Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead
by Tom Stoppard
directed by Thomas P. Cooke

Audience Guide

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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

Character Breakdown

Rosencrantz – Companion of Guildenstern, Friend of Hamlet
Guildenstern – Companion of Rosencrantz, Friend of Hamlet
The Player – Leader of a group of traveling actors (The Tragedians)
Alfred – One of the Tragedians, described by Stoppard as a small boy
Hamlet – Prince of Denmark
Ophelia – Daughter of Polonius, one time love interest of Hamlet
Claudius – King of Denmark, husband to Gertrude, brother of Hamlet’s father (former King of Denmark)
Gertrude – Queen of Denmark, wife to Claudius, mother of Hamlet
Polonius – Advisor to Claudius
Horatio – Friend of Hamlet
Fortinbras – Nephew of the King of Norway
Ambassador – An Ambassador from England
Tragedians – A band of traveling actors

Synopsis

From http://www.sff.net/people/mberry/rosen.htp

Stoppard's first and perhaps most famous full-length play, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* presents a worm's-eye view of a classical tragedy, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as filtered through the existential sensibilities of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

The play opens with the title characters alone on stage, placing bets on the toss of a coin while traveling toward Elsinore, the castle of Danish King Claudius and their childhood friend, Prince Hamlet. Guildenstern is perturbed that the coin has come down heads eighty-five times in a row. This seems ominously significant to him. Rosencrantz sees nothing particularly amiss.

R&G inhabit a world completely beyond their comprehension. Unsure of where they are going (and even of who they are and where they come from), they depend upon others to give their lives meaning. While awaiting instructions, they fall back upon games -- word play and simple wagers -- that rarely achieve their intended goals.

Instructed by the King and Queen to "glean what afflicts" poor Hamlet, the boys attempt to cross-examine the prince but end up only more confused. Neither do they have the wit to see their own deaths foretold when the Player and his Tragedians rehearse the melodramatic tragedy, *The Murder of Gonzago*, which includes the execution of "two smiling accomplices -- friends -- courtiers -- two spies" who accompany a prince to England, only to be betrayed by a purloined letter.

After Hamlet kills Polonius, R&G are dispatched to retrieve the body, but they of course bungle the job. They are then dispatched to England with the prince. During the ocean voyage, R&G discover
that the letter they carry from Claudius calls for the immediate cutting off of Hamlet's head. Before they can decide what to do with the letter, it is stolen from them by Hamlet and replaced with another. After the ship is attacked by pirates and Hamlet escapes overboard in a barrel, R&G open the letter again, only to learn that it is now they who must be killed when they arrive in England.

The Player and his band are also on the ship, but he is not especially surprised to learn of this treacherous turn of events, saying, "In our experience, most things end in death." Infuriated, Guildenstern plunges a knife into the Player's throat and watches him die spectacularly. After a moment, the Player jumps up, brushes himself off and reveals the knife to be a spring-loaded fake. Guildenstern is too distraught to be impressed, saying, "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..."

In the end, R&G resign themselves to their fate, although Guildenstern says, "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, when we could have said -- no. But somehow we missed it." Perhaps. But the play ends with two ambassadors from England informing Horatio that, at long last, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

**Shakespeare’s Hamlet**

**Character Breakdown**


**Hamlet** - The Prince of Denmark, the title character, and the protagonist. Hamlet is the son of Queen Gertrude and the late King Hamlet, and the nephew of the present king, Claudius. Hamlet is melancholy, bitter, and cynical, full of hatred for his uncle’s scheming and disgust for his mother’s sexuality. A reflective and thoughtful young man who has studied at the University of Wittenberg, Hamlet is often indecisive and hesitant, but at other times prone to rash and impulsive acts.

**Claudius** – The King of Denmark, Hamlet’s uncle, and the play’s antagonist. The villain of the play, Claudius is a calculating, ambitious politician, driven by his sexual appetites and his lust for power, but he occasionally shows signs of guilt and human feeling—his love for Gertrude, for instance, seems sincere.

**Gertrude** - The Queen of Denmark, Hamlet’s mother, recently married to Claudius. Gertrude loves Hamlet deeply, but she is a shallow, weak woman who seeks affection and status more urgently than moral rectitude or truth.

**Polonius** - The Lord Chamberlain of Claudius’s court, a pompous, conniving old man. Polonius is the father of Laertes and Ophelia.

**Ophelia** - Polonius’s daughter, a beautiful young woman with whom Hamlet has been in love. Ophelia is a sweet and innocent young girl, who obeys her father and her brother, Laertes. Dependent on men to tell her how to behave, she gives in to Polonius’s schemes to spy on Hamlet. Even in her lapse into madness and death, she remains maidenly, singing songs about flowers and finally drowning in the river amid the flower garlands she had gathered.
**Fortinbras** - The young Prince of Norway, whose father the king (also named Fortinbras) was killed by Hamlet’s father (also named Hamlet). Now Fortinbras wishes to attack Denmark to avenge his father’s honor, making him another foil for Prince Hamlet.

**The Ghost** - The specter of Hamlet’s recently deceased father. The ghost, who claims to have been murdered by Claudius, calls upon Hamlet to avenge him. However, it is not entirely certain whether the ghost is what it appears to be, or whether it is something else. Hamlet speculates that the ghost might be a devil sent to deceive him and tempt him into murder, and the question of what the ghost is or where it comes from is never definitively resolved.

**Rosencrantz and Guildenstern** - Two slightly bumbling courtiers, former friends of Hamlet from Wittenberg, who are summoned by Claudius and Gertrude to discover the cause of Hamlet’s strange behavior.

**Horatio** - Hamlet’s close friend, who studied with the prince at the university in Wittenberg. Horatio is loyal and helpful to Hamlet throughout the play. After Hamlet’s death, Horatio remains alive to tell Hamlet’s story.

**Laertes (Does not appear in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead)** - Polonius’s son and Ophelia’s brother, a young man who spends much of the play in France. Passionate and quick to action, Laertes is clearly a foil for the reflective Hamlet.

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**Hamlet Synopsis**

http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/hamlet/summary.html

ON A DARK WINTER NIGHT, a ghost walks the ramparts of Elsinore Castle in Denmark. Discovered first by a pair of watchmen, then by the scholar Horatio, the ghost resembles the recently deceased King Hamlet, whose brother Claudius has inherited the throne and married the king’s widow, Queen Gertrude. When Horatio and the watchmen bring Prince Hamlet, the son of Gertrude and the dead king, to see the ghost, it speaks to him, declaring ominously that it is indeed his father’s spirit, and that he was murdered by none other than Claudius. Ordering Hamlet to seek revenge on the man who usurped his throne and married his wife, the ghost disappears with the dawn.

Prince Hamlet devotes himself to avenging his father’s death, but, because he is contemplative and thoughtful by nature, he delays, entering into a deep melancholy and even apparent madness. Claudius and Gertrude worry about the prince’s erratic behavior and attempt to discover its cause. They employ a pair of Hamlet’s friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to watch him. When Polonius, the pompous Lord Chamberlain, suggests that Hamlet may be mad with love for his daughter, Ophelia, Claudius agrees to spy on Hamlet in conversation with the girl. But though Hamlet certainly seems mad, he does not seem to love Ophelia: he orders her to enter a nunnery and declares that he wishes to ban marriages.

A group of traveling actors comes to Elsinore, and Hamlet seizes upon an idea to test his uncle’s guilt. He will have the players perform a scene closely resembling the sequence by which Hamlet imagines his uncle to have murdered his father, so that if Claudius is guilty, he will surely react. When the moment of the murder arrives in the theater, Claudius leaps up and leaves the room. Hamlet and Horatio agree that this proves his guilt. Hamlet goes to kill Claudius but finds him praying. Since he believes that killing Claudius while in prayer would send Claudius’s soul to heaven, Hamlet considers that it would be an inadequate revenge and decides to wait. Claudius, now frightened of Hamlet’s madness and fearing for his own safety, orders that Hamlet be sent to England at once.
Hamlet goes to confront his mother, in whose bedchamber Polonius has hidden behind a tapestry. Hearing a noise from behind the tapestry, Hamlet believes the king is hiding there. He draws his sword and stabs through the fabric, killing Polonius. For this crime, he is immediately dispatched to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However, Claudius’s plan for Hamlet includes more than banishment, as he has given Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sealed orders for the King of England demanding that Hamlet be put to death.

In the aftermath of her father’s death, Ophelia goes mad with grief and drowns in the river. Polonius’s son, Laertes, who has been staying in France, returns to Denmark in a rage. Claudius convinces him that Hamlet is to blame for his father’s and sister’s deaths. When Horatio and the king receive letters from Hamlet indicating that the prince has returned to Denmark after pirates attacked his ship en route to England, Claudius concocts a plan to use Laertes’ desire for revenge to secure Hamlet’s death. Laertes will fence with Hamlet in innocent sport, but Claudius will poison Laertes’ blade so that if he draws blood, Hamlet will die. As a backup plan, the king decides to poison a goblet, which he will give Hamlet to drink should Hamlet score the first or second hits of the match. Hamlet returns to the vicinity of Elsinore just as Ophelia’s funeral is taking place. Stricken with grief, he attacks Laertes and declares that he had in fact always loved Ophelia. Back at the castle, he tells Horatio that he believes one must be prepared to die, since death can come at any moment. A foolish courtier named Osric arrives on Claudius’s orders to arrange the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes.

The sword-fighting begins. Hamlet scores the first hit, but declines to drink from the king’s proffered goblet. Instead, Gertrude takes a drink from it and is swiftly killed by the poison. Laertes succeeds in wounding Hamlet, though Hamlet does not die of the poison immediately. First, Laertes is cut by his own sword’s blade, and, after revealing to Hamlet that Claudius is responsible for the queen’s death, he dies from the blade’s poison. Hamlet then stabs Claudius through with the poisoned sword and forces him to drink down the rest of the poisoned wine. Claudius dies, and Hamlet dies immediately after achieving his revenge.

At this moment, a Norwegian prince named Fortinbras, who has led an army to Denmark and attacked Poland earlier in the play, enters with ambassadors from England, who report that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Fortinbras is stunned by the gruesome sight of the entire royal family lying sprawled on the floor dead. He moves to take power of the kingdom. Horatio, fulfilling Hamlet’s last request, tells him Hamlet’s tragic story. Fortinbras orders that Hamlet be carried away in a manner befitting a fallen soldier.

*From Beckett to Stoppard: Existentialism, Death, and Absurdity*
By Ryan Petty

Excerpted from:

http://home.sprintmail.com/~lifeform/beckstop.html

In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile. . . . This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.

- Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus

Absurdism, one of the most exciting and creative movements in the modern theater, is a term applied to a particular type of realistic drama which has absorbed theater audiences and critics for the past three
decades. One specific area, appropriately labeled "Theatre of the Absurd" by the American critic Martin Esslin in the 1960's, offers its audience an existentialist point of view of the outside world and forces them to consider the meaning of their existence in a world where there appears to be no true order or meaning. Inching ever closer to a realistic representation of life, the evolution of absurdist drama from Samuel Beckett to Tom Stoppard brings a new focus to absurdism and expands the role of philosophy and metaphor in theatrical drama.

Before discussing the ways in which the Theatre of the Absurd has evolved, it is beneficial to understand where and how it developed. Many theater historians and critics label Alfred Jarry's French play, *Ubu Roi* as the earliest example of Theatre of the Absurd. Absurdism also has origins in Shakespearean drama, particularly through the influence of the Commedia dell'Arte. The current movement of absurdism, however, emerged in France after World War II, as a rebellion against the traditional values and beliefs of Western culture and literature. It began with the existentialist writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus and eventually included other writers such as Eugene Ionesco, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Edward Albee, and Harold Pinter, to name a few. Its rules are fairly simple: 1.) There is often no real story line; instead there is a series of "free floating images" which influence the way in which an audience interprets a play. 2.) There is a focus on the incomprehensibility of the world, or an attempt to rationalize an irrational, disorderly world. 3.) Language acts as a barrier to communication, which in turn isolates the individual even more, thus making speech almost futile. In other words, absurdist drama creates an environment where people are isolated, clown-like characters blundering their way through life because they don't know what else to do. Offentimes, characters stay together simply because they are afraid to be alone in such an incomprehensible world. Despite this negativity, however, absurdism is not completely nihilistic. Martin Esslin explains: the recognition that there is no simple explanation for all the mysteries of the world, that all previous systems have been oversimplified and therefore bound to fail, will appear to be a source of despair only to those who still feel that such a simplified system can provide an answer. The moment we realize that we may have to live without any final truths the situation changes; we may have to readjust ourselves to living with less exulted aims and by doing so become more humble, more receptive, less exposed to violent disappointments and crises of conscious - and therefore in the last resort happier and better adjusted people, simply because we then live in closer accord with reality. (Kepos 384)

Therefore, the goal of absurdist drama is not solely to depress audiences with negativity, but an attempt to bring them closer to reality and help them understand their own "meaning" in life, whatever that may be. Samuel Beckett's understanding of this philosophy best characterizes how we should perceive our existence as he says, "Nothing is more real than Nothing."

Building on these components of absurdism, we can now proceed to analyze the way in which absurdist drama has evolved. The two dramatists who best reveal this process of evolution are Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard. Using Beckett as a starting point and Stoppard as an ending point, one gets a small sense of the ways in which absurdist theater has changed and keeps changing. In comparing and contrasting these two dramatists' works, specifically changes in structure and metaphorical intent, the evolution of absurdism ventures beyond its original borders into a new and distinct realistic theater. Of the three plays which clearly reveal this evolution, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* will be addressed first, followed by a discussion of Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. All of these plays metaphorically address the issue of "ending" or "dying" and through such a focus offer us a clear example of one way in which absurdism has evolved.

Beckett's most popular absurdist play, *Waiting For Godot*, is one of the first examples critics point to when talking about the Theatre of the Absurd. Written and first performed in French in 1954, *Waiting for Godot* had an enormous impact on theatergoers due to its strange and new conventions. Consisting of an
essentially barren set, with the exception of a virtually leafless tree in the background, clown-like tramps, and highly symbolic language, *Waiting for Godot* challenges its audience to question all of the old rules and to try to make sense of a world that is incomprehensible. At the heart of the play is the theme of "coping" and "getting through the day" so that when tomorrow comes we can have the strength to continue.

Structurally, *Waiting for Godot* is a two-act play which is primarily cyclical. It begins with two lonely tramps on a roadside who are awaiting the arrival of a figure referred to as Godot and ends with the same premise. Many critics have concluded that Act Two is simply a repeat of Act One. In other words, Vladimir and Estragon may forever be "waiting for Godot." We are never given an answer to their predicament. As an audience, we can only watch them do the same things, listen to them say the same things, and accept the fact that Godot may or may not come. Much like them, we are stuck in a world where our actions dictate our survival. We may search for an answer or a meaning to our existence, but we most likely will never find it. Anthony Jenkins writes, "there can be no answers; Godot may or may not exist and may or may not arrive; we know no more about him than do Vladimir and Estragon"(40). Thus, this play is structurally arranged in such a way as to make us believe that Godot will probably never come, and that we must accept the uncertainty of life.

The two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, spend their days reliving their past trying to make sense of their existence, and even contemplate suicide as a form of escape. As characters, however, they are the prototypical absurdist figures who remain detached from the audience. They essentially lack identities and their vaudeville mannerisms, particularly when it comes to contemplating their suicides, has a more comic effect on the audience than a tragic one.

They consider parting, but, in the end, never actually part. Andrew Kennedy explains these rituals of parting saying, "each is like a rehearsed ceremony, acted out to lessen the distance between time present and the ending of the relationship, which is both dreaded and desired"(57). Therefore, Vladimir and Estragon's inability to leave each other is just another example of the uncertainty and frustration they feel as they wait for an explanation of their existence. For them and for us, death seems forever on the horizon, and therefore ending becomes "an endless process"(Kennedy 48).

Obviously influenced by Beckett, Stoppard's play certainly imitates *Waiting for Godot*. Like the previous play, Stoppard's main characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are two individuals who find themselves in the center of an incomprehensible world. While *Waiting for Godot* is "about the uncertainty and frustration felt by Didi and Gogo in their interminable waiting in limitless time, Stoppard's is about the uncertainty felt by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in trying to understand the origin and meaning of events which they come to realize are carrying them to their deaths"(Duncan 59). What essentially makes them different is while the characters in Godot wait, but never change, the characters in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* have to change.

As Michael Hinden suggests, Stoppard's play is an example of his ability "to absorb and to work through Beckett, not to get around him"(404). So, it follows that Stoppard uses the absurdist template to build on and go beyond. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard introduces us to an absurd world, but a world nevertheless which possesses some type of order. Unlike the previous play, there are rules that must be followed. *Godot* subscribes to the belief that man has no role to play, and thus can only make up reasons for existence. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, however, postulates that man plays a defined role, but it is a role that is unfathomable. Victor Cahn supports this difference, explaining that Stoppard "brings his characters into a new world, one where elements of absurdity are disguised under a mask of order and reason worn by a society which Stoppard has made us come to see as perhaps absurd
itself"(64). So, Stoppard uses Beckett's absurdist tendencies as a model, but goes beyond the traditional absurdist play in several ways.

The first thing that Stoppard does that differs from Beckett is he provides his characters with a stronger sense of identity. Vladimir and Estragon are nobodies in Waiting for Godot. We don't know much about them, as a whole. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, on the other hand, become more real to us. In including the Hamlet sub-play, Stoppard gives them an identity, a meaning in their incomprehensible existence. They are Elizabethan courtiers who have been summoned to Elsinore to glean what afflicts Prince Hamlet. Here, Stoppard is playing with the audience's pre-knowledge of the tragedy of Hamlet. Therefore, when they view this play, they already know the outcome of the play based on their knowledge of Hamlet or their understanding of the play's title. This, in turn, makes the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern more realistic and more subject to the audience's pity, thereby breaking the distance between audience and actor. In this manner, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead also differs by having a structure which is linear, not cyclical. Stoppard's play has a definite end, a movement toward death which does come and is certain. Joseph Duncan explains, "the courtiers become part of a pattern of events- whose cause or purpose they do not understand- which they cannot or will not escape and which both gives them their only identity and carries them to their deaths"(65).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are extremely preoccupied with contemplating their deaths. What is unique about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead and signifies the final evolution of the absurdist view is Stoppard's abrupt answering of the absurdist question: What is the meaning of life or death in an irrational world? The answer is simply the realization that death comes to all living things and is something that can never be understood or explained, but something that simply is. And, unlike Waiting for Godot, death does come at the end of the play. The end result remains a metaphorical treatise on the way in which we perceive death and how we condition ourselves to believe in its existence.

In his essay, "Theatre at the Limit," John Perlette rightly points out that Stoppard "knows that direct and immediate access to the reality of death is simply beyond the capacity of his audience" and that the only solution is to present that "illusory spectacles of death are the only kinds in which we are prepared to believe"(666). This philosophy is best represented through the character of The Player, and it is The Player's job to convince Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that this is the case. Ideally, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern represent the concept of Everyman, or put more simply, they are no different from us. When their own deaths are presented to them two different times, they blindly do not see what they are headed for because the reality of what must be is too close to realism for them. The same is true for modern man. We accept only what we can believe in, and to believe in death is to believe in our own absence of presence. In more realistic terms, we see death as a tragic end which metaphorically symbolizes "an abrupt exit from one's own drama into a place incomprehensibly other"(Jenkins 43). Stoppard's ultimate conclusion on this subject is that we as human beings will be better off if we learn to accept that death is just as incomprehensible as life, and the only way to psychological happiness must come from dismissing social conventions and beliefs of death and reconciling it with the ultimate view that we live in a world which defies reason and meaning.

Unlike Vladimir and Estragon, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do much more than wait for something to happen to them. In fact, they are constantly being bombarded with attention, which tends to irritate them on several occasions. They have come to realize that their actions are somehow connected to a larger force, which may or may not have control of their actions.

As the Hamlet play continues, they begin to feel themselves being "caught up" in the action. People are coming at them from all sides, and they feel they are being pulled in all different directions. In Godot, this is certainly not the case. Stoppard hints that they do have the luxury of "choice" and that there are a few
moments where they can escape from their predicament. Guildenstern recognizes this when they are on the boat taking Hamlet to England saying, "Free to move, speak, extemporize, and yet. We have not been cut loose... we may seize the moment, toss it around while the moments pass, a short dash here, an explanation there, but we are brought full circle"(101). Eventually this theorizing continues until the end of the play when they realize their situation as Guildenstern's last lines question the validity of choice: "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said- no. But somehow we missed it"(125). And the absurdity of the situation is heightened even more when he continues, "Well, we'll know better next time"(126).

Getting back to the issue of death, and the certain uncertainty of it, Stoppard sets up an argument between The Player and Guildenstern to show that just as there are two levels of life there are two levels of death: stage death and real death. As The Player is narrating the dumb-show to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Guildenstern asks the Player what the actors know about death. The Player tells him that it is "what they do best"(83).

Guildenstern then proceeds to stab The Player who falls to the ground and dies. Thinking he has really killed The Player, Guildenstern is satisfied with his argument that real death and stage death are not congruent. However, he is denied this satisfaction because The Player gets up and is applauded by the Tragedians for his very believable "act" of dying. The Player reemphasizes, "What did you think? (Pause.) You see, it is the kind they do believe in- it's what is expected" (123). Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we as the audience are also convinced of The Player's death. As Perflette suggests, "we 'believe' because we do not believe"(667). So, as a result, we can "believe' by suspending our disbelief only if that disbelief is there to be suspended in the first place"(667). This illusion is what The Player has been trying to explain all along, and what Stoppard wants us to understand most about his play. Therefore, as Cahn has suggested, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are at the end of their play "the ultimate victims of absurdity"(60).

When we compare and contrast the plays Waiting for Godot and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, we can list many ways in which they are alike in their absurdist tendencies and many ways in which they are different. What remains essentially important is not so much that they are different, but the degree to which they are different. Beckett's treatment of death as something to come, something always on the horizon out of reach, is probably more happily acceptable to the viewer than Stoppard's view. But despite the negative connotations death holds, both Beckett and Stoppard use the metaphor of death to help us understand how our lives are absurd and how, once we accept this, we can be happier, healthier individuals. The evolution of absurdism is most clearly represented by the degree to which Stoppard uses the linear metaphor of death to bring us closer to his characters and closer to ourselves. He goes beyond absurdism by breaking the distance between the audience and the actors. We feel more for his characters and we sympathize with their inability to completely change their fates, as we ourselves struggle with the same problem. Again, the words of Martin Esslin come to mind, and the Theatre of the Absurd in all of its intellectual complexities and intricacies helps us to see our role in life. Esslin writes:

> The human condition being what it is, with man small, helpless, insecure, and unable ever to fathom the world in all its hopelessness, death, and absurdity, the theatre has to confront him with the bitter truth that most human endeavor is irrational and senseless, that communication between human beings is well-nigh impossible, and that the world will forever remain an impenetrable mystery. At the same time, the recognition of all these bitter truths will have a liberating effect: if we realize the basic absurdity of most of our objectives we are freed from being obsessed with them and this release expresses itself in
Interview with Director Tom Cooke

By Tiffany Moon

Tiffany Moon: Let’s talk about your vision for this piece

Tom Cooke: This play is a wonderful play about the theatre, and it is in the long tradition of the play within the play. The play that Stoppard has chosen to be in the play, of course, has the most famous play in the play that’s probably ever been written, *The Mousetrap* play that Hamlet uses to “catch the conscience of the king.” A big part of my planning for the production has to do with deciding what this production is that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are part of or not part of. They’re in this limbo land within and outside this production of *Hamlet*. I have to decide what is this production of *Hamlet*. And I decided that for this production I would use the Olivier film as the production of *Hamlet*. I selected it for a variety of reasons; One thing, it was the archetypal *Hamlet* of my youth, and for generations people thought of Lawrence Olivier’s film when they thought of *Hamlet*. When they thought of classical acting, they thought of this film. It was archetypal for generations. Today, our students who see the play using this film will not have the same associations, but I think the associations they will have with it are good. It’s a black and white film, from the past, and it’s kind of reaching way, way back into the history of interpretation of *Hamlet* and cinematography, because it’s in black and white, and it was the Academy Award winner in 1948. It won about five or six Academy Awards, Best Picture, Best Actor. Amazing. It was considered at the time a real triumph for Lawrence Olivier. Another reason for me to select it, I thought that having the interaction with film, rather than live theatre, would give us another dimension that we could explore of this time and space warp the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves. At the very beginning of the play we simply see them standing, flipping coins – and they’ve been doing this for a long time, and the coins always come up “heads.” So immediately Guildenstern knows that something is wrong, and it scares him a little bit. Rosencrantz doesn’t mind very much. He wins, he’s having a good time, and he doesn’t worry about the implication. But Guildenstern is a little worried. Throughout the play, they’re trying to find out who they are, where they are, and why they are there. Of course, they are on a path toward death in the play, and they are also helpless in the face of all the different manifestations of society they come in contact with. Their destiny is being controlled. Another reason for doing the play today, as Joanne has said in her program notes for the season, is this play reminds us of how helpless we are to change anything about our lives, and how these forces move us around without us being in control. This is the situation that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves in.

For me it’s a fascinating play, and made more fascinating by the fact that Stoppard’s language is so brilliant; his wordplay is so wonderful. He is native Czechoslovakian and became a very famous British playwright, and because English is his second language, his use of it becomes more marvelous.
TM: What modern forces do you see that would make this play relevant to today?

TC: As Joanne said in that really nice footnote to the season, WE are helpless to do anything about the wars that are being fought, about the stock market that is crashing around us, our financial future, the lives of our children are all in danger by events we have no control over. These are the kind of forces that scare us. This is not what scares Guildenstern – Guildenstern is afraid that he has seen his death. He’s afraid that he has seen something that is bigger than the expectations of life. When he flips a coin, it can either come down “heads” or “tails”; and he’s comfortable with that, with the duality of the heads and tails. He has a little story that he tells in the play, about a Chinese philosopher that dreams one night he’s a butterfly. And after he woke up the next morning, he was never sure whether he was a Chinese philosopher or that butterfly that he dreamed he was. But he was comfortable with the fact that he was one or the other. And that is something that will make Guildenstern very comfortable. If a coin can come down either heads or tails, he will be satisfied. But when it constantly defies the laws of chance, then maybe he’s looking at something really startling, something like the face of death itself, or fate, or some miracle that’s happening. Like all of a sudden he sees the Madonna, he sees something that is too big to comprehend, and it scares him.

TM: I know that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tend to be confused with each other throughout the play, but it sounds like you have a very clear understanding of who each character is.

TC: That’s a very good point. Stoppard has said that they are two sides of the same person, and to a certain extent that’s true. Even though Guildenstern seems to be the dominant personality, and the leader of the two, Rosencrantz and times takes over that leadership and dominance. And Rosencrantz usually wins all the games they play, ironically. And Rosencrantz is just as capable of this kind of philosophy they are espousing throughout the play as Guildenstern is. But I think definitely they have different personalities. Rosencrantz, to begin with, is a much warmer person. It gives plot away, and I don’t know how much of the plot you want to give away, but I think everyone knows that Hamlet eventually dies and I think everyone knows that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern eventually die. But when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find that they are taking Hamlet to his death, Rosencrantz is upset about it; Guildenstern rationalizes it away. He’s capable of using cold logic when dealing with this kind of emergency they’re facing. They read him the letter they’re delivering to the King of England, that Hamlet is to die. Rosencrantz feels very bad about it. But then on the other hand, when Rosencrantz becomes terrified by the events in the play, Guildenstern is the one that reassures him and calms him down; takes care of him. They take care of one another really, it goes back and forth. They’re like a couple that’s been together forever, they know one another, they finish each other’s sentences, they get their own identities confused - Rosencrantz even calls himself Guildenstern. But of course this is taking it a little further than couples in real life who are very close and get personalities intertwined and confused, it’s taking it a little further for theatrical purposes. Not only do all of the people who meet them become confused about their identities, they do too. That’s kind of important in the play. Which reminds me of something else– they’re very often left out of productions of Hamlet, and the great irony about me choosing Lawrence Olivier’s Hamlet is that he leaves them out. They are not in that movie. So here they are feeling the tug of a movie that has left them out. We’re going to have that interplay between the screen and the stage, the two media that
give life to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and we’re going to have characters come from the screen and into the screen, so they will kind of morph out, back and forth.

One more important thing about the play – it is a comedy. It’s a comedy about a very serious subject. So, it is a comedy about a very serious subject that is very, very funny, very brilliant, and at the same time chilling.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How do the plots of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Hamlet* differ? How are they similar?
2. How does the character of The Player in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* influence the plot and the characters?
3. Does *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* change the way you view the characters and situations in *Hamlet*?
4. How does the Existential view of life and death differ from your own view?
5. One of Guildenstern’s last lines is, “There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said-no. But somehow we missed it.” Do you agree, and if so where was that point? If you don’t agree, why?