

Extending the Audience: The Structure of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead"

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THESE seems to be widespread agreement among critics that "there is something forced and jejune about much of the overt rhetoric of ideas" in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and that it is as "theatre of criticism" that the play is most successful. In other words it should be regarded as a play about other plays (Beckett's and Pinter's as well as Shakespeare's) rather than as a direct comment on life. Perhaps. Certainly Stoppard throws around the vocabulary of modernism in a highly self-conscious fashion. But although the "overt" themes of the play may look derivative, "forced and jejune" on the page, I have always found them highly effective and even moving in the theatre, where subtlety is not always a virtue. Furthermore I cannot go along with the suggestion that these themes are communicated by sheer "rhetoric"; on the contrary, it seems to me that Stoppard has contrived a very sophisticated strategy for the presentation of his ideas.

But before we examine this strategy we have to confront Stoppard's own disarmingly unpretentious account of his methods and aims:

The chief interest and objective was to exploit a situation which seemed to me to have enormous dramatic and comic potential....What was actually calculated was to entertain a roomful of people with the situation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at Elsinore. The chief thing that added one line to another line was that the combination of the two should retain an audience's interest in some way....²

There seems to be no place here for sophisticated strategies. Luckily Stoppard goes on to acknowledge that his work is not in fact devoid of shape and form but ordered by "subconscious . . .

choices", and he is generous enough subsequently to concede that "anybody's set of ideas which grows out of the play has its own validity." Thus vindicated, I shall proceed to enunciate my own "set of ideas" about its structure and substance.

It is clear at a glance that Stoppard's play turns Shakespeare's inside out, so that, in the Player's words, we see "on stage the things that are supposed to happen off."³ Thus the exits marked for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet* become exits for the other characters in Stoppard. Now at one level this obviously represents a simple technical device for putting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Hamlet's place at the centre of the play so that the action of *Hamlet* can be seen in a different perspective. As Harold Hobson puts it:

Shakespeare looked at the matter from Hamlet's viewpoint, with the Prince in the centre and everything revolving round him. How would these events appear to someone not at their centre, but on the periphery; someone such as Guildenstern or Rosencrantz? This is the question that Stoppard answers. To Rosencrantz and Guildenstern what happens in Shakespeare's play seems totally baffling and incomprehensible.⁴

Now this is certainly part of the story, but it rather implies that Stoppard tinkered (albeit ingeniously) with an (or should I say *the?*) established dramatic masterpiece for no better reason than that "it was there". I hope to show that the play is based upon a much more substantial foundation than this, and that the inversion of the *Hamlet* action is merely a symptom of a thoroughgoing inversion of conventional assumptions about life. These profounder concerns are immediately suggested by the fact that not all the occasions on which Stoppard has inverted *Hamlet* can be explained by the desire to substitute Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for Hamlet at the centre of the action. Why *show* us "Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced..." (p. 25) instead of having Ophelia describe him in this guise? (And, indeed, why include the episode at all — or any of the episodes from *Hamlet* in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play no part?) Similarly why turn "To be or not to be" from speech to mime (p. 53)? And why have Hamlet retreating from Polonius during the "crab" speech (p. 37) instead of *vice versa*, which is the conventional arrangement? These subsidiary inversions are designed, I

think, to provide tangible support for the play's basic theme, which is that modern life requires an inversion of the assumptions which (in Stoppard's view at any rate) underlie *Hamlet*.

The key to Stoppard's play seems to me to lie in the recognition of a hard-and-fast distinction between the world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the world of the players-within-the-play (i.e. the Tragedians and the *Hamlet* cast). Let us, for reasons which will presently appear, begin by ignoring the Tragedians (i.e. the Player, Alfred and the rest of their troupe) and concentrating on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, on the one hand, and the *Hamlet* cast, on the other.

There seem to be no points of contact whatever between them. Even when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are supposed to be involved in the *Hamlet* action Stoppard has contrived to make them look completely detached from the other characters' business. Thus, on page 52, when Stoppard depicts the discussion between Claudius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern which occupies the early part of III,i in *Hamlet*, he keeps Guildenstern apart from the others for as long as he can and (more important) turns Rosencrantz's responses to Gertrude's questions into deliberate untruths. Rosencrantz lies again (in Stoppard but not in Shakespeare) over the matter of Hamlet's arrest following the murder of Polonius (p. 67), and it is clear that in Stoppard *Hamlet* is captured *in spite of* Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's endeavours rather than because of them. The *Hamlet* action seems to go its own way under its own momentum, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern stand about on the fringes, more like spectators than participants.

It is, I surmise, in order to emphasize their role as spectators that Stoppard has incorporated into his play scenes from *Hamlet* in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are spectators pure and simple. Time and again we find them at "*the two downstage corners looking upstage*" (p. 37), "*at footlights*" (p. 30), or simply "*downstage*" (p. 52), observing the scenes from *Hamlet* which are going on "*upstage*". At times they express their awareness of the passive role they are playing: "I feel like a spectator," says Rosencrantz on page 30. At other times they put this awareness to spectacular effect: "Next!" shouts Rosencrantz on page 49,

presumably imitating a director auditioning actors — a role more obviously assumed by Guildenstern on page 23, when he tells the miserable Alfred, "We'll let you know."

All this seems to suggest that Stoppard regards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as an extension of the audience. The pair deliver many of their speeches directly to the audience, the most spectacular case in point occurring on page 43 when Rosencrantz yells, "Fire!" "*at the audience*" and, when they don't move, observes, "*with contempt*", "They should burn to death in their shoes." The Faber edition is designed for performance in theatres (like the Old Vic) with a proscenium-arch and "footlights"; in more adaptable theatres I surmise that Stoppard would approve if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were to mingle with the audience on occasions.

All this tends towards the conclusion that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, on the one hand, and the cast of *Hamlet*, on the other, are strictly juxtaposed. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are portrayed as an extension of the audience and therefore as "real" people; the *Hamlet* characters, by virtue of the on-stage audience (added to the off-stage one), are made to appear all the more artificial, stagy and "unreal". It is probably significant that on the one occasion when Hamlet tries to communicate with the audience he comes, as it were, up against a brick wall:

HAMLET comes down to footlights and regards the audience. The others watch but don't speak. HAMLET clears his throat noisily and spits into the audience. A split second later he claps his hand to his eye and wipes himself. He goes back upstage. (p. 84)

With this distinction in mind let us proceed to examine these two sets of characters in more depth. The world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is manifestly bizarre; absurdity permeates both their voluntary activities (spinning coins, playing word-games, establishing the points of the compass and the time of day) and their involuntary ones (muddling their names, tripping over words, losing their trousers).

Beneath this Beckettian/Pinterian veneer lie the customary Beckettian/Pinterian problems. Somewhat arbitrarily perhaps, I tend to isolate three of them. First there is the problem of the limits of knowledge. I am not a philosopher (Stoppard is — or

rather he subjected himself to a crash course in the subject before writing *Jumpers*), but I hope it is reasonable to assert that there are basically two ways of arriving at knowledge: by deductive logic and by inductive logic. At first Guildenstern tries to use the syllogism (the classic instrument of “deductivists”) to understand the bizarre predicament in which he finds himself at the beginning of the play, when the coins keep coming down “Heads”. But his efforts produce meaningless results:

Syllogism the second: one, probability is a factor which operates within natural forces. Two, probability is not operating as a factor. Three, we are now within un-, sub- or supernatural forces. Discuss....Now - counter to the previous syllogism: tricky one, follow me carefully, it may prove a comfort. If we postulate, and we just have, that within un-, sub-, or supernatural forces *the probability is* that the law of probability will not operate as a factor, then we must accept that the probability of the *first* part will not operate as a factor, in which case the law of probability *will* operate as a factor within un-, sub- or supernatural forces. And since it obviously hasn't been doing so, we can take it that we are not held within un-, sub- or supernatural forces after all; in all probability, that is.... (pp. 11-12)

So deduction proves fruitless and we soon find that it has given way to induction in the form of “Pragmatism” (p. 41) and learning “by experience” (p. 65). This seems to represent a decline of confidence which culminates in Guildenstern’s absurd statement early in Act III:

I've lost all capacity for disbelief. I'm not sure that I could even rise to a little gentle scepticism. (p. 72)

Ultimately, then, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s situation proves to be unknowable — even un-unknowable. They are in the “alarming” situation of the two men who see the unicorn (p. 15), or perhaps in the same sort of dilemma as the celebrated “Chinaman of the T'ang Dynasty” who “dreamed he was a butterfly, and from that moment...was never quite sure that he was not a butterfly dreaming it was a Chinese philosopher” (p. 43).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot understand their predicament; nor can they control it, and here we arrive at the second of the serious issues which seem to me to underlie the play’s trivial veneer: the clash between predestination and free-will. From the very beginning of the play Guildenstern (the

more discerning of the two, as the “*character note*” at the head of Act I indicates) senses that his freedom is being circumscribed by some power outside himself:

The equanimity of your average tosser of coins depends upon a law, or rather a tendency, or let us say a probability, or at any rate a mathematically calculable chance, which ensures that he will not upset himself by losing too much nor upset his opponent by winning too often. This made for a kind of harmony and a kind of confidence. *It related the fortuitous and the ordained into a reassuring union which we recognized as nature.* The sun came up about as often as it went down, in the long run, and a coin showed heads about as often as it showed tails. Then a messenger arrived. We had been sent for. Nothing else happened. Ninety-two coins spun consecutively have come down heads ninety-two consecutive times.... (p. 12)

Two important points emerge from this extract. The first is the suggestion highlighted by my emphasis: that the “fortuitous” has given way to the “ordained”. The second is the observation that this change is connected with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s entanglement in the plot of *Hamlet*. More and more as the play proceeds the world of *Hamlet* comes to symbolize the “ordaining” power over which Stoppard’s protagonists struggle to impose a measure of personal control. Early in Act II Guildenstern is still capable of some optimism (though the logic of the first sentence rather undercuts that of the third and fourth):

Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are...condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one — that is the meaning of order. If we start being arbitrary it’ll just be a shambles: at least, let us hope so. Because if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we’d know that we were lost. (pp. 42-3)

But later in this scene even Rosencrantz is conscious of his lack of free-will:

We have no control. None at all...for all the compasses in the world, there’s only one direction, and time is its only measure. (p. 51)

At the beginning of Act III when the pair find themselves on a boat, apparently free from the shackles of the court, they experience a brief upsurge of confidence:

GUIL: one is free on a boat....Free to move, speak, extemporize....(p. 73)

But immediately fatalism sets in again:

and yet, we have not been cut loose. Our truancy is defined by one fixed star, and our drift represents merely a slight change of angle to it.... (p. 73)

He remembers that they have not “cut loose” but “are taking Hamlet to England”, and immediately Rosencrantz comes up to report that Hamlet is indeed on board the ship. Guildenstern makes one last effort to assert his free-will at the end of the play when (in a gesture reminiscent of Mathieu’s brave defiance of the existential dilemma at the end of Sartre’s *Roads to Freedom*) he stabs the Player and triumphantly refutes the notion of an “ordaining” destiny:

If we have a destiny, then so had he — and if this is ours, then that was his — and if there are no explanations for us, then let there be none for him. (p. 89)

But it was a trick dagger, and the Player rises to his feet again, thus destroying Guildenstern’s last illusion of freedom.

Having sacrificed their free-will to the exigencies of the *Hamlet* plot, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern must inevitably die, for that is what happens to them in *Hamlet*. And the third great problem with which they have to grapple in Stoppard’s play is: the nature and significance of death. Again there is an important progression in their attitudes. In Act I death is a subject for frivolous disquisition: Rosencrantz wonders why “the fingernails grow after death, as does the beard” (p. 12). Rosencrantz’s treatment of death in Act II is even sillier, but this time his intentions seem to be serious, and Guildenstern adds a chilling afterword:

Death followed by eternity...the worst of both worlds. It is a terrible thought. (p. 52)

He supplements this reflection with an impassioned debunking of the stage-deaths depicted in the dress-rehearsal of *The Mousetrap*:

No, no, no...you’ve got it all wrong...you can’t act death. The *fact* of it is nothing to do with seeing it happen — it’s not gasps and blood and falling about — that isn’t what makes it death. It’s just a man failing to reappear, that’s all — now you see him, now you don’t, that’s the only thing that’s real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming

back — an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death. (pp. 61-2)

At the end of the play Guildenstern reacts similarly (with less passion — as befits his reduced circumstances — but still with “*an edge of impatience*”) to another spate of “romantic” state-deaths, and then proceeds to act out his own definition:

Well, we'll know better next time. Now you see me, now you — (*And disappears*). (p. 91)

To Rosencrantz and (more particularly) Guildenstern, death is no more meaningful than life; it is simply the negation of life — *l'être et le néant*, nothing more.

Thus through the experience of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Stoppard conveys to his audience these three themes (all of them commonplace in the literature of existentialism): that life is meaningless; that it is also uncontrollable; and that death, far from being imbued with romance and significance, is mere negation — the absence of existence.

In the juxtaposed “stage” world of *Hamlet* things are, of course, quite different. All the characters seem to know what they are doing and they do it completely and efficiently, notwithstanding the obstacles which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern put in their way from time to time. This applies to their deaths no less than to their lives: the final holocaust (as depicted by the Players) is full of expression and meaning, and in the speech with which Stoppard concludes his play Horatio is able to give a satisfactory explanation of each several death.⁵

There are in the play several explicit (even spectacular) demonstrations of the coherence of the *Hamlet* world *vis à vis* the shambles of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's. On page 67, for example, Guildenstern's immediate reaction to one of the *Hamlet* scenes is to observe:

And yet it doesn't seem enough; *to have breathed such significance*. Can that be all? And why us? — anybody would have done. *And we have contributed nothing*. (My emphasis.)

On page 32, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, after a series of unsuccessful attempts, suddenly get their names right at the very moment when Hamlet crosses the stage. But as soon as he

disappears the old confusion returns. Coherence is evidently dependent on the presence of some member of the *Hamlet* cast. Likewise in Act I the run of "heads" ceases (and the law of probability reasserts itself) "*simultaneously*" with the commencement of the *Hamlet* actions. And on page 80 the appearance of Hamlet "*from behind his umbrella*" seems to be the factor which enables Rosencrantz to give a suddenly lucid summary of their situation.

The contrast between the real world of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and the audience and the artificial, stage-world of *Hamlet* constitutes the core of Stoppard's play. But dramas are not made out of simple juxtapositions (masques are — but that is another story!), and so Stoppard has bridged the gap between the real world and the artificial world by introducing a set of characters who belong at different times to both worlds. I refer, of course to the Tragedians, whose role in the play we must now examine.

At first they seem to inhabit the same world as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They get involved in the coin-spinning, complain that they "have no control" (p. 18) and join in the speculation about "chance" and "fate" (p. 18). With this existential attitude goes an inverted form of theatre:

We keep to our usual stuff, more or less, only inside out. We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else. (p. 10)

They are prepared to portray "flagrante delicto" (p. 16), and they even countenance audience participation. All this goes under the title of "realism" (p. 16). (And since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern too are doing "on stage the things that are supposed to happen off" — in *Hamlet* — this passage provides another reason for considering them as "real" characters.)

But soon the Tragedians' style changes. Guildenstern persuades them to perform an orthodox play rather than one of their inverted "performances", and the Player seems suddenly to change from a "real" person like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to an actor, "Always in character" (p. 24), like the *Hamlet* cast. This association with *Hamlet* is immediately cemented

when, in place of the expected play by the Tragedians, Stoppard gives us a scene from *Hamlet*; it is as if the Tragedians have been somehow transubstantiated into the cast of *Hamlet*.

This "transubstantiation effect" is employed again frequently in Acts II and III. A small example is Rosencrantz's mistaking Alfred for Gertrude on page 54. Much more significant is the way in which Stoppard has handled the dress-rehearsal of *The Mousetrap* which forms the centre-piece of his play in much the same way as the final performance forms the centre-piece of Shakespeare's. In extending the play-within-the-play beyond the truncated version given by Shakespeare, Stoppard has turned it into a paraphrase of *Hamlet*. This at once serves to bind the Tragedians all the more firmly into the world of *Hamlet*. Moreover, when the Player, on page 57, calls, "Gentlemen!... It doesn't seem to be coming. We are not getting it at all..." he seems to be alluding not to the rehearsal itself (which has hardly got under way) but to the incursions made into it by Hamlet, Ophelia, Claudius and Polonius. Once again the Tragedians and the *Hamlet* cast interweave, and the Player fails to distinguish between them. (So does Hamlet, who, in the course of his incursion, "*leans close to the PLAYER-QUEEN and POISONER*" to deliver lines literally intended for Gertrude and Claudius.) The interweaving of these two groups culminates in the closing moments of the play; Stoppard's stage-directions tell the story:

ALFRED, *still in his queen's costume, dies by poison: the PLAYER, with rapier, kills the 'KING' and duels with a fourth TRAGEDIAN, inflicting and receiving a wound....*" (p. 90) "*Immediately the whole stage is lit up, revealing, upstage, arranged in the approximate positions last held by the dead TRAGEDIANS, the tableau of court and corpses which is the last scene of Hamlet.*" (pp. 91-2)

I hope it is clear from this account that the Tragedians do not do what we might reasonably have expected them to do: they do not shuttle back and forth between their real selves and their assumed roles in order to provide common ground for the "real" characters (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) and the "artificial" characters (Hamlet and company) throughout the play. Instead they make one decisive shift — late in Act I — from the "real" to the "artificial". What is Stoppard up to?

Well, first of all, I think he means this shift away from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's points of view to underscore the intensifying sense of isolation which they feel as the play proceeds. It should be noted that the full effect of the change in the Tragedians is not felt until the middle of Act II, which is when Guildenstern is becoming particularly anxious about the other problems which I have defined.

Secondly, by removing the Tragedians from the "real" world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Stoppard has not completely deprived himself of a link between this world and the "artificial" world which the Tragedians now inhabit alongside the cast of *Hamlet*. For although there is now a *psychological* rift between the Tragedians and the protagonists, the two groups continue to encounter each other *physically*, so that, on this level at least, there persists a sense of drama rather than sheer juxtaposition. In fact one of the main functions of the Tragedians is to develop the abstract antithesis between the world of *Hamlet* and the world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into a dramatic confrontation full of fear and menace; in Acts II and III the Tragedians act as surrogates for the *Hamlet* cast — surrogates who, because of their freedom from a pre-existing Shakespearean text, can activate (or dramatize) the clash between the two worlds. This sense of physical menace first becomes strong just prior to the *Mousetrap* rehearsal on pages 54-5. The confrontation between Rosencrantz and the Player on page 54 is a replay of their Act I confrontation (p. 24), but this time the Player rather than Rosencrantz comes off best, and Rosencrantz emerges hurt and frightened. What follows is even more alarming:

He makes a break for an exit. A TRAGEDIAN dressed as a KING enters. ROS recoils, breaks for the opposite wing. Two cloaked TRAGEDIANS enter. ROS tries again but another TRAGEDIAN enters, and ROS retires to midstage.

This note of menace is maintained during the rehearsal, particularly at its climax: the death of the "two spies" (stage replicas of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern). At this point Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are only half-aware of the resemblance between them and the spies, and therefore of the threat posed to them by the spies' deaths; but the replay of these deaths in Act

III finally convinces them that they are doomed. The context of this replay, incidentally, provides a good example of the way in which Stoppard uses the Tragedians to flesh out the threats posed to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by the *Hamlet* plot: on page 88 Rosencrantz and Guildenstern read the death-warrant which Hamlet has prepared for them, and immediately they are threatened physically by the Tragedians:

One by one the PLAYERS emerge, impossibly, from the barrel, and form a casually menacing circle round ROS and GUIL who are still appalled and mesmerized.

Although Stoppard has recently claimed that he doesn't "have to be bothered by seductive action on the stage"⁶, it seems to me that he used the Tragedians in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* to make tangible the forces threatening his protagonists, and so provide a modicum of "action" in a play which deals largely with the inner man.

But a much more important function of the Tragedians is to elucidate the basic clash between the real and the artificial on which the play depends. This task of elucidation begins almost as soon as the Tragedians appear at Claudius's court in Act II. In the midst of his plangent account of the spectatorless performance given in response to Guildenstern's commission in Act I the Player lets slip a crucial definition: "We're *actors* — we're the opposite of people!" At this point it is the Player who seems to be out of his element, but it very soon becomes apparent that in the world of *Hamlet* it is the "actors" who are at home and the real "people", like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are lost. This point emerges clearly from an exchange between Guildenstern and the Player later in Act II:

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

We don't know how to *act*.

PLAYER: Act natural....(p. 48)

The emphasis on the word "act" in Guildenstern's speech indicates that Stoppard is still using it in its technical sense; he is maintaining the dichotomy between "people" and "actors". The Player now proceeds to define the kind of world which "actors" inhabit:

There's design at work in all art — Surely you know that? Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion [*sic.*].... we aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies.... It is *written*.... We follow directions — there is no *choice* involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means. (pp. 57-8)⁷

This world (unlike the “real” world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) has form and meaning; and death (which so perplexes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) is an accepted part of its design. To be sure, for the Tragedians, as for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “there is no *choice* involved”, but in the case of the Tragedians there is a transparent logic behind this lack of choice — and anyway the death which is ordained for them is only a mock death:

Do you know what happens to old actors?...Nothing. They're still acting.
(p. 84)

Guildenstern reacts with “*derision*” to this ordered, artificial view of the world — especially to its stylized version of death:

Actors! The mechanics of cheap melodrama! That isn't *death!*... You scream and choke and sink to your knees, but it doesn't bring death home to anyone — it doesn't catch them unawares and start the whisper in their skulls that says — “One day you are going to die.” (p. 61)

This verbal disagreement is bolstered visually by the confrontation between the “real” Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and their “artificial” replicas, the “two spies”, and particularly by the contrast (here and at the end of Act III) between the “dramatic” death acted out by the spies and the “real” death defined by Guildenstern.

This mention of Guildenstern in isolation from Rosencrantz brings me to my last observation about the basic design of this play, which is that the two protagonists are not interchangeable. Rosencrantz's relative obtuseness is indicated by Stoppard in his introductory stage-direction:

The run of 'heads' is impossible, yet ROS betrays no surprise at all — he feels none. However, he is nice enough to feel a little embarrassed at taking so much money off his friend. Let that be his character note.

GUIL is well alive to the oddity of it. He is not worried about the money, but he is worried by the implications; aware but not going to panic about it — his character note.

That Stoppard maintained this distinction throughout the play is clear enough. Helene Keyssar-Franke sums up the matter thus:

They are men conceived on an existential pattern, but for Rosencrantz the protest against the loss of hope is a cry in the wind; for Guildenstern it becomes the full tragic perception.⁸

At this point a *caveat* should be sounded concerning the word "existential". Stoppard has said,

I didn't know what the word 'existential' meant until it was applied to *Rosencrantz*. And even now [1974] existentialism is not a philosophy I find either attractive or plausible.⁹

Luckily he goes on to say that "the play can be interpreted in existential terms, as well as in other terms" and most critics have been happy to plump for the existential label.

Of course, it is a trifle ironical that Guildenstern should emerge as an existential hero, since several modern critics have applied the same label to Shakespeare's Hamlet. And perhaps Rosencrantz is a little like Shakespeare's Horatio. Stoppard was not unaware of this resemblance, I think — it is probably significant that made Guildenstern assume the mask of Hamlet in Act I (pp. 33-6). This this does not mean that the play need never have been written; Stoppard recognized that, as a result of "the death of tragedy" in modern times, *Hamlet* had to be redefined. The same urge was felt by other men of the theatre in the sixties: David Warner played Hamlet as an unheroic, alienated young intellectual in Peter Hall's 1965 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company; Nicoll Williamson portrayed a mean-and-nasty prince at the Round House in 1969 (and subsequently on film); and Charles Marowitz went further in producing a *Hamlet* collage with a hero who "is a slob" and can "never pull his finger out."¹⁰ But whereas all of these kept (more or less) to Shakespeare's text, Stoppard went further and created an original masterpiece.

NOTES

- ¹Andrew F. Kennedy, "Old and New in London Now", *Modern Drama* XI (1968-9), 445. The same sort of complaint can be found in Charles Marowitz's *Confessions of a Counterfeit Critic* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973), p. 124 and in Normand Berlin's article, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead: Theatre of Criticism", *Modern Drama* XVI (1973-4), 269-77.
- ²"Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas", *Theatre Quarterly* IV (1974), 6. For further observations by Stoppard on the role of "accident" in determining dramatic structure, see Ronald Hayman, *Tom Stoppard* (London: Heinemann, 1977), pp. 2-3.
- ³*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, p. 20. All references are to the revised second edition of the play (London: Faber and Faber, 1968).
- ⁴"Tom Stoppard — Master of Dramatic Invention", reprinted in *The Christchurch Press*, 3 May 1977.
- ⁵The second edition ends with the speeches of the English Ambassador and Horatio which constitute the fourth and fifth-to-last speeches of *Hamlet*. But the first edition (London: Faber and Faber, 1967) enshrines an earlier version of the play with a different conclusion, in which two modern ambassadors interrupt the Shakespearean text and bumble about (in the manner of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves) in an attempt to establish the precise number of the dead. In other words this edition leaves us in the "real" world, whereas the second edition leaves us in an "artificial" one.
- ⁶*Newsweek*, 15 August 1977, p. 40.
- ⁷The Player is, of course, echoing Wilde's Miss Prism, who defines fiction in similar terms early in the second act of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Stoppard's debt to Wilde has yet to be fully determined, but it seems worth observing here that Wilde too was fascinated by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
- ⁸"The Strategy of 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead'", *Educational Theatre Journal* XXVII (1975), 85-97.
- ⁹"Ambushes for the Audience", p. 6.
- ¹⁰Charles Marowitz, *The Marowitz Hamlet' and 'The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus'* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 10.