



## The Strategy of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead"

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**HELENE KEYSSAR-FRANKE**

## ***The Strategy of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead***

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 352-353.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 338.

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

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

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

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

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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