find most of the court lying dead in the throne room and no one left alive to thank him for his news. The irony of this moment is amplified by the fact that King Claudius actually never issued any such command, and that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern died because of Hamlet's craftiness and their own inability to identify, much less adhere to, any kind of moral compass for themselves.

What Stoppard discerns so brilliantly about the line in *Hamlet*, and what forms the basis for much of the humor in his own play, is the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do indeed seem to be completely interchangeable characters throughout most of *Hamlet*. Certainly since Stoppard wrote his play, and probably before, performance traditions around productions of

Hamlet have been in on the joke as well. When Claudius, in Act 2, scene 2, says to the two men, “Thanks, Rosencrantz, and gentle Guildenstern,” and Gertrude adds, “Thanks, Guildenstern, and gentle Rosencrantz,” most contemporary productions tend to show either Claudius, or Gertrude, or both, mixing the two men up. In Stoppard's play even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves aren't always sure who's who, and Stoppard's genius lies in his ability to convince us that such confusion doesn't seem like much of a stretch from Shakespeare's original.

As a play, *RosandGuil* shows the influence of various theatrical movements that began in the middle of the 20th century, particularly the so-called Theatre of the Absurd as represented in the works of such playwrights as Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Eugene Ionesco, among others. (Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is often cited as a possible inspiration for *RosandGuil*.) Theatre of the Absurd was itself influenced by the philosophical thought and writings of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others, and we can see these different traditions at work in Stoppard's play: stylistically, in the rapid-fire, back-and-forth dialogue interspersed with longer philosophizing speeches and awkward silences; and thematically, in the preoccupation with such existentialist concerns as death and the ultimate emptiness of life. And of course, we see the influence of these traditions in the humor, at times bordering on just plain silliness, of Stoppard's play. Some literary critics have suggested that the Theatre of the Absurd playwrights drew their ideas and inspiration from Elizabethan drama and literature, making Stoppard's choice of *Hamlet* as his jumping-off point all the more appropriate.

Another more recent literary genre to which *RosandGuil* also belongs is that of the alternate perspective narrative. These are works of literature or drama in which a familiar story is re-told from the point of view of a minor character in the original tale, or sometimes from the perspective of a character who has historically been portrayed as the villain of the story. Examples include the novel *The Mists of Avalon*, by Marion Zimmer Bradley, who retells the Arthurian legends from the viewpoint of the women characters, or Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which conveys the story of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of Mr. Rochester's mad wife. The blockbuster Broadway musical *Wicked*, which portrays the events of *The Wizard of Oz* from the point of view of Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West, also falls into this genre. Such revisionist narratives, especially

“BRING OUT YOUR DEAD!” CONTINUED...

when they give voice to a silenced (usually female) character serve as correctives, displacing the (usually male) protagonist and serving to humanize and give dimension to characters who may be more familiar to us as unsympathetic villains or insignificant ciphers (such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose deaths Shakespeare's *Hamlet* dismisses without a moment's thought).

The performance history of *RosandGuil* offers fascinating insights into how this play has continued to speak to different generations of actors and audiences. Particularly in England, many actors who appeared in the play relatively early in their careers went on to become well-known Shakespearean actors both on the British stage and in film. In the 50th anniversary production in 2017 in London, the actor Daniel Radcliffe, famous from starring in the eight *Harry Potter* films, played Rosencrantz to considerable critical acclaim. The 1990 film version of the play features Tim Roth (from the 2001 film *Planet of the Apes* and the TV series *Lie to Me*) as Guildenstern; Gary Oldman as Rosencrantz (Oldman is now also very familiar to audiences from the *Harry Potter* films, in which he plays Sirius Black; and in 2018, Oldman won an Oscar for his portrayal of Winston Churchill in *Darkest Hour*); and a young Iain Glen (better known these days as Ser Jorah Mormont on the HBO series *Game of Thrones*) as Hamlet.

How well does an audience member need to know Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in order to appreciate *RosandGuil*? It certainly helps to have at least a passing familiarity with *Hamlet*, and the more familiar the viewer is with Shakespeare's play, the more they will appreciate the jokes and sly humor of *RosandGuil*. One running gag, for example, involves Rosencrantz and Guildenstern shaking their heads in confusion over the fact that Hamlet keeps “talking to himself”; but if we are familiar with Shakespeare's play, we know that Hamlet frequently speaks in soliloquies (including the famous “To be, or not to be” speech), and we can enjoy the joke, one of many that are made at the expense of the clueless Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Stoppard's play also interpolates many lines of dialogue and stage directions from *Hamlet*, which we can better appreciate (both in performance and when reading *RosandGuil*) if we are familiar with Shakespeare's play.

Moreover, the themes of *RosandGuil* are also the themes of *Hamlet*; these themes include: questioning what role, if any, does Fate play in a person's life; the practices of spying and eavesdropping (and the resulting performance choices to set the play in some type of authoritarian surveillance state); trying to outsmart one's enemies; the characters' struggles to accept that some forces may be beyond their control; and, ultimately, resigning oneself

to one's fate. Much of the brilliance of the Stoppard play lies in the playwright's recognition that *Hamlet* itself is, in many ways, a very modern play, especially in the self-conscious awareness shown by the characters and by Hamlet in particular. This self-awareness anticipates such twentieth-century dramatic theories and concepts as Theatre of the Absurd, and also the concept of Metatheatre and Metatheatrical drama, in which a play calls attention to itself as a play and thus not real, an idea that very much informs *RosandGuil*.

But regardless of how well we know Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we can enjoy Stoppard's play on its own merits; and even as we shake our heads over Rosencrantz's slow-wittedness, or Guildenstern's powerless rages, we also can't help but feel a pang of sympathy for these two characters, who bumble along, doing the best they can to make their way in a complex world that in the end proves to be just too much for them. Their confused attempts to understand what is going on, and to make sense of their life's purpose, mirror our own struggles to do the same. In the end, Stoppard seems to say, we can do a lot worse than accept our lot with resignation and laugh at ourselves—but we have the choice as well to do much better than that. ♦

Additional Resources: The 50th anniversary edition of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (Grove Press, 2017) includes a new Preface by Tom Stoppard, as well as the cast lists of significant productions from 1966-2017.

The 1990 film version (starring Tim Roth as Guildenstern, Gary Oldman as Rosencrantz, Richard Dreyfuss as the Player, and Iain Glen as Hamlet) was revised and directed by Stoppard himself. (Note: the film's entry on IMDB includes some fun trivia facts about last-minute cast changes and the filming process.)

On YouTube, see the wonderfully compelling clip of a brief scene from *RosandGuil* starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Kobna Holdbrook Smith that was performed as part of a gala celebration at the National Theatre in London on November 2, 2013, entitled “National Theatre: 50 Years on Stage.”

For other “alternate” versions of *Hamlet*, see the Margaret Atwood short story “Gertrude Talks Back” in her collection *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (2001); and the Ian McEwan novel *Nutshell* (2016), which is told from the point of view of Hamlet as a fetus.

For further reading on Shakespeare's plays, see Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (Anchor Press, 2005), a masterfully insightful discussion of all of Shakespeare's plays by a well-known Harvard professor. See also Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2004 and the 2016 anniversary edition), in which the renowned Harvard professor discusses several of Shakespeare's plays, including *Hamlet*, in terms of how they may have reflected or been influenced by events in the playwright's own life.

For further reading on the Theatre of the Absurd, see Martin Esslin's classic work, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (written in 1961 and reissued in subsequent editions); Esslin himself coined the term “Theatre of the Absurd.”

NOT recommended: the 2009 film *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Undead*. Yes, this is a real thing, and yes, the best thing about it is the title.

HAMLET EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism is a philosophical theory that has to do with where we find meaning in our lives. Ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle believed that every human being is born with an essence, a specific set of core properties or traits. They took that thought further and said that part of what it is to be a good human is to adhere to your innate essence. This essence, then, gives a purpose to your life as it guides you toward certain behaviors and away from others.

However, in the mid 20th Century, French philosopher and playwright, Jean-Paul Sartre, proposed the idea that perhaps we are born without any innate essence or purpose, perhaps we exist before we find our essence. This idea, that existence precedes essence, is the basis for the theory of existentialism. Existentialism proposes that if we are not born with an intrinsic or programmed essence, it is up to us to find meaning in our lives.

However, our quest for meaning is not a quest for answers. In existentialism, the world is believed to be answerless—that is, it holds no answers to our questions about purpose and meaning. In fact, in existential thought, the search for answers for questions concerning essence and reason out in the world is considered absurd. Absurdity, in existential thought, is defined as the search for answers in an answerless world. Because the world is answerless, there is not definite reason.

The existential concept of absurdity came about in the wake of World War II. The extreme devastation of World War II left many skeptical about the existence of an overarching reason in the world. This skepticism was a huge influence on philosophical thought following the war, and a huge influence on the creation of existentialism as a theory.

This lack of reason and lack of pre-programmed essence in the world leads to an abundance of freedom in terms of the choices individuals are able to make throughout their lives. On the one hand, this freedom is so vast that it is almost terrifying—where do you go to find meaning? On the other hand, this freedom allows everyone to be able to define and create the terms for their own existence. ♦

Edited from: Crash Course Philosophy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaDvRdLMkHs&vI=en>

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[https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/crash-course/#.](https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/crash-course/#.WxBSfVMvzOQ)

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"John Philip Kemble as Hamlet" by Sir Thomas Lawrence, 1801, Tate Collection

ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD AND EXISTENTIALISM

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on a mission. They cannot, however, exactly remember what that mission is, where they are headed, or even who they are—often, the two mix up who is Rosencrantz and who is Guildenstern. They appear to exist in a world that is only loosely bound to principles of reality and laws of the universe, a world that does not have definite divisions of space or a definite character. In pursuit of their mission, they often find themselves tangled up in unanswerable questions, unsure of how to proceed. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is often considered to be a semi-existential comedy. In many ways, existential ideas are at the core of Tom Stoppard's play.

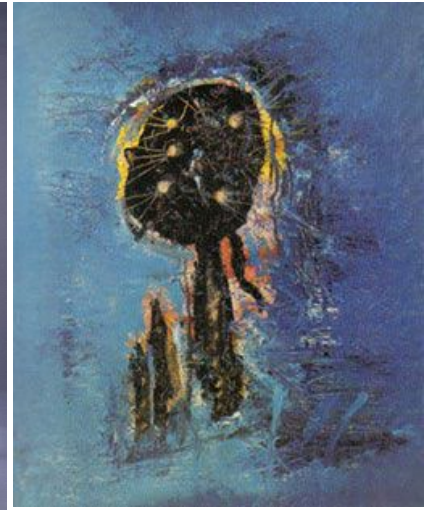
According to existentialism, existence precedes essence. That is, a person is born without an essence, or a set of core characteristics and personality traits, and that an individual's essence comes from his or her interaction with the world. Right from the start, we see that the world of the play is one in which existence appears to precede essence. As the play opens, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are placing bets on the outcome of a flipped coin. In this initial action, the two are seen as existing in a space that does not have much distinguishing character or essence. They themselves have a difficult time remembering what it is that has led them to where they are. Their existence in the space is definite while the reasons for their being in the space and the reason for their actions is not. In this sense, the existence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is definite, while the essence, or character traits of the two characters, appears to be less defined.

Then, there are the rules of the world which appear to stray from reason. Every time Rosencrantz or Guildenstern flips a coin in the opening sequence, the coin lands heads side-up. This goes against the law of probability that assumes that every time a coin is flipped, it has an equal chance of landing on heads or tails and therefore should land tails side-up about as often as it lands heads side-up. Existentialism takes the stance that there are no laws or reason in the world. Since the law of probability does not seem to be in effect, it appears that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are in an existential realm, a realm without definite, dependable rules.

It is important to consider the historical context from which Stoppard was writing in order to understand the role existential ideas play in this work. Stoppard was



"Walking Man" by Alberto Giacometti, 1960.



"Blue Phantom" by Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze, 1951.

born just before the start of World War II, a war that caused massive and widespread destruction. Stoppard's family did not escape that destruction entirely: Eugen Straüssler, Stoppard's father, was killed by the Axis Powers in Singapore. Existentialism emerged, in large part, in response to the chaos and devastation of World War II, at a time in which the natural laws of the universe did not seem to make sense and ambiguity ruled. The world appeared to be an absurd place—a place without answers.

While existentialism is a prominent force in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the play is not a purely existential work. What sets *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* apart from a pure existential play is the meta-theatrical elements that run through the work. In a discussion with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, The Player says that the fates of the characters in the plays the Tragedians perform are not decided, they are written, and that it is his goal to "aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies." Considering that the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are written to die in *Hamlet*, as well as considering the title of the play, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, the fates of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz appear to be set before the play even begins. The fact that the fates of the two lead characters are determined before the action of the play unfolds does not adhere to the tenants of an existential work. ♦

META-THEATRE: A PLAY-WITHIN-A-PLAY

Meta-theatre is a literary term defined as “theatre that draws attention to its unreality,” according to the Oxford English dictionary. The most common way a piece of theatre draws attention to its unreality is through the use of a play-within-a play. While this device allows the audience to become aware that the work they are watching is a piece of fiction, it also holds a mirror up to the performer-audience relationship and asks the audience to examine the role they play in a theatrical performance.

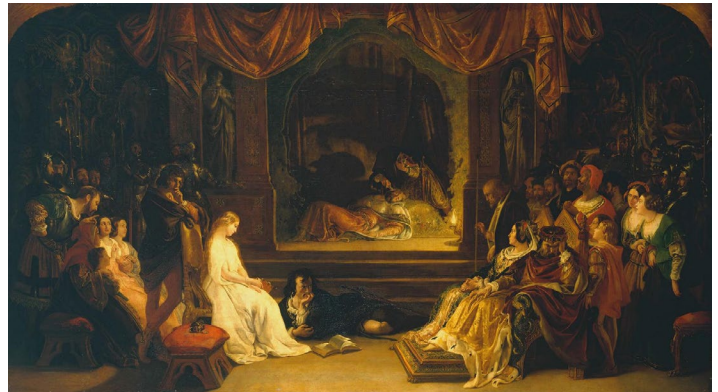
Meta-theatre plays a significant role in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. In fact, it operates at a number of levels in the play.

LEVEL ONE: *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* as a play within *Hamlet*

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* provides the framework for Stoppard’s play. In fact, the action of *Hamlet* drives much of the action of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. In his play, Stoppard has taken two minor characters from *Hamlet* and expanded upon their role and experience during the action of *Hamlet*. In this sense, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is a play within *Hamlet*.

LEVEL TWO: *Hamlet* as a play within *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*

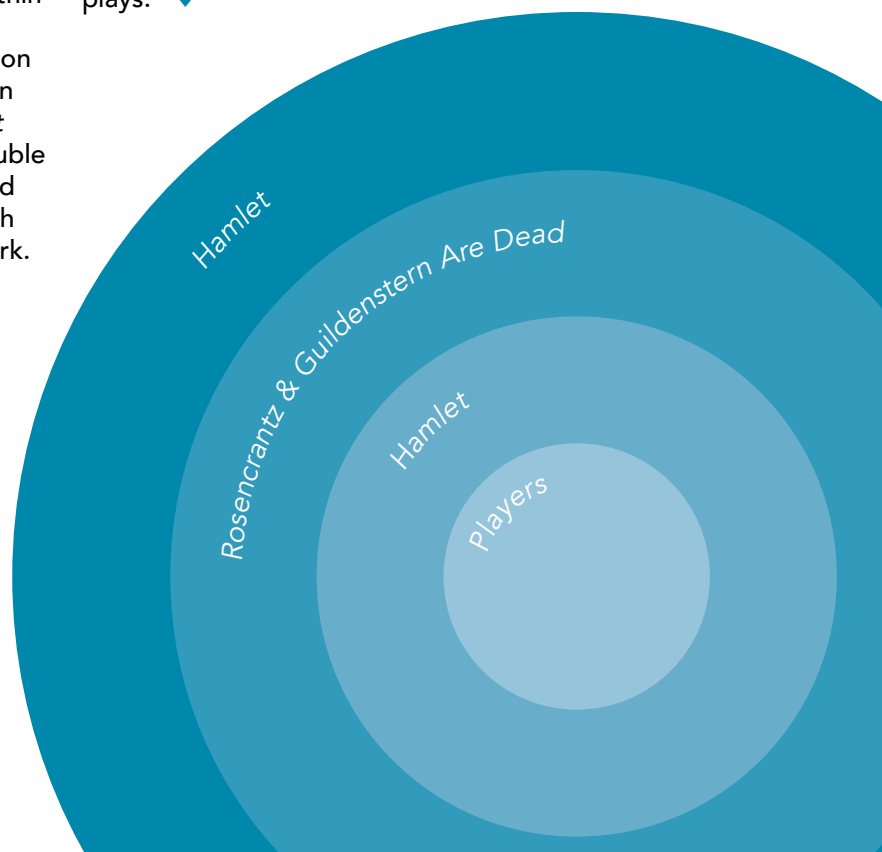
While *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* exists within *Hamlet*, Stoppard’s inclusion of the text from large passages of *Hamlet* as well as the inclusion of the action of *Hamlet* taking place in the background of the action between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern places *Hamlet* within *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. This double meta-theatre relationship between Stoppard’s play and Shakespeare’s play highlights the large extent to which the two works are intrinsically linked in Stoppard’s work.



“The Play Scene in Hamlet” by Daniel Maclise, 1842, Tate Collection.

LEVEL THREE: The Players’ play-within-a-play

In Shakespeare’s work, Hamlet asks a group of traveling players to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* for the court. In *The Murder of Gonzago*, the King’s nephew, Lucianus becomes jealous of the King. Lucianus decides to kill his brother by pouring poison in his ear while he is sleeping in order to woo the Queen and to usurp his brother’s throne. The action of *The Murder of Gonzago* is almost identical to the actions Claudius took in order to become King of Denmark. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the Players both rehearse their performance of the play for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and perform the play for the court at the same time. In this sense, the Players’ play-within-a-play, becomes a play-within-two-plays. ♦



ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD THEMES

AUTHENTICITY AND PERFORMANCE

Guildenstern: Well...aren't you going to change into your costume?

Player: I never change out of it, sir.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spend much of their time trying to decide what in their world is real, and what is not. This extends to attempts to decide when other characters mean what they say and do. However, in the play, the line between authentic interactions and performance is often blurred. Such is the case in many of the pair's interactions with the Player. The Player, who is always ready to put on a show, is the leader of a troupe of actors desperate for performance opportunities. When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern interact with the Tragedians and especially the Player, it is difficult to tell where the Player and the Tragedians begin and end their performances. Guildenstern has a hard time with this concept. As Tragedians prepare for their performance for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the following interaction takes place:

Guildenstern: Aren't you going to—come on?

Player: I am on.

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

Player: I start on.

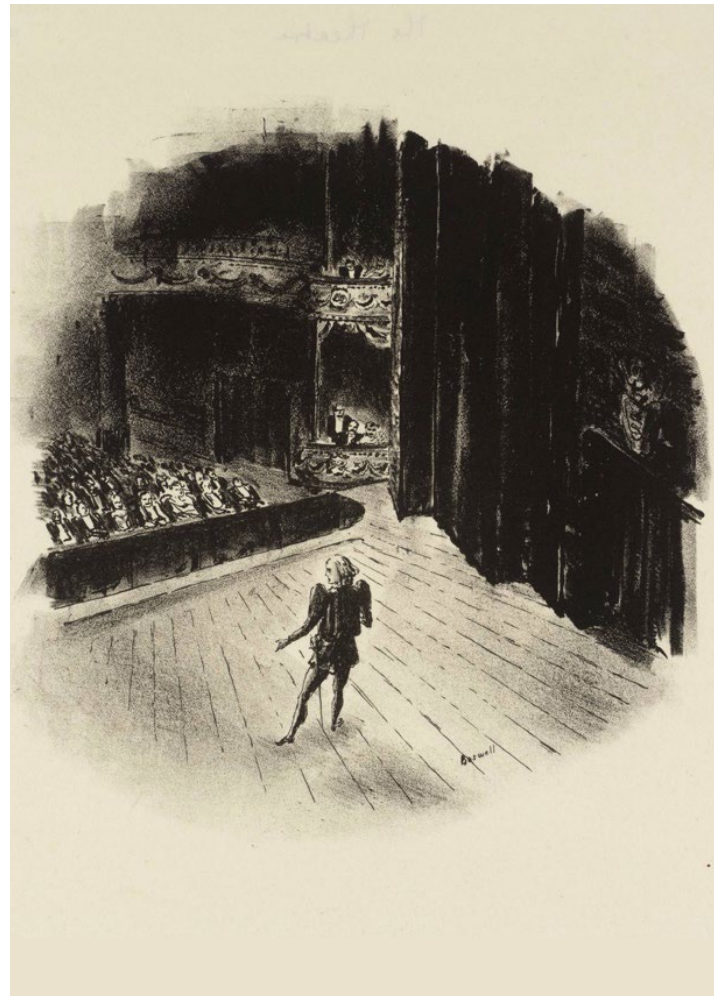
Guildenstern: But it hasn't started.

In this interaction, the Player suggests that he is always "on"—always acting, ready to step into a performance at any moment. Even when the Player exits a space, he looks "on every exit being an entrance somewhere else." Because the Player always seems to be performing, it is difficult to tell when the Player is speaking as himself, authentically. The Player is concerned with believability more than with authenticity. It matters more to him that others believe what he is saying or doing more than if what he is saying or doing is real. The Player touches on his feelings about authenticity in performance when he describes a time in which, during a performance, he had a man actually hanged. The Player says that the hanged man did not give a convincing death. The authenticity of the real death got in the way of the believability of the performance.

MORTALITY

Guildenstern: The only beginning is birth and the only end is death—if you can't count on that, what can you count on?

Death plays a prominent role in this play. Just from



"The Theatre" by James Boswell, 1939, Tate Collection.

the title, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, we can tell that the two leading characters are going to meet an end. Even before they realize that the letter they are carrying to England holds instructions for the King of England to kill them upon their arrival, the two contemplate death. Rosencrantz imagines what it must be like to be dead, in a box in the ground, and Guildenstern engages in a discussion about the theatrical portrayal of death with the Player. In his discussion, Guildenstern argues that death is nothing gory or glamorous. In fact, death is such an elusive thing that it is notactable:

"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 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

ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD THEMES CONTINUED...

"Study of a Human Skull" artist unknown, c. 1750, Tate Collection.

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."

When Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ultimately face their deaths, they have no brave final moment, no heroic last line. Instead, they quietly disappear, slipping away into the darkness, there one minute and gone the next.

IDENTITY

Player: We're actors...we pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade, that someone would be watching.

Throughout the play, characters seem to be in search of their identities. The Tragedians' understanding of their identity relies on the presence of an audience. Without an audience to perform for, The Tragedians' cannot be Tragedians as theatrical storytelling depends on the relationship between performers and audience members. In this sense, the Tragedians' identities are at the mercy of the availability of an audience. The only Tragedian whose identity is not solely reliant on the presence of an audience is Alfred. Alfred is the only one of the group to have a name, a unique identifier. He has also made it known that he does not want to be an actor. These two qualities—the fact that Alfred has a name and does not want to be an actor—give Alfred an identity beyond that of only a Tragedian. Regardless of if there is an audience to perform in front of, Alfred will be Alfred: his identity is

not entirely defined by his profession, or by the presence of an audience.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern also struggle with their identities. The two are often mixed up by other characters in the play. In the fact that we see other characters call Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by the other's name, we see that the world views Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a unit. Others' idea of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a pair, inseparable and indistinguishable, influences Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's understanding of their own identities. Occasionally, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern mix up their own names. The fact that it is difficult for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to remember who they are highlights the role others' perceptions can play in one's idea of self-identity.

UNCERTAINTY

Player: Uncertainty is the normal state. You're nobody special.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are often confused. At the start of the play, they do not know where they are going or why, or even who they are. Their confusion persists through to the end of the play when they do not have a solid understanding of what they should do once they see that they are carrying orders for their own execution.

Rosencrantz is quicker to trust his surroundings than Guildenstern. Guildenstern does not sit well with uncertainty. His attempt at rationalizing how the law of probability has allowed a flipped coin to only land heads-up is evidence of his discomfort with a lack of reason.

As the two endure the events of the play they become increasingly tangled in uncertainty. They do not know exactly when their service to Claudius and Gertrude will end, or what will become of them once it ends. They do not know what they should do after they find out they are carrying Hamlet's death warrant. They do not even know if England is real—Rosencrantz says that he does not believe England exists.

Moreover, the rule of the world in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist becomes increasingly uncertain as the play progresses. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern suddenly, appear in Elsinore. Once there, they note that it appears common for individuals to talk to themselves. Later, on the boat to England, the entire band of Tragedians emerges from three barrels on the ship's deck. The two even face uncertainty in death. Because their deaths are disappearances, it is uncertain when or how the two die.



ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD AS A RETELLING

The link between Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is irrefutable. In fact, Tom Stoppard relies upon much of the action in *Hamlet* to drive the action of his play. Because the action of *Hamlet* is so inextricably linked to the action of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, Stoppard's play is often considered a retelling of Shakespeare's work.

Although Stoppard uses the events of *Hamlet* as the background to the action of his play, Shakespeare's play provides the framework and limitations for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. At any point where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern consider taking any action which may cause them to deviate from Shakespeare's narrative, a scene from *Hamlet* sweeps across the stage and sets the pair back on track. It is however, interesting to note that Stoppard places one of the most instantly recognizable speeches in the English language—Hamlet's "To be or not to be"—in the background as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have a scene in the foreground. While Prince Hamlet is contemplating his own mortality, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are trying to decide if they should approach him to chat about his mental state. This is an example of how an understanding of Stoppard's play and the comedy within Stoppard's play relies on an understanding of the source play.

In choosing to tell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's story, Stoppard certainly makes us consider that there is more than one story worth telling, that there are many more stories woven into the Shakespeare canon; voices of every man and woman who don't get considered when the focus is on Kings. These stories from our past and our present are maybe not being heard as Shakespeare's plays still dominate our stages.

Beyond its obvious connections to *Hamlet*, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* also has many connections to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's absurdist drama depicts two clown-like characters, Vladimir and Estragon, as they wait for a man named Godot. As they

wait for Godot, Vladimir and Estragon engage in verbal games and slapstick bits. Similarly, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern engage in question games, philosophical talks, and physical comedic bits as they try to remember what it is they are meant to be doing at the start of the play. While it is clear that Beckett's play was of some influence on Stoppard's play, the two works do differ in terms of their genre categorizations. There is virtually no structure or logical order to the world in *Waiting for Godot*. While there is uncertainty surrounding the exact nature of the laws of the world in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, there is some degree of structure that emerges from the play's relationship with the plot of *Hamlet*. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern end up arriving in Elsinore, and they contribute to the overall arc of Shakespeare's story. The world in *Waiting for Godot*, on the other hand, does not adhere to any kind of logical order. The fact that the world in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is orderly, to an extent, sets it apart from *Waiting for Godot* and other works of Theatre of the Absurd.

Ian Johnston, in his lecture on the play, suggests that *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is a fine example of post-modernism, a response to Nietzsche's "call for us to appropriate our cultural past and turn it to our own original purposes, deriving from the process the highest delights of human life: the joy in artistic play." While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are trapped by *Hamlet*, unable to create or invent, Stoppard seems to suggest that as contemporary artists and audiences we are not. There is both merit and delight in playing with great ideas and exploring the possibilities within them; indeed it could be this that marks our very humanity. ♦

Edited from: <https://oldvic-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2017/05/Rosencrantz-Guildenstern-Are-Dead-Education-Pack.pdf>

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR GEOFF ELLIOTT

Q: What do you admire about Tom Stoppard?

I fell in love with Stoppard the first time I read *Arcadia*. I picked it up and could not put it down. Much of it I couldn't understand the first time because it seemed very dense, but at the same time, I knew that I was reading greatness. I had to reread it and by the third reading, I began to understand what was really going on. The fascinating thing about Stoppard is on the page, it can seem very dense, but he is such a genius that he is able to help us feel as though we are smarter than we probably are. By the end of watching a production of his, you really feel as though you understand these concepts and why they are important to our lives.

Q: How did you ultimately pick to direct *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*?

When I picked up *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* at the beginning of this year, just like *Arcadia*, I couldn't put it down, and I immediately fell in love with it. The play is really dealing with life—it's kind of a heavy description, but keep in mind, it is hilarious. Although it ends in their death, as we know from the title, getting there is an absolute hoot. By the time you get to the end of the play, it's not so much sad as it is incredibly mysterious—almost eerie. It's truly and incredibly crafted work of genius.

Q: To you, what is the play about?

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is really about these two minor characters and what happens to them as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is going on around them. They've been spit out into this world with a vague memory of how they got there, but they don't know what direction they're going in. People keep bursting in, and they have to respond to these people, often with Shakespeare's lines. These two guys are trapped in this almost existential world in which people come and go and the two of them have to try to figure out how to survive. The play really is a metaphor for our lives. From the time we're born until we die. The experience Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go through is really the kind of experience all of us go through—we were also spit out into this world.

Q: Why haven't you done this play before?

This will be our first time doing this play because, to be honest, I wasn't terribly familiar with it. It was very, very famous but I never had the chance to read it. When I read *Arcadia*, it really devoured me and I began to turn my head towards Stoppard, and when I did, I fell in love with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. I'm actually delighted that we've never done it before because it's a whole clean slate for us to work on!

Q: What should the audience expect?

I think for an audience, first and foremost, they are going to be surprised as to how funny it is. But I think ultimately the audience is going to go away with a great deal to chew on and to think about. Not only in terms of how Tom Stoppard could have created such a dynamic, intelligent play, but also what it means for all of us in terms of the roles that we play in our own lives. ♦

TOM STOPPARD'S PREFACE TO THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION OF **ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD**

When *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* opened in April 1967—performed by the National Theatre at the Old Vic—a play about Hamlet's 'excellent good friends' had been on my mind for three years or so. I had spent part of the summer of 1964 in Berlin at a 'literary colloquium' for promising young playwrights, and my graduation piece was a sketch about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern finding themselves in England. I developed this backwards into a full-length play in which our heroes are discovered on their way to Elsinore, and it was accepted by the Royal Shakespeare Company. But the planned production fell by the wayside, and the RSC passed the script to the incumbent director of the Oxford Theatre Group. The OTG performed the play at the Edinburgh Festival fringe in August 1966. A review by Ronald Bryden in the *Observer* was such that when I returned to London it was to find a telegram from Kenneth Tynan, the literary manager of the National Theatre, asking to read the play.

In 1966 the administration of the National Theatre occupied a long wooden hut with a rehearsal room at one end, Laurence Olivier's office at the other, and somewhere between the two a tiny room hardly big enough to contain Tynan's desk. A hatch in the wall communicated with his secretary. Ten years earlier, Tynan, as the *Observer's* theatre critic, had changed the landscape with his review of *Look Back in Anger*. Six years earlier, I had written my first play. As far as I was concerned, to be sitting in Tynan's visitor's chair was to have arrived on Olympus. He had an attractive stammer, and to my consternation I heard myself stammering back

at him. I remember nothing else of our meeting except that his primrose yellow polo-necked shirt—a short-lived fashion—gave him much pleasure.

At the beginning of March—by which time I had at Olivier's prompting added my play—'R and G', as I called it, was in rehearsal. One day, Oliver popped in to watch for a while. He offered a suggestion, and as he left the room he turned and said, 'Just the odd pearl.' In due course we occupied the Old Vic stage for our technical rehearsals, followed by the dress rehearsal, and the next night we opened. Previews, an American innovation, were as yet unknown in England, so the terror of the opening night was on a scale I was not to experience again.

This it was that I and my wife sat watching the curtain go up on 11 April, and not many minutes later an elderly man in evening dress sitting in front of us sighed heavily and muttered, 'I do wish they'd get on.' It was largely because of him, I think, that we never emerged from the pub at the first interval and were pleasantly surprised by the exulting actors when the play was over.

For fifty years now, on being asked what *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is about, I have stood pat on 'It's about two courtiers at Elsinore.' I wasn't insensitive to more suggestive possibilities but I took the view that every subjective response had its own validity: no interpretations endorsed, none denied. The one I liked best, however, was by a Fleet Street journalist who was at the first night. 'I get it,' he said, 'it's two reporters on a story that doesn't stand up.' ♦

Source: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard. 50th Anniversary Edition. Published by Grove Press, New York in 2017.

PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **RESEARCH**

Purpose:

These research prompts will help students develop an understanding of the historical, cultural, and literary context of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Prepare:

Have students research the following topics, either in groups or individually. When they are finished, have students present their findings to the class.

Elizabethan Era

- Dates
- Morals
- Politics
- Key literary figures
- Social class structure
- Tradition of traveling player troupes
- Theatre

Hamlet

- Performance history—date written, date of first performance, reception of performance, etc.

Existentialism

- The philosophy
- The history of the philosophy
- Existential thinkers
- Existential writers
- Existential works of art and writing

Tom Stoppard

- His childhood
- His education
- His family
- His other works:
 - ♦ *Arcadia*
 - ♦ *Travesties*
 - ♦ *The Real Inspector Hound*
 - ♦ *The Hard Problem*
 - ♦ *Jumpers*

PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **ACTIVITIES**

Purpose:

These activities will prompt students to think critically about the themes in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Shakespeare Story Expansion

In this activity, students will have the opportunity to develop a well-thought out plan for how they might expand the story of a minor character in a Shakespeare play into a stand-alone narrative.

- Have students read a play by William Shakespeare.
 - ♦ Examples: *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*
- Ask students to define the term "minor character" and list all of the minor characters in the play.
- Instruct students to pick one of the minor characters listed who piques their interest.
- Prompt students to list the core characteristics of their character and then to outline the action and arc of their chosen minor character in the source text.
- Ask students to consider what the character might be doing in the time that they are not on stage.
- Using the information provided about the character from the source text, have students draft a creative outline for their character's offstage life.
- Have students utilize their outlines, arcs, and list of characteristics to write a short theatrical scene that features their character when that character is not onstage in the source text.
- Allow students to present their scenes to the class.

Hamlet Recap

In this activity, students will distill the key events of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into an illustrated comic strip.

- Have students read William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.
- As a class, have students chronologically list the major plot points in the play. List these plot points on the board.
- Ask students to divide these key plot points up by acts.

- Instruct students to create five illustrations—one for each act of *Hamlet*—that encapsulate the key points of each act, and to organize their illustrations into a comic strip form.
- Allow students to share their *Hamlet* comic strips with the class.

A/B Scenes

In this activity, students will have the opportunity to explore extracting meaning from ambiguous text by applying context to a piece of text from *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*.

- Ask students to get into pairs. Have each pair designate a person to be A and a person to be B.
- Provide students with the following A/B scene.
- Instruct students to write out the following:
 - ♦ A context in which this dialogue in this scene would reasonably be said
 - ♦ A relationship between the two characters
 - ♦ An objective for each character—what each character wants from the other person in the scene
- Provide students time to rehearse their scenes.
- Allow students to perform their scenes in front of the class.
- Ask the class to guess the context of the scene, the relationship between the characters, and the characters' objectives.

Scene:

A: *Do you think it matters?*

B: *Doesn't it matter to you?*

A: *Why should it matter?*

B: *What does it matter why?*

A: *Doesn't it matter why it matters?*

B: *What's the matter with you?*

A: *It doesn't matter.*

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Existentialism is the philosophical theory that emphasizes an individual's freedom to make choices. In existentialist thought, an individual has no limits in the choices he or she is able to make—individuals are completely, utterly free. However, in response to the massive role of freedom in existentialist philosophy, Jean-Paul Sartre, an existentialist thinker and writer, is quoted as saying "We are condemned to be free." In a thesis-driven essay, analyze the role of freedom and free choice in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Support your thesis with evidence from the text.
2. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are often mixed up by other characters in the play—and even by each other. However, the two characters are separate individuals. In a well-developed essay, compare and contrast the core characteristics of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and how each character's core characteristics color their view of their world. Support your claim with evidence from the text.
3. At the start of the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are seen placing bets on the outcome of a flipped coin. According to the law of probability, the outcome of each flipped coin is random and does not depend on the outcome of the previously flipped coin. Nevertheless, when flipping coins, the coin lands heads-up seventy-six times in a row. In a thesis-driven essay, analyze the role of chance in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Use evidence from the text to support your stance.
4. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is considered to be part of the mythology of *Hamlet*—that is, it contributes to the overall story of the Prince of Denmark. Using your knowledge of both *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Hamlet*, analyze the relationship between the two works. Use evidence from both texts to support your stance.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by Tom Stoppard. Anniversary Edition Published by Grove Press in 2017.

Hamlet by William Shakespeare. Published by Folger Shakespeare Library.

Stoppard's Theatre: Finding Order Amid Chaos by John Fleming. Published by University of Texas Press in 2003.

Conversations with Stoppard by Mel Gussow. Published by Grove Press in 1996.

Murder Most Foul: Hamlet Through the Ages by Dave Bevington. Published by Oxford University Press in 2011.

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett. Published by Grove Press in 1954.

ARTICLES

Hamlet through the Looking-Glass: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by Erica Hateley. Published by Screen Edition in 2012.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead: A Study of Theatrical Determinism by Benjamin Gross. Published by gnovis in 2014.

The Spectre of Shakespeare in Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead by Benjamin Vonwiller.

VIDEO CLIPS:

Existentialism: Crash Course Philosophy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaDvRdLMkHs>

FILM

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead directed by Tom Stoppard (1990)

ONLINE RESOURCES

Hamlet by William Shakespeare, full text available with Folger Digital Texts

<http://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/?chapter=5&play=Ham&loc=p7&ga=2.244675532.831914765.1527886067-1613581808.1527886067>

ABOUT THEATRE ARTS: KEY THEATRICAL TERMS

Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of amusement: going to the theatre. But attending a live theatrical performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of entertainment.

In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like *A Noise Within*, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd.

Although playhouses in the past could sometimes be rowdy, participating in the performance by giving respect and attention to the actors is the most appropriate behavior at a theatrical performance today. Shouting out (or even whispering) can be heard throughout the auditorium, as can rustling paper or ringing phones.

After this *A Noise Within* performance, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and directors. You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

blocking: The instructions a director gives actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

character: The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

conflict: The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

dramatic irony: A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

genre: Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce or social drama.

motivation: The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

props: Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they are manufactured in the theatre shop.

proscenium stage: There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

set: The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

setting: The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

stage areas: The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place. Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area closest to the audience. Center stage defines the middle of the playing space. Stage left is the actor's left as he faces the audience. Stage right is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

theme: The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

thrust stage: A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. *A Noise Within* features a thrust stage.

ABOUT **A NOISE WITHIN**

A NOISE WITHIN A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists performing in rotating repertory immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue. Our plays will be performed in rotating repertory, sometimes simultaneously in multiple spaces, and buttressed by meaningful supporting programs to create a symphonic theatrical experience for artists and audience.

In its 27 year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 40,000 individuals attend productions at a Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 16,000 student participants to its arts education program, *Classics Live!* Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides. ♦

Study Guides

A Noise Within creates study guides in alignment with core reading, listening, speaking, and performing arts standards to help educators prepare their students for their visit to our theatre. Study guides are available at no extra cost to download through our website: www.anoisewithin.org. The information and activities outlined in these guides are designed to work in compliance with the California VAPA standards, The Common Core, and 21st Century Learning Skills.

Study guides include background information on the plays and playwrights, historical context, textual analysis, in-depth discussion of A Noise Within's artistic interpretation of the work, statements from directors and designers, as well as discussion points and suggested classroom activities. Guides from past seasons are also available to download from the website.

Study Guide Credits

Alicia Green	<i>Education Director and Editor</i>
Rebecca Wilson.....	<i>Education Associate</i>
Craig Schwartz	<i>Production Photography</i>
Teresa English	<i>Graphic Design</i>



Geoff Elliott & Julia Rodriguez-Elliott
Producing Artistic Directors

ADDRESS 3352 E Foothill Blvd
Pasadena, CA 91107

TEL 626.356.3100

FAX 626.356.3120

EMAIL info@anoisewithin.org

WEB anoisewithin.org