

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and the Theatre of the World

Honourable Mention, Humanities

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Identified most readily through its characteristic forms and clichés, metatheatre is ultimately concerned with self-consciously establishing itself as both performance and theatre. Developed initially by Lionel Abel, metatheatre makes use of such tropes as a play within the play, or simply by addressing the idea of theatre as performance. Most interestingly however, metatheatre often involves the concept of *theatrum mundi*, or the theatre of the world. This concept transforms the stage into an echo of our real world, thereby indicating that the real world is also an echo of the theatrical world of the stage. This further indicates that what occurs on the stage may be taken not merely as entertainment, but as concrete and meaningful.

Theatrum mundi blurs the boundaries between the reality of the theatre and the reality of the outside world, alluding to the statement: "All the world's a stage." This statement is significant to the evaluation of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. In this play, not only do we see clear evidence of the characters and plot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but the events of that particular play also echo the concluding events of Stoppard's work. In fact, Stoppard appropriates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and supplies the audience exclusively with the narrative of these characters, while the events of *Hamlet* happen primarily offstage. Ultimately, it is by making use of the concepts of authority, game play, and the role of the players that Tom Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, situates itself as a self-consciously metatheatrical work that re-evaluates the concept of *theatrum mundi* and argues for the existence of reality within theatre.

Throughout Stoppard's play, the influence of the author is evident through the characters' awareness of that authority as an external force. The growing anxiety of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about where they came from as well as their autonomy within the world of the play is significant, as it displays precisely their lack of autonomous action. Early in the play, Guildenstern states that "there's a logic at work—it's all done for you, don't worry. Enjoy it. Relax. To be taken in hand and led, like being a child again" (Stoppard 40-41). At this stage, the characters are aware of the external authority of the author that dictates their actions and the events they encounter. However, they have not yet become anxious about their lack of autonomy; instead, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern take comfort in the fact that everything has already been scripted for them.

There is a certain degree of dramatic irony in the audience's knowledge, not only of the plot of *Hamlet*, wherein these two minor characters are killed, but also Stoppard's chosen title, which illustrates the inevitable deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It becomes clear from the outset that their fate "is written" (Stoppard 80) in the title of the play. The Player later comments "we follow directions—there is

no choice involved... That is what tragedy means" (Stoppard 80). Similarly to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the players are unable to deviate from their roles as Tragedians. The players, however, accept their fate and are therefore able to find meaning in their lives as well as their repeated and ongoing deaths. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern consistently resist their fate, and are unable to achieve any meaning. The directions mentioned by the Player are strongly reminiscent of those that would be put forward by any director or author in the form of either script or stage direction. This, combined with the presence of authority, but the absence of the author, strongly resembles the real-world authority of an omnipotent figure, whether it be the Judeo-Christian God or even Reason and Logic. Within Stoppard's play, just as in the real world, the figure of authority is entirely absent; however, its presence is constantly felt as an external and influential force. Ultimately, the tragic fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as illustrated by the Player, is not limited solely to these two characters: human life is also scripted in a similar manner. From the moment a person is born, they are essentially "marked for death" (Stoppard 79) just as Stoppard's characters are.

Stoppard's characters are scripted by the author in this manner, and were also originally called into awareness by the author. The focus on their call into awareness is significant not only because this signifies their original creation by Shakespeare, but also their being re-called into awareness by Stoppard. Guildenstern, the decidedly more cerebral of the two, declares "he was just a hat and a cloak levitating in the grey plume of his own breath, but when he called we came. That much is certain—we came" (Stoppard 39). This call-and-response is indicative of their re-awakening as characters, now under Stoppard's authority rather than Shakespeare's.

However, there are higher stakes at play than the re-appropriation of characters and the establishment of a new authorial authority. At the heart of this call-and-response theme is Althusser's theory of interpellation. The principle of interpellation describes an inherent ideology stating that an individual, when called, will recognize themselves as called and will then turn to face the individual who has called them (Wollaeger 800). The use of this call-and-response by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern then is more than a simple game; it is the means by which they are attempting to face their own identities and access the knowledge and awareness of their significance within the world of the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern both struggle with the intangible forces of authorial influence that they come to recognize as the play progresses. Thus, the importance and high stakes that are placed upon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's use of such language games are inherently directed to their attempts to negotiate not only their knowledge of their identities, but also their fate.

Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern use games and game-play throughout the play in order to address and negotiate such existential issues as fate and agency. Furthermore, it is through their playing that they are able, not only to understand their reality and rehearse future events, but to provide possible answers to each other about the issues they are concerned with. Their use of language while playing the questions game is interesting, because it is here that we see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern effectively rehearsing for their encounter with Hamlet. Guildenstern says, "it's a matter of asking the right questions and giving away as little as we can, it's a game" (Stoppard 40). This use of rehearsal is

significant to our understanding of the play as an example of the *theatrum mundi* theory, because rehearsal plays an immense and important role in individuals' lives as they mature and grow. Stereotypical children's games such as cops and robbers, house, and classroom prepare them for future gender roles, as well as possible careers, and even help to instill an understanding of social justice and good morals. Rehearsal is also a large part of any theatrical event, as actors need a great deal of practice to perfect their performances. Furthermore, a prevalent belief within the theatre world is that within the provisional world of rehearsal, all of the awkward moments or errors will be purged so that the actual performance will be without fault.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's games are also the only way that they can confront and engage with their anxieties about identity, fate, and agency. Though they use the questions game as a way to rehearse future events, the game is also used to confront those existential questions in such a way that lessens their scale and impact. Egan argues that "language itself is a form of play, a system of artificial counters that can be manipulated and rearranged to improvise meanings" (Egan 63). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's use of these language games then, is not exclusively about mere communication, but also holds the potential for the creation of new meanings and opportunities through their use of language and word play. Indeed, the characters are able to progress from word association and dialogue to rehearsal, through the growing sophistication of their play with language. Though they are able to use language in this manner, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are still unable to create new meaning for themselves or act upon their situation in order to change it because they are, at this point, inexperienced players.

In regards to their preoccupation with identity, the most important question asked during the game of question and answer is Guildenstern's demand: "WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?" (Stoppard 44). This question is the precise embodiment of their concern and anxiety about their identities. It is clear that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have not been putting forward meaningless questions simply to pass the time. Instead, they use these questions to address the existential issues that apply to them. Later, Rosencrantz answers to not only his own name, but Guildenstern's as well. This complicates the Athusserian theory of interpellation, because while Rosencrantz turns correctly to the call, he answers to every call, rather than just to his name alone: Guildenstern asks "don't you discriminate at all?" (Stoppard 51). This also addresses the issue of identity that the two characters struggle with during the play: Guildenstern comments "Words, words. They're all we have to go on" (Stoppard 41). The characters' use of words to identify themselves and even to rehearse their situation is significant because the only way any individual is able to define themselves and the world around them is through their own use of language.

Liang argues that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are using these word games "to give them a sense of action in their inaction" (Liang 102). Indeed, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's anxieties about their situation make them consistently unable to act: they are merely able to react. Their language game of questions resembles strongly a game of tennis, with words being volleyed back and forth at high speed. With this image in mind, it is clear that this use of linguistic repartee is meant to alienate the audience

and force them to view the scenes as an event of skill rather than a play to become absorbed in (Keyssar-Franke 89). Later in the play, the characters' banter fails to lead them to any sort of conclusion; instead, this language use is merely a way to avoid making a decision about which direction to go (Stoppard 87-88). Thus it is clear that the characters' play with language is both an attempt to negotiate their situation, as well as a way to avoid any sort of action on their part.

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* opens with a scene which illustrates the two characters playing a coin toss game. This game of chance is yet another method of play that the characters use in their attempts to interpret their world and situation. As Liang argues, "the fact that the coin falls on heads eighty-five times in a row predicts a world that does not follow reason" (Liang 102). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's play with the coin-toss game displays their desire to prove that their world is operating normally, and that they are still subject to the normal functions of both chance and probability. However, due to the coins repeatedly coming up heads, these laws are suspended for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The simple coin-toss game is defamiliarized as the audience sees the coins consistently landing on heads. As a result, we are meant to understand, as Keyssar-Franke argues, that the world of the stage is one where the possibility for spontaneity rules (Keyssar-Franke 88). Furthermore, while we are not necessarily meant to dwell upon the coin tossing game itself, it does provide new ways to view Rosencrantz and Guildenstern according to their perspectives on the outcomes.

This provides an interesting opportunity then to view Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as figurative characters, rather than embodied ones, suggesting that their physical identities are not at stake, but rather their ideological identities as characters. Stoppard notes the characteristics of both, indicating that Guildenstern is generally anxious while Rosencrantz is often very compliant (Stoppard 11). At the outset of the coin-toss scene, the stage directions outline the two characters being "without any visible character" (Stoppard 11). This further indicates that they are not physically discernible, but still must be differentiated by their ideologies, especially when considering Guildenstern's anxieties about death. It is no surprise then, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not experience any physical death that would appear theatrically realistic to the audience, but simply vanish mid-sentence and "[fail] to reappear" (Stoppard 84). The mid-sentence death and the resulting cut in their dialogue here is representative of their capacity as scripted characters; their lives are abruptly cut off the moment their dialogue is severed. Their abrupt disappearance does not mirror real death at all, and so Guildenstern's perception of dying as a meaningless disappearance is exposed as unrealistic. This ultimately supports the players' alternate conviction that melodramatic death is both representative of reality and a way to give significance and meaning to life.

The role of the players within Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a crucial one, but distinctly different from that of the titular characters, as the players draw attention to the mirroring of life through theatre. The players are strictly scripted in a similar way to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; however, it is through their deliberate and conscious embrasure of these scripts that they are able to act and mirror reality. For the tragedians, and especially the Player, their art is inseparable from their

reality; Guildenstern tells the Player that "[he'd] prefer art to mirror life, if it's all the same to you" (Stoppard 81), to which the Player replies "It's all the same to me, sir" (Stoppard 81). Thus, for the Player, there is no room for art to simply mirror life, because, for him, they are one and the same. Indeed, in reality, players, or actors, are the embodiments of theatre; they have the ability to merge their real life with art. Earlier, the Player confirms that he is "always in character" (Stoppard 34), which is significant to the audience because not only are they watching the Player on stage, but an actor acting within that role, declaring that he is never out of character.

The difference in perspective between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is exemplified when the Player declares, "everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true. It's the currency of living" (Stoppard 67). While the players embrace their situation and trust the conventions of the theatre, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern experience growing anxiety about their fate. Furthermore, Guildenstern consistently argues for the meaninglessness of death, that it is just a "failure to reappear" (Stoppard 84). However, by arguing for the meaninglessness of death, Guildenstern also inadvertently argues for the meaninglessness of life. As Egan argues, Guildenstern's "insistence on the meaninglessness of death (and thus of life) becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Egan 69).

This perspective, on the other hand, is contrasted by that of the players, who are able to give meaning to death through their theatricality. The Player himself declares, "I can extract significance from melodrama... occasionally, from out of this matter, there escapes a thin beam of light that... can crack the shell of mortality" (Stoppard 83). This perspective of significance and trust shown by the Player is starkly contrasted with Guildenstern's own perspective of anxiety and fear: "Fear! The crack that might flood your brain with light!" (Stoppard 15). Guildenstern's anxiety and resistance of this enlightenment into his mortality essentially forges him into a non-actor, as he and Rosencrantz are consistently unable and unwilling to act throughout the play. Alternately, the Player and his tragedians accept and trust their status as actors, and thus are able to create meaning for themselves in both life and death. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are denied ordered and meaningful deaths because they have denied the possibility that art is life, and so they must simply disappear mid-sentence.

There is a great aspect of metatheatricality to be seen in the Player and his tragedians in Stoppard's play. These characters are the most relevant example of the theory of *theatrum mundi* because they argue for and demonstrate the creation of a reality through one's perception of it. Guildenstern's belief that the players cannot act death is exposed as false when he believes that he has killed the Player. The Player's explanation about the suspension of disbelief is significant as it reflexively exposes theatrical expectations. He states, "it's the only kind [of death] they do believe. They're conditioned to it... audiences know what to expect, and that is all that they are prepared to believe in" (Stoppard 83-84). The Player exposes theatrical expectations here, as he alludes to the audience's desire to see reality portrayed on the stage and be comforted that if there is meaning portrayed through theatre, as a mirror for life, then they are free to re-establish their belief that there is meaning in their own lives. However, audience members are safe in the assumption that what occurs onstage is not concretely real, but a reflection of reality in which they can see themselves.

Earlier in the play, the Player appears and shouts "an audience!" (Stoppard 21), indicating not only Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but the offstage audience as well. It is in this manner that the division between the reality of the audience and the reality of the stage is blurred within Stoppard's play. The theory of *theatrum mundi* is once again supported through this merging of life and art through the Player and his tragedians. The Player then recognizes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as "fellow artists" (Stoppard 23), which indicates their capacity as actors or players as well. The primary difference between the tragedians and the main characters is that the Player and his troupe accept their condition as actors and their inability to exercise free will as they are constantly within character. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, unlike the players, are unable to create their own positive reality through their play.

The implications of the use of external authority, game play, the role of the Player figures, and the overall address of *theatrum mundi* in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, are that reality can indeed exist within theatricality. This forces the audience to treat the play, and theatre as a whole, as an organic and living thing to interact with; an attitude that replaces the approach to theatre as simply a culinary experience to be enjoyed and then quickly disregarded. With this new understanding of theatricality and reality existing within one another, audience members become much more invested in theatre productions as they are able to strongly engage with and find meaning in plays and can, as a result, find great significance and meaning in their own lives as well.

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