

CHAPTER 4

Baffled Innocents in an Off-stage World: A Postmodern Reading of Shakespeare in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

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Chapter IV

Baffled Innocents in an Off-Stage World

We are not the masters of our own destinies. No one is totally innocent and no one is totally guilty. We are social animals and as members of a society responsible to some degree for that society...It is often the choices we make, the options we select that determines the extent of our "guilt" or "innocence".

(qtd. in Pilkington 15)

One of the most Elizabethan and the most intellectual of all contemporary British playwrights, Tom Stoppard is unquestionably a major power in the contemporary theatre, both in Britain and increasingly in America. He entered the British theatre with a flourish and made a permanent mark on the drama of his age. It was his early masterpiece, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, an offshoot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that made him popular in the academic world. This modern classic was hailed as a landmark in British dramatic history and was received as a deconstruction of the image of the Hamlet world.

Stoppard was, apparently, not the first playwright to notice dramatic possibilities in Hamlet's two courtiers. Oscar Wilde in *De Profundis* claimed they were immortal: "They are what modern life has contributed to the antique ideal of friendship...They are types fixed for all time" (950). Sir W.S. Gilbert's

short burlesque comedy titled *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is another example. Similarly, T.S Eliot who like Wilde, was a constant influence on Stoppard in *The Love Song Of J.Alfred Prufrock*, elaborated on the predicament of the attendant lord:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be,
 Am an attendant lord, one that will do
 To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
 Advice the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
 Deferential, glad to be of use,
 Politic, cautious and meticulous
 Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse
 At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –
 Almost, at times, the Fool. (17)

However, Meenakshi Pawha in *The Dramatic Art and Vision of Tom Stoppard*, thinks it proper to say that Stoppard is the first dramatist “to build a whole play out of two peripheral theatrical figures, as the play takes as its main characters two of literature’s most marginal figures, attendant lords who, as several critics point out are actually excluded from some productions of *Hamlet*.”(43)

Stoppard moves steadily backwards into their history and explains their arrival in Britain :

The interesting thing was them at Elsinore...By this time I was not in the least interested in doing any sort of pastiche, for a start, or in doing a criticism of *Hamlet* – that was simply one of the by-products.(20)

What Stoppard intended, he explains in the same interview, was “to entertain a roomful of people” (Ambushes 6). With the two courtiers at Elsinore, he sought “to inject some sort of interest and colour into every line, rather than counting on the general situation having a general interest”(7). Paul Delaney in *Tom Stoppard: The Moral Vision of the Major Plays* states:

Ros and Guil spear carriers from the wings of Shakespeare’s imagination, are summoned to centre stage by Tom Stoppard. With three acts before them and no acts to perform, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spin coins, devise word games, parry questions and answers, delve and glean, draw Hamlet on to pleasures, play at playing, take a stab at killing (though the intended victim never gets the point), and, finally, wind up on the receiving end of the point themselves.(14)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead has been open to all kinds of critical interpretations, particularly as a statement of existential or absurdist intent. In the play Stoppard explores themes like chance, freedom, identity and death. As Anthony Jenkins declares in *The Theatre of Tom Stoppard*:

What Stoppard does is to exploit the comic potential of Ros and Guil's situation in *Hamlet*, a confused paralysis most cogently expressed in modern terms by Estragon and Vladimir's circumstances in *Godot*, in order to arrive at a statement about death that is both serious and of universal application.' (37)

Stoppard's debt to the Theatre of the Absurd, particularly to Beckett, is often acknowledged without being analysed. Beckett's anguished clowns Didi and Gogo are strange, anonymous characters without history or social milieu. They are stunningly sympathetic and vulnerable in their naked humanity. Stoppard's characters too, like Beckett's, are conceived with compassion. Bewildered and basically gentle people, they struggle to maintain their balance in a world without gravity. To Stoppard, as to most playwrights of the absurd, the issue is the same: how can a man live reasonably in a world that makes no sense?

The foundation of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is Shakespeare's play where an intellectual struggle is a heroic endeavour. Stoppard superimposes on this his own version of Shakespeare's play, a reduction to absurdity of everything noble and weighty in *Hamlet*. In the rewriting there is no ghost, no bird of dawn, no intimation of a divinity that shapes our ends. Hamlet becomes a slick conniver who drills in and out of action adding to the general confusion. Through a brilliant inversion, the most significant exchanges and soliloquies in the original play have been eliminated, diluted with comedy, or so drastically abridged that they are mere

reminiscences of Shakespeare's passages. At the same time, the focus is on minor characters and incidents, and action that had taken place off- stage. "This new *Hamlet* is a disjoint farce without a protagonist" (Jill Levenson 435). The last component of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is Stoppard's tale of the two bewildered courtiers who stumble along in a search for direction. In this there are obvious affinities with Beckett's characters, especially the melancholy pairs held together by the peculiar love - hate bred of desperation.

While biding by their time to play their roles in Shakespeare's tragedy Rosencrantz and Guildenstern while away their time by telling jokes and speculating upon reality like the two tramps who occupy themselves in much the same way in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* illustrates

the absurdity of life through these two characters who have bit parts in a play not of their making and who are capable only of acting out their dramatic destiny. They are bewildered by their predicament and face death as they search for the meaning of their existence. (10)

Delving deep into man's inner existence and his being- in-the-world reveals his dejection and despair, struggle and suffering. The twentieth century heralded an era of moral perplexity and uncertainty. The rise of scientific spirit and rationalism led to a questioning of accepted social beliefs, conventions and traditions. Torn asunder by the two World Wars, man experiences the terror of

the world and his own powerlessness. He finds himself in a tragic mess. This atmosphere of anxiety, perplexity and confusion has been further accentuated by the dominating influence of technology that makes man aware of his own helplessness. Man loses faith in Rationalism and Humanism and is aware of his own rootlessness that has brought in its wake its own problems and frustrations. As F.H. Heinemann puts it:

Because the very existence of man on this earth is menaced, because the annihilation of man, his dehumanization and the destruction of his humanity and of all moral values is real danger therefore the meaning of human existence becomes our problem. (178)

Existentialism, which occupies a prominent position in modern philosophy, is not to be regarded as a system or school of philosophy but as a kind of philosophical activity which revolts against the objectivity and abstraction of traditional philosophy. It may be defined as a descriptive and subjective analysis of the nature of human existence and its ethical interests. It is very much concerned with human and personal values, and with the realization of an authentic human existence.

The basic dictum of Existentialism, 'existence precedes essence,' is apparent even in the teachings of such famous defenders of human reason as St. Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, the Danish Protestant philosopher and Soren Kierkegaard, its principal founder. Existentialism is primarily concerned with the problem of man's inner existence. The Existentialist philosophers lay stress

on subjectivity and concreteness. G. Srinivasan in *The Existentialist Concepts and the Hindu Philosophical Systems* opines :

Existentialism is a protest against the self- estrangement and dehumanization of human existence and the dissolution of its individual, concrete, subjective reality either in an objective system of thought or a mechanized system of society. It maintains that to exteriorize human existence in any of these forms is to de-existentialize it: for the truth of human existence is its concreteness and subjectivity which disappear in its abstraction and exteriorization; human existence is not really static, abstract and objective, but dynamic, concrete and subjective, and is to be grasped in its original dynamism, concreteness and subjectivity from within. (1-2)

Initially, Stoppard had got interested in the two characters as existential immortals. He states that what lured him to the plight of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern was, in part, its “combination of specificity and vague generality” (Ambushes 6). This combination of specificity and vague generality seems to have made the play particularly inert ground for a remarkable outcropping of critical interpretations. Ruby Cohn in her essay, “*Tom Stoppard: Light Drama and Dirges in Marriage*,” argues that the theatrical techniques and dramatic devices used by Stoppard in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* are derived from *Waiting for Godot*. It is true that Stoppard consciously exploits a number of well-known theatrical motifs in Beckett’s *Godot*. But *Rosencrantz and*

Guildestern is not a sheer attempt to rewrite *Waiting for Godot* within the fabric of Shakespeare's drama. It is a woeful attempt to question the possible importance of Shakespearean tragedy for a young adult in the second half of the twentieth century. Tim Brassell in *Tom Stoppard: An Assessment* refers to Kenneth Tynan's judicious comment of the play that "despite its multiple sources *Rosencrantz* is a genuine original, one of a kind" (85). This is exactly what the play represents- the advent of a new writer with a rare sense of theatrical daring and comic innovation. When the play is dismissed by Arnold Hinchliffe as "a parasite feeding off Shakespeare, Pirandello and Beckett,"(142) Stoppard generously adds a fourth name. He declares, "it would be very difficult to write a play which was totally unlike Beckett, Pirandello and Kafka" (23).Victor L. Cahn implies that in *Rosencrantz* "Stoppard confronts absurdity head-on and at the same time takes the initial steps towards moving beyond absurdity"(35).But Jim Hunter appears to be closer to the mark when he says, "Stoppard both celebrated *Waiting for Godot*, and largely got it out of his system, in *Rosencrantz*"(149).The echoes of *Godot* which run throughout the play are , perhaps, Stoppard's tribute to the play which provided the most dramatic dismissal of realism in the theatre's history.

A random comparison of *Rosencrantz and Guildestern are Dead* with *Waiting for Godot* will show how deeply Beckett has influenced Stoppard's view of theatre and of life. Stoppard himself, in an interview, has described how he feels the influence of *Waiting for Godot*:

There's just no telling what sort of effect it had on our society, who wrote because of it, or wrote in a different because of it. But it really defined the minimum of theatrical experience...of course it would be absurd to deny my enormous debt to it. To me the representative attitude is I am a human being...Beckett gives me more pleasure than I can express because he always ends up with a man surrounded by the wreckage of a proposition he had made in confidence only two minutes before.(Declare 47)

Again, in an interview on Thames Television in 1976, Stoppard proposed:

One of the reasons that the play turned out to work so well, I think, is that the predicament of the characters coincides with the predicament of the playwright. In other words, I have these two guys in there and there's no plot until somebody comes in three pages later and they have to fill three pages and I have to fill three pages, and there's nothing. So they end up playing word games, spinning coins, speculating on eternals as well as the immediate situation, getting nowhere, and one finds that there becomes a sort of empathy, a circular one, between an audience watching somebody kill time watching somebody kill time, surrounded by somebody killing time.

This is Beckett's starting point too in *Godot* where two tramps wait for a man who seems to hold the solution to all their problems but who never comes. According to the absurdists, everyday-existence consists of chaos and contradictions. Beckett defies the audience with a complicated problem bound heavily with psychological principles – the problem of human insistence to find faith in a failed religion. The non – appearance of Godot on the stage to Vladimir and Estragon and to the audience can thus only be construed as an indication of realism. On the other hand, Stoppard entertains the audience by parodically referring to the theatricality, the fictionality, or the unreality of this complicated problem. His strategy is to capitalize on the gaps between the folklore status of *Hamlet* as archetypal Shakespeare- tragedy and the established academic interpretations of *Hamlet* as a complicated and finely articulated text which expresses an intricate set of contemplation on human actions and motives.

Stoppard is, perhaps, best distinguished as a postmodernist writer, someone who self- consciously questions and speculates upon the fragments of the culture he has inherited. He cares not to build his plays out of direct experience but from the outlines of older plays and older forms of amusement. In order to assert his own attitude to life, Stoppard first interrogates, parodies, deconstructs, ridicules and at times celebrates the values inherent in the conventional cultural forms which comprise the frame of his own work. His own view of life can be articulated in terms of a tension between the farcical

deconstruction of the old forms in the process of which new meanings are discovered and new attitudes to life accomplished.

Stoppard finds guidelines to his perception of life and to his artistic energies in the works of postmodernists like Jean Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, (Gilles) Deleuze and (Felix) Guattari *et al.* Two postmodern literary terms are “metafiction” and “intertextuality”. The postmodern metafiction instead of concealing its fictionality behind a mask of reality, consciously calls attention to its own constructedness and physical transitoriness through means such as excesses, disruptive juxtapositions and ironic representations. The literary strategies employed for achieving these ends include eclecticism, aleatory writing and the use of parody and pastiche.

Stoppard’s plays are necessarily eclectic as he chooses his material from a wide variety of cultures, systems, genres, professional idioms and personal traits, and brings them together not in harmonious continuity but in a healthy contestation that does not have anything to do with the traditional theatrical concept of “agon”.

Parody and pastiche, stock features of Stoppard’s plays, refer to the second aspect of postmodern ontology- intertextuality. Since a text cannot accurately or even rudimentarily touch upon a reality, it can only refer to previous and contemporary texts which claim to embody or represent such reality, but the intertextual reference is never free from either parody or irony. The Italian word *pasticcio* means a medley of various ingredients, a jumble.

Pastiche is therefore a kind of permutation, a shuffling of generic and grammatical ties. The presence of pastiche in postmodern writing is not anything unique. The origin of the novel form itself was marked by a succession of parodies from Samuel Richardson to Laurence Sterne. In fact pastiche arises from the frustration that everything has been done before. Linda Hutcheon's comment on postmodern intertextuality in her work, *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, brings out the difference of postmodern intertextuality from the modernist use of it:

Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between the past and the present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context. It is not a modernist desire to order the present through the past or to make the present look spare in contrast to the richness of the past...Instead, it directly confronts the past of literature -and of historiography, for it derives from other texts . It uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony. In all there is little of the modernist sense of a unique, symbolic visionary work of art; there are only texts, already written ones.(86)

This differentiation that Linda Hutcheon draws between the modern and postmodern uses of intertextuality through the ideas of irony and parody brings at once to the attention of the critical reader a comparison between T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and Stoppard's plays. While Eliot refers to other texts with the

idea that they exemplified a blatant reality which was better than the present one, Stoppard's reference to other texts - Shakespeare is just one among the prominently targeted referents- is essentially based on the idea of the text as writing, not as the bearer of truth and reality. Hence the rich potential of parody and irony which forms the moving spirit of his writing. What *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* offers is a sophisticated pastiche of the cliché's of Shakespearean interpretation as the basis on which Stoppard develops his reflections on contemporary experience. What is interesting is the realization that a Shakespearean play is not a stable entity. Surrounding every play of Shakespeare is both a textual and intertextual history and the latter refers to the traditions that have grown around it through its performance over the centuries. Keir Elam referring to the works by Julia Kristeva, writes about the intertextual nature of a play:

Appropriate decodification of a given text derives above all from the spectator's familiarity with other texts... the genesis of the performance itself is necessarily intertextual : it cannot but bear the traces of other performances at every level, whether that of the written text (bearing generic, structural and linguistic relations with other plays), the scenery (which will 'quote' its pictorial or proxemic influences), the actor (whose performance refers back, for the cognoscenti, to other displays), directorial style, and so on. 'The text,' remarks Julia Kristeva 'is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality. In

the space of a single text several *enonces* from other texts cross and neutralize each other'.(7)

The concept of intertextuality, in close association with metafiction, insinuates two things: that the text is engaged in a dialogue with itself, the various threads of which are in eternal competition with one another, and that no text can be written or read in isolation – as an original work – but is to be located within the totality of a writing space occupied by previous and contemporary works within the genre of that text or within the whole scope of literary writing.

Thus, rather than merely quoting from a previous text to strengthen comparisons and contrasts in significance as the modernist would do, the postmodernist either incorporates his work into the structure of the earlier text or accommodates the formal and contextual elements of previous texts into his own work. This is what Stoppard does in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The play is intertextual not by means of quotations or borrowings from the author and text it refers to, but by means of its participation and problematization of particular discursive spaces, and the interrogations, distortions and modifications they effect on the symbolic codes which are potential formalizations of such spaces. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* engages itself with *Hamlet* on a debate about the codes of ethical politics represented in literature: whether it is the imperial ethics of the state or the fundamental ethics of the individual which is more conveniently applicable to the daily existence of human beings.

In general, Stoppard's plays are seen to exude a postmodernist tone and tenor that subvert, transcend or even transform artistic conventions to generate a new and lively drama – to instil fresh life into blocked veins. Stylistic experimentation, authorial absence, artistic self reflexivity, the toying and trickery with language, deflation of metanarratives – all constituting the recurrent features of his plays – unmistakably proceed from a postmodern sensibility that tries to present the unrepresentable.

In short, postmodernism involves a playful, self-conscious, parodic and subversive exploration of the received notions of truth, reason, identity, objectivity, progress – all kinds of grand narratives and field theories of explanation, in order to hint at a world that is ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate and contingent in its meanings and realities.

The postmodernist critic, John Barth, in an influential essay, has referred to parody and travesty as two of the manifestations of the new approach which dominates the post-war literary front in which, “artistic conventions are likely to be re-tried, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work”(66).

This search to revive new versions of traditional forms is what separates postmodernism from modernism. This comment is relevant to Stoppard's plays especially *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* and a question that arises is whether Stoppard's plays might represent a step past Beckett into the vanguard of our Post-modern theatre.

The term postmodernism has only become current since 1960s. In fact the dominant mode of literature between 1960 and 1990 was postmodernist writing. Peter Barry in his *Beginning Theory* refers to J.A. Cuddon's entry in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* where he describes postmodernism as characterized by "an eclectic approach [by a linking for] aleatory writing [and for] parody and pastiche"(84). He also compares and contrasts modernism with postmodernism and says:

For the postmodernist... fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief. In a word, the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it. (84)

The postmodernists foreground what might be called intertextual elements in literature, such as parody, pastiche and allusion, in all of which there is a high degree of reference between one text and another. They also realize that the past must be revisited but "with irony" as is mentioned by Peter Brooker in *Modernism/Postmodernism* (227).

Young Stoppard's days as a theatre reviewer encouraged him to develop and cultivate a prose style of his own. In addition to his appreciation for wit, the critic in Stoppard clearly preferred plays dense with literary allusions. The Shakespeare reviews show him awed by the text even when critical of the architecture. It is no accident that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*,

transports blocks of Shakespeare's lines untouched into the context of *Godot*. *Hamlet's* structure can be violated, not its language.

With such a long apprenticeship in the theatre, it is perhaps no surprise that parody became Stoppard's first choice of comic method. In recycling prior texts, parody establishes the ground of tradition against which Stoppard's surprise deviations become both visible and valuable.

The most obvious point to make about Stoppard's work is that it is almost always amusing. Benedict Nightingale in his *50 Modern British Plays* speaks of him:

[Stoppard is] a writer who delights in unexpected verbal connections, word games, puns, conceits, pastiche, parody... Committees, news reporting, sports reporting, linguistic philosophy, psychiatrists, theatre critics, whodunits, war memoir, political memoir, travelogue, even text messages: all these, and more have become butts of Stoppard's sly and ebullient wit. (406-7)

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* around 1603 at the beginning of the period of his mature tragedies. Refurbishing an old revenge play in which the external obstacles had been dropped to make way for a Senecan ghost, Shakespeare was faced with a new motivation for delay. He combined in one character the interesting features of the truth-speaking, feigning madman and of the melancholy hero who was in vogue in those years. *Hamlet* is specular and ductile medium; it has reflected its readers and been used as material by other

writers. The story is familiar to everyone but not only do countless critics differ as to its interpretation, there is also a fundamental disagreement about what happens in it.

The image of *Hamlet* is relatively unexplored. Many important writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have employed this image. Some people have an image of Shakespeare's Hamlet as an ineffectual procrastinator or a brooding over-sensitive soul who fails to act when confronted by the harsh realities of power politics. It exists where Hamlet the character or *Hamlet* the play is taken by a creative writer used as a personal myth or symbol in the writer's own creations. Modern literature has found in Hamlet as no previous literature has done, a special stimulus and symbol. The enigmatic character of the hero and the different perspectives have made them themes for reflection and symbols for the perplexing, fragmented experience of modern life.

Yeats has some interesting things to say about Hamlet in his prose writings and brings Hamlet into, at least, two poems. For much of his life, his sense of Hamlet was derived from the deep impression on him of Henry Irving's performance of Hamlet, which his father took him to see when he was ten or twelve. In his *Autobiographies* Yeats says: "For many years Hamlet was an image of heroic self-possession for the poses of youth and childhood to copy, a combatant of the battle within myself"(47). In 1911, Hamlet was for Eliot the romantic hero, but particularly interesting romantic hero because his heroism seemed to tend towards something very different, a Prufrockian lack of

belief in himself. He is the romantic hero on the verge of becoming else: “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be” (Eliot 17). After “The Love Song of J- Alfred Prufrock” Eliot does not again use the failed romantic as a persona. And in writing on Hamlet too, he becomes more detached and objective, and turns to a critical analysis.

Mallarme made *Hamlet* a symbol of himself as poet and Hamlet a symbol of poetry. Hamlet epitomizes the problems of the opposition in life of the ideal and the real, of contemplation and action, of essence and existence. For Mallarme, the drama of Hamlet is an interior drama, fought out in the protagonist’s mind.

Joyce’s *Ulysses* is so full of allusions to *Hamlet* that Joyce would seem to be the foremost exemplar of the creative use of the play in modern literature. At the same time, Hamlet is only one of the many myths in *Ulysses*. Hamlet is not only important as a part of Stephen’s consciousness, but also a part of Bloom’s. The play not only serves as a constant source of trite moral reflections for Bloom but also as a kind of touchstone of sanity. Michael D. Bristol in *Big-Time Shakespeare* refers to Bloom’s claims that Shakespeare’s characters are the source of modern identity: he maintains that certain of Shakespeare’s characters, particularly Hamlet and Falstaff have “overdetermined our ideas of representation ever since he wrote.” The definite form of this Shakespearization of consciousness lies in the “active self-assimilation of one’s own language”(qtd.in Bristol 124).

Most of what we know about how to represent cognition and personality in language was permanently altered by Shakespeare. The principal insight that I've had in teaching and writing about Shakespeare is that there isn't anyone before Shakespeare who actually gives you a representation of characters or human figures speaking out loud, whether to themselves or to others or both, and then brooding out loud whether to themselves or to others or both, on what they themselves have said. And then, in the course of pondering, undergoing a serious or vital change, they become a different kind of character or personality and even a different kind of mind. We take that utterly for granted in representation But it doesn't exist before Shakespeare.(Bloom 125)

It is on this principle that Bloom proposes that Shakespeare, not Freud is the founding father of psychoanalysis. Bloom has repeatedly argued that Shakespeare is the source of a more wide-spread cultural influence that affects the population at large. One of the preoccupations is with Hamlet's identity, with what finally constitutes the essence of his character. Most writers see Hamlet's character as uncertain, shifting and impossible.

To Stoppard, his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* "simply presents Hamlet viewed by two people driving past Elsinore" (Mel Gussow 54). In an interview with Giles Gordon Stoppard remarked:

Influences such as appear in *Rosencrantz*, and any play of anybody else's, are I suppose admirations that have, but of the influence that has been involved on my behalf, and they have been Beckett, Kafka, Pirandello of course, I suppose Beckett is the easiest to make, yet the most deceptive. (23-4)

If it was Shakespeare's lack of interest in the affairs of *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* in *Hamlet*, it was the style and humour of Beckett that attracted Stoppard.

I find Beckett deliciously funny in the way that he qualifies everything as he goes along, reduces, refines and dismantles. When I read it I love it and when I write I just guess it comes out as other things come out.(Gordon 24)

Stoppard began to work on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in 1964. During a five- month stay in Berlin on a Ford Foundation grant he wrote a one-act Shakespearean pastiche in blank verse. On his return, he rewrote it abandoning verse for prose and it was duly performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1966. Few writers can have been accorded such instant recognition. Harold Hobson decribed it in the *Sunday Times* as the most important event in the British professional theatre since Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* had changed the direction of British drama. It was also called the most brilliant debut of the sixties.

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a complete piece of dramatic composition in its own right. It far exceeds the usual terms of reference of a burlesque. While retaining the broad context given by Shakespeare, Stoppard develops his "borrowed" characters into his own creation speculating philosophically upon the reality of a dramatic situation - the plot of *Hamlet*- which they cannot understand. In an interview with R. Hudson, S. Itzin, and S. Trussler for the *Theatre Quarterly* Stoppard himself avers:

The chief interest and objective was to exploit a situation which seemed to me to have enormous dramatic and comic potential of these two guys who in Shakespeare's context don't really know what they are doing. The little they are told are mainly lies, and there's no reason to suppose that they ever find out why they are killed. And, probably more in the early sixties than at any other time, that would strike a young playwright as being a pretty good thing to explore.(5-6)

These two "bewildered innocents" act out a scenario which they cannot understand. They are uncertain of their own roles and increasingly disturbed by the apparent meaninglessness of their own lives. Though aware that the only beginning is birth and only end is death, they are forced to believe that there is some purpose in their existence. Like the players who are to perform before Hamlet, they act out their assigned roles with diminishing confidence. They

begin to suspect that life lacks both a transcendent dimension and an enabling logic. As the player says:

We're actors...We pledge our identities secure in the conventions of our trade that someone would be watching. And then, gradually, no one was. We were caught high and dry...Even then, habit and stubborn trust that our audience spied upon us from behind the nearest bush, forced our bodies to blunder on long after they had emptied of meaning, until like runaway carts they dragged to a halt. No one came forward. No one shouted at us. The silence was unbreakable, it imposed itself upon us; it was obscene. (Ros. And Guil 46)

Bewildered innocents, modern anti-heroes, audience within audience: all these are claims for the precise role of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Each claim contains part of the truth. Moreover, William E. Gruber reminds us that the play raises issues of justice, freedom and responsibility. He also rightly stresses the particular qualities of Act three, once Stoppard has gone beyond Shakespeare's controlling script. "Stoppard here invites his characters to invent their history according to their will. He offers them alternatives, if not absolute choice" (301).

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* presents Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as being summoned to the Danish Court by Claudius in order to probe the enigmatic behaviour of Hamlet. Prince Hamlet perceived that their former friendship with

him has given way to a new mercenary allegiance to Claudius. Nevertheless, the two are chosen to accompany Hamlet to England. During the crossing they are attacked by a private vessel. Hamlet discovers in his companions' possession a letter to the English King commanding his execution. On his return he recounts to Horatio how he substituted it for another commanding their deaths.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* Stoppard presents his heroes as two likeable but utterly confused characters. They engage themselves in an eternal struggle to comprehend the complex manoeuvrings that are taking place around them as the plot of Hamlet unfolds. The absurdity of their position becomes increasingly pronounced, culminating in their journey to England without the prince they are supposed to be escorting and carrying a letter which demands their own deaths. Shakespeare defends Hamlet's action in substituting the letters. Stoppard sees it as unnecessarily vicious. The sympathies of a Hamlet audience lie with the prince and for them his survival from the potential peril of the ship is clearly imperative. However, Stoppard's concern is to redress this balance of sympathies in favour of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. As John Weightman says in his review article, "Mini - Hamlets in Limbo"

Stoppard has walked off into the wings to imagine the extratextual reality of two characters in Hamlet, whose Shakespearean appearances are tantalisingly incomplete. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern never come on to the stage, and are never referred to, except as a couple, as if their psychological

charge were too slight to allow them to exist separately. Hamlet greets them warmly as old friends and then, a little later sends them off without compunction to their deaths. This being so, Mr. Stoppard has decided that they can be developed as modern anti-heroes. They are siblings in nonentity sharing a ridiculous Tweedledum/Tweedledee part; they never fully get the hang of the situation and they are swatted like flies through being accidentally caught up in the tragedy. (38)

When the play opens, Rosencrantz announces after a few onstage tosses that the score is seventy -six - love. The game is continued and the final string of heads comes to one hundred. This is a change from their past experience. Guildenstern observes; "We have been spinning coins together since I don't know when, and in all that time (if it is all that time) I don't suppose that either of us was more than a couple of gold pieces up or down" (*Ros and Guil.* 12). This has happened only after the summons, indeed on the same day as the summons, and has been continued into the meeting with the players, who introduce the controlling *Hamlet* plot.

The coin tossing not only provides a protracted opening scene, but is frequently referred to in the play, and extends into the first meeting with the Tragedians. The fantastic run of "heads" involves the problem of chance, freedom and determinacy, which is central to Stoppard examination of the lives of these two minor characters from *Hamlet*.

The summons becomes associated with the run of “heads,” the *Hamlet* pattern represented by the Tragedians, and the deaths of the principals. These elements are brought together and their interrelationships suggested in two key passages. In the first passage, Guildenstern makes the second reference to the summons in his speculation about the impossible run of “heads”:

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 ... and for the last three minutes on the wind of a winless day I have heard the sound of drums and flute ... (*Ros. and Guil.* 12)

The music heralds the Tragedians, the first characters from the entrapping *Hamlet* plot whom Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet. The plot includes the players' production which results in the two being sent to England and their deaths. Rosencrantz's next remark to Guildenstern, that the fingernails and beard grow after death is the first reference to death.

A second key passage occurs a few minutes later:

GUIL. Practically starting from scratch ... An awakening, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters, our names shouted in a certain dawn, a message, a summons... A new record for pitch and toss. We have not been ... picked out

... simply to be abandoned ... set loose to find our own way
 ... We are entitled to some direction ... I would have
 thought.

ROS. (alert, listening) : I say -! I say –

GUIL. Yes?

ROS. I can hear - I thought I heard - music. (*Ros. and Guil.* 14)

Stoppard reinforces the idea that his play is the reverse side of Shakespeare's by employing an intricate symbolic device. The appearance of the opposite sides of the coin is used to point out that dramas which are flip sides or each other are being juxtaposed in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

The turning up of heads is not infinite, since “tails” finally comes up just as a scene from *Hamlet* is about to be staged. The appearance of the other side of the coin signals that *Hamlet*, the flip side of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is about to be performed. Stoppard displays the other life, thereby supplying the complementary half of the courtiers' total existence. He presents a world in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off.

The two sidedness of a coin also suggests the theme that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are essentially the two sides of the same person. Shakespeare spent little time in developing and differentiating their characters in *Hamlet*.

They are granted only intermittent involvement in the play's action. As a result these sadly neglected dramatis personae are virtually indistinguishable from each other. The audience has difficulty discriminating between the two and so do characters within the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves get mixed up with their identities.

ROS. My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz.

(Guil confers briefly with him)

(Without embarrassment) I'm sorry - his name's Guildenstern, and I'm Rosencrantz. (Ros. and Guil. 16)

Though indistinguishable at times there are marked differences too between the two. They may be two sides of the same coin, but just as "heads" and "tails" are distinct from each other, so also are Stoppard's versions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Guildenstern who tosses only "heads" may be characterized as the brains. Rosencrantz who flips only "tails" may be marked as the ass.

This idea is again established by the fact that Guildenstern is the one who is able to identify who is who. Besides it is Guildenstern who recognises that the phenomenal results of their gambling must have some great implication for them. He tries to put forward several possible explanations.

GUIL. It must be indicative of something, besides the redistribution of wealth. (He muses.)List of possible

explanations. One: I'm willing it. Inside where nothing shows, I am the essence of a man spinning double-headed coins, and betting against himself in private atonement for an unremembered past (He spins a coin at Ros). Ros: Heads.
(Ros and Guil 10)

The notion of language as a self-contained system relates closely to Lyotard's idea of the "disappearance of the real"; Jeffrey Nealon explains the notion of "language and games" derived from Wittgenstein. Both Becketts' and Stoppard's pair engage in "language games", but without realizing their full significance. According to post-modernists, all we have are these language games. They are actually self-validating and there is no transcendent reality behind them. They also provide us with the identity we seek.

In Stoppard's work, games are not superficial either for the author, his characters or his audience, and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* stands poised between both terms – serious and comic – when described as a serious play. Stoppard's important ideas are made trivial by theatrical trickery and his theatrical fireworks masquerade as important ideas. Stoppard has always sought to unite the two incompatible opposites and in particular in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern begins with the image of two men spinning coins but in an equivalent verbal image, words are also being spun.

The most common form of pun is the spinning of words where a single sound seems to possess more than a single meaning.

GUIL. (*musings*). The law of probability, it has been oddly asserted, is something to do with the proposition that if six monkeys (*he has surprised himself*)... if six monkeys were...

ROS. Game?

GUIL. Were they?

ROS. Are you?

GUIL. (*understanding*). Game. (*Flips a coin*) (8)

“Game” means different things to both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This type of pun lands, like a coin, sometime on heads (meaning A), sometimes on tails (meaning B), sometimes on its edge (meaning C), and sometimes disappears altogether which is most frightening. This results in linguistic confusion; the same word or phrase may mean any number of things. “Are we all right for England?” Ros asks the Player when they meet on the boat. He meant whether they were headed in the right direction “You look all right to me. I don’t think they’re very particular in England”, (85) the Player replies. There are innumerable examples of this kind of pun in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. Hersh Zeifman in *Tomfoolery: Stoppard’s Theatrical Puns* avers:

Words may indeed be all we have to go on, but in Stoppard's plays words are, more often than not, puns, ambiguous, confusing, enigmatic. For the reality those puns reflect is itself enigmatic. The spinning of words thus becomes a symbol for the spinning of webs; linguistic uncertainty mirrors metaphysical uncertainty. And we are trapped in those webs, in a world in which there is such a confusing multiplicity of possible meaning that the whole concept of meaning ultimately becomes meaningless. (89)

Finally, language itself disintegrates making the simplest statement or question an amazing source of perplexity:

PLAYER.	Why?
GUIL.	All. (to Ros) Why?
ROS.	Exactly,
GUIL.	Exactly what?
ROS.	Exactly why?
GUIL.	Exactly why what?
ROS.	What?
GUIL.	Why?
ROS.	Why what, exactly? (49)

One of the pleasures of a game is to throw oneself against a set of rules or conventions. Here, the rule book is *Hamlet* and everybody else knows the game except Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Even before the play begins,

Stoppard's title supplies the audience with the crucial information that Ros and Guil are dead.

PLAYER: There's a design at work in all art – surely you know that? Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion.

GUIL: And what's that, in this case?

PLAYER: It never varies – we aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies.

GUIL. Marked?

PLAYER. Between “just desserts” and “tragic irony” we are given quite a lot of scope for our particular talent. Generally speaking, things have gone about as far as they can possibly go when things have got about as bad as they reasonably get. (he switches on a smile)

GUIL.: Who decides?

PLAYER (switching off his smile): It is written. (58)

Though they know they are part of a game, they have not read this particular rule book. They have been picked as part of the team is all they know.

Waiting seems to be an important activity in twentieth century drama and the games – both puns and coin-tossing – that Ros and Guil play while waiting for the known end (execution by the British King) are not simply a means to fill time as we understand. Stoppard has an undeniable “talent to amuse” but it is clear that he is obsessed with puns. They are intended not only to amuse us as they certainly do, but they have other functions as well. Stoppard uses puns consciously and thoughtfully as structural devices in his plays, as an integral part of the play’s basic meaning. Just as form mirrors content in Stoppard’s plays, so too do patterns of language, and in particular, puns.

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, the two courtiers on the fringes of *Hamlet* consider the precise implications of Claudius’ promise to reward them handsomely for helping to undermine the cause of Hamlet’s affliction.

GUIL. And receive such thanks as fits a king’s remembrance.

ROS. He doesn’t forget his friends.

GUIL. Difficult to say, really – some kings tend to be amnesiac,
others I suppose the opposite, whatever that is...

ROS. Yes-but-

GUIL. Elephantine...?

ROS. Not how long-how much?

GUIL. Retentive-he’s a very retentive king, a royal retainer. (29-30)

Guil is by far the first in Stoppard's long line of punsters and we are tickled to laugh at the nimbleness of his wit. He has fun with language and we share his pleasure. The passage continues:

ROS. What are you playing at?

GUIL. Words, words. They're all we have to go on. (30)

The joking suddenly becomes 'darker and more sinister'. For Ros and Guil are forced 'to take part in a play of which they are totally ignorant, their lines not simply forgotten but never learned'.(86) Their response is panic, but panic of a metaphysical kind and it quickly becomes clear that what Stoppard offers us here is a metaphor of life.

The play-life metaphor that Stoppard makes use of links the two concepts "We don't know how to act" (48) and "we are entitled to some direction" (14). Comparing life to a play may be the oldest of theatrical cliches but Stoppard manages to make it seem fresh through a bold and dazzling use of *Hamlet*. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, we too are actors in a play. Our life, which, like *Hamlet*, is in one sense a tragedy, in that it inevitably ends with our death, but in another sense is also a kind of farce. Life is like the play *Hamlet*, and we find ourselves cast as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, secondary characters - insignificant little ciphers who never really understand what is going on. And there is the crux of the issue: the play of our life proceeds bewilderingly around us, as *Hamlet* does around *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. Like them, we desperately try to pick up our cues, even though

we have no idea of the plot, our place in the action, our motivations, the purpose of it all. "What in God's name is going on?" Guildenstern cries out, but nobody answers Zeifman declares "Life is a terrible riddle, an enigma; and what better way to reflect this metaphysical riddle than through a series of linguistic riddles, a series of puns" (88).

The opening image of two men spinning coins is also a verbal image in that it is also words that are being spun. The most common form of pun in the play is precisely this spinning of words: a single sound is seen to possess more than a single meaning:

GUIL (musing). The law of probability, it has been oddly asserted, is something to do with the proposition that if six monkeys (he has surprised himself) ... if six monkeys were...

ROS. Game?

GUIL. Were they?

ROS. Are you?

GUIL (understanding). Game. (Flips a coin) (Ros. and Guil. 8)

Rosencrantz means one thing by "game", Guildenstern another. This type of pun lands, like a coin, sometimes on heads (meaning A), sometimes on tails (meaning B), sometimes on its edge (meaning C), and, most frightening of all, sometimes disappears altogether. The result is linguistic confusion.

The astonishing range of puns links the two concepts (“We don’t know how to act “;(48) and “we are entitled to some direction (14) Like Ros and Guil, we too are actors in a play . Our life too is in one sense a tragedy because it inevitably ends with our death. It is also a kind of farce in that we are not given the privilege of being the main character, of occupying the centre stage. Life is more like the play *Hamlet* and we are cast as secondary characters like Ros and Guil, insignificant little ciphers who never really understand what is going on. And therein lies the crux of the issue: the play of our life progresses bewilderingly around us, as Hamlet does around Ros and Guil. We have no idea of the plot, our place in the action, our motivations or the purpose of it all. “What in God’s name is going on?” Guil cries out,(69) but nobody answers. Nobody can. Life is a riddle, an enigma and the best way to reflect this metaphysical riddle is through a series of linguistic riddles, a series of puns.

However, the truly hostile critics regard punning as an essentially shameful adolescent activity if it is overdone. Both these critical responses seem not to look at Stoppard’s puns in their wider dramatic context.

Stoppard expresses his basic sense of disorder by a lack of development and coherence in his plots, which are constructed episodically of a chain of arguments and counter-arguments. He himself sees it as the greatest virtue of his plays that they present "a series of conflicting statements made by conflicting characters, and they tend to play a sort of infinite leap - frog. You know, an argument, a refutation, then a rebuttal of the refutation, then a counter

- rebuttal, so that there is never any point in this intellectual leap-frog at which I feel that is the speech to stop it on, *that is* the last word" (Ambushes 6).

However, at one point Stoppard completely contradicts the general impression of ignorance by making Rosencrantz and Guildenstern impersonate Hamlet and visualize the situation very penetratingly from his point of view:

ROS. To sum up : your father, whom you love, dies, you are his heir, you come back to find that hardly was the corpse cold before his young brother popped on to his throne and into his sheets, hereby offending both legal and natural practice. Now why are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?

GUIL. I can't imagine! (*Ros. and Guil. 36*)

"As is now generally known *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a theatrical parasite, feeding off *Hamlet*, *Waiting for Godot* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author* -- Shakespeare provides the characters, Pirandello the technique, and Beckett the tone with which Stoppard's play proceeds" (Brustein 149). There is a small measure of truth in Robert Brustein's term for the play - "theatrical parasite" for it is obvious that Stoppard needs *Hamlet* if his play is to exist at all. As for William E. Gruber, "Stoppard's play seems to vibrate because of the older classic, as a second tuning fork resonates by means of one already in motion" (291)

Life seems absurd in the play because of the limitations of one's own particular angle. The audience who know Shakespeare's *Hamlet* know the

game Ros and Guil have to play and are sure, as is Shakespeare, that “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will” (V.ii.10-11). From our omniscient vantage point we laugh at their confusion, but we also see ourselves in them and we end up with a sense of personal loss. After all the game playing that final empathy is essential if we are to experience their deaths for ourselves. Stoppard makes his pair so likable that he seems to us to have been unfaithful to his own concept. For, in *Hamlet* they are just henchmen who betray their past friendship with the Prince. Hence Hamlet’s words “Why, man, they did make love to the employment? They are not near my conscience”(V. ii.57-8) seems fair enough.

All individuals need an audience, like actors. Stoppard makes us see Ros and Guil as both actors and people even though the Player claims that “We’re actors – we’re the opposite of people”(45).

Benedict Nightingale in *50 Modern British Plays* quotes C.W.E Bigsby’s remark: “the world which exists indistinctly and threateningly just beyond the focus of their vision is a brutal and uncompassionate one” (417). Whichever way we see it, the final blow is death. Tim Brassell quite rightly notes that in *Ros and Guil* the “ideas of role and fate” invoke the inability of all mankind to understand these forces ultimately in control of their lives and fates. Yet precisely because Ros and Guil’s fate is determined by Hamlet and not by random forces, Stoppard further suggests that there is some method behind the seeming madness of their lives. But the Player says, “There’s a design at work in all art – surely you know that?”(58) and like the players, the

audience are able to see what Ros and Guil cannot. Brassell continues – “What tempers our recognition of the courtiers” amusingly ironic plight is a latent awareness that like them, we cannot see the ‘design’ behind our own lives. Our sympathies are thus directed towards these two men groping in an existential void which to varying degrees, may mirror our own” (54).

Stoppard proposes a recurring pattern of incomprehension and seeming motivelessness for all those living on the fringe of events. The intended parallel between Ros and Guil and the ambassadors who appear at the end of the play, to announce their death is further emphasized. Brassell seals the matter when he says, “the inevitability of their deaths proves, ironically, to be the single surest aspect of their lives and for explanation they have only the cold and passive inscrutability of the Player’s declaration: “It is written” (58). The fates of Ros and Guil are indeed written, written in *Hamlet* and that finally is all that needs to be said(58) Yet Stoppard’s play is not an attempt to produce *Hamlet* with a new pair of tragic heroes. In either play, the fates of these two courtiers are not tragic. However, Marowitz in *Recycling Shakespeare* suggests that Stoppard’s play, “despite its autonomy as a work of art, remains thematically related to *Hamlet* and still operates within the orbit of the original work”(9). Perhaps, Stoppard is questioning whether the concept of tragedy is not obsolete in the modern age. Brassell quotes George Steiner who in his *The Death of Tragedy* writes: “Tragedy is a deliberate advance to the edge of life, where the mind must look on blackness at the risk of vertigo” (66).

Like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are killed trying to understand why they are alive. Emphasizing the fruitlessness of their quest, the troupe of players survive because they have ceased to question. The actors, minor figures in *Hamlet* are central to Stoppard's play, where they represent an effective way of coming to terms with a capricious universe. They do not analyse, doubt or worry: "Relax, Respond. That's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn" (*Ros and Guil.*48). The chief player is particularly perceptive:

I extract significance from melodrama, a significance which it does not in fact contain ; but occasionally, from out of this matter, there escapes a thin beam of light that, seen at the right angle, can crack the shell of mortality. (61)

At times the actors' situation is notably similar to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's; they too cannot function without a sense that someone is watching. Acting out a role can be dehumanising. Yet, play-acting is the only alternative Stoppard offers to the pointless and fatal pursuits of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Stoppard's characters are unnerved by uncertainty. They are plagued by the thought of having to "take everything on trust."

GUIL. We only know what we're told, and that's little enough.

And for all we know it isn't even true.

PLAYER. For all anyone knows, nothing is. Everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true. (48)

They are characters who are trapped in their roles and are constantly foiled by inexplicable events. It is no wonder that they indulge in dreams of escape. The form of these dreams indicates the condition as well as the secret romanticism of his characters. Driven to breaking point by having to act in an unknown play, Guildenstern sees his ideal in a boat. "I like the way they're -contained. You don't have to worry about which way to go, or whether to go at all" (72).

Stoppard's plays consist of a sequence of farcical situations and abstract ideas put together in a parodistic and seemingly aimless fashion. He admits to interviewers that he has enormous difficulty in working out his plots. Hence Stoppard allows the plot to unfold in a seemingly uncontrolled manner because the characters have no control over their destinies. They are at the mercy of every situation and, as noted in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, "without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation" (90). Moreover, the lack of plot turns the play away from sentiment and melodrama. It works as an alienation effect, preventing the spectator from becoming too involved in any one character's dilemma. He escapes from being weighed down by cruel and depressing circumstances. It also keeps the spectator alert to the intellectual fireworks of the play, which serves to create the detached and extremely funny effect that is Stoppard's trademark.

This explains why Stoppard is so successful with parody. Gabrielle Scott Robinson defines parody in an article:

Parody is a way of reducing the stature of characters and events, of destroying a known model and revealing its absurdity, of looking at ideas from an angle which fractures their meanings. But when the great truths can no longer be taken on trust, parody seems the only way of at least approaching them. It makes an indirect statement on life. (48)

Stoppard is at his best in parody when he plays with other people's ideas, as in *Jumpers* and *Travesties* or with plots as in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. He performs theatrical feats in playing with contemporary concepts. He initiates us into a world in which the commonplace is often seen as absurd and absurdity accepted as commonplace. Disorder is the order of the day. This is reflected in the incoherence and the lack of sustained action of his plays. Stoppard treats his hero's bewilderment as farce. Metaphysical questions are aired but, like the characters themselves, they are submerged in farcical mishaps. This makes the plays both painful and funny.

Hersh Zeifman's comments on Stoppard's use of punning in *Tomfoolery: Stoppard's Theatrical Puns* is noteworthy.

Puns are both the glory and the bane of Stoppard's critical reputation. On the one hand, his plays are feasts of language in a time of almost universal famine, it is hardly surprising that audiences having

gratefully responded by gorging themselves into paroxysms of delight. The exuberance and inventiveness of Stoppard's puns are difficult to resist, so seductive are they and so starved are we for any kind of verbal elegance in the theatre... (86)

Stoppard is obsessed with puns. But his puns not only amuse they serve other functions as well. They are used as structural devices in his plays and form an integral part of the play's basic meaning. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the two shadowy courtiers consider at one point the precise implications of Claudius' promise to reward them handsomely for helping to determine the cause of Hamlet's unhappiness. Guildenstern is the first in Stoppard's long line of compulsive punsters. We laugh at the agility of his mind and the nimbleness of his wit. He has fun with language, playing with it and we share his pleasure. But the passage continues:

ROS. What are you playing at?

GUIL. Words, words. They're all we have to go on. (30)

But all of a sudden the joking becomes darker and more sinister. "For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are forced to take part in a play of which they are totally ignorant, their lines not simply forgotten but never learned" (Zeifman 86).

The play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* functions from the assumption that "all the world is a stage"(II.vii.139). In order to establish this point Stoppard makes deliberate use of the Player and his troupe who play a small part in *Hamlet*. The player makes a critical remark that they have recognized

Ros and Guil as fellow artists and has made us aware that they may not be only spectators but actors also:

ROS. And who are we?

ROS. I thought we were gentlemen.

PLAYER. For some of us it is performance, for others,
patronage.

They are two sides of the same coin, or, let us say, being as
there are so many of us, the same side of the two coins. (Bows
again.) Don't clap too loudly it's a very old world. (16)

As the play progresses, they desperately try to avoid becoming involved in the action in order to maintain their possessions as 'spectators' without understanding that the position of the actor and spectator are interchangeable, that is, two sides of the same coin. Stoppard is out to dissolve any notion that art and life are distinct. Hamlet's famous soliloquy "To be, or not to be" (III.i.56) is resolved by the implication to read "to seem or not to seem." "Robert Gordon states that "life can be seen to be a game whose moves are not rationally coherent while it is being experienced". (20) Not only their words but also their actions and games enhance their dramatic irony by showing them as actors. Just as the Players rehearse The Murder of Gonzago, Rose and Guil practice for the encounter with Hamlet. Later,

ROS Right. My honorable lord!

GUIL My dear fellow!

ROS. How are you?

GUIL. Afflicted!

ROS. Really? In what way?

GUIL. Transformed.

ROS. Inside or out?

GUIL. Both.

ROS. I see. (Pause.)Not much new there.

GUIL. Go into details. Delve. Probe the background, establish
the situation.

ROS. So _Your uncle is the king of Denmark?!

GUIL. And my father before him.

ROS. His father before him?

GUIL. No, my father before him.

ROS. But surely_____

GUIL. You might well ask.

ROS. Let me get it straight. Your father was king. You were his only son. Your father dies. You are of age. Your uncle becomes king.

GUIL. Yes. (35)

Guil assumes the identity of the Prince and performs the scene of their arrival and welcome in England and Ros plays the English King. Thus, they unconsciously assume the role of 'actor' which they had resisted earlier.

The most significant moment in the play is the scene in which Ros and Guil watch the rehearsal of "The Mouse Trap" around which the action turns. The Players' statement that actors and spectators have changed positions is shown in the words: "Now if you two wouldn't mind just moving back" (55). Michael Scott comments: "As Shakespeare asks questions concerning the relation between stage and action and the world of the audience, so Stoppard's play investigates the interaction between actors and their act, inquiring into the various levels of perception" (Scott 20). In Stoppard's play when the players appear in the second act, the main player scolds Ros and Guil for walking off when the actors are half-way through their performance. They realize they have no audience, without which a play is quite meaningless.

Very skilfully, Stoppard demonstrates that reality and illusion, real and acted life, rehearsal and performance, spectator and actor are nothing but two sides of the same coin.

The different actions in the play demonstrate the spiritual disintegration that is Stoppard's major theme. Heroism degenerates into mock-heroic, and the supernatural disappears to leave an irreclaimable void. What was once viewed with admiration and awe is patronised now as sentimental and futile. This dissolution is effectively embodied in the general structure and is continually defined by individual situations. When Guildenstern takes the aid of logic to help him interpret his situation, they cloud comprehension and make him frantic. Rosencrantz's attempt to voice his questions and fears about death becomes a jerky music-hall routine. Straining to discover their identities, they cannot even remember their names. Efforts to understand why they suffer, increase their pain; the elaborate games they play to distract them, often daze them. Hope and faith in what is mysterious and beautiful is again and again disappointed. Guildenstern is bitterly disillusioned when he meets the players:

GUIL. (shaking with rage and fright) : It could have been - it didn't
 have to be obscene .., It could have been - a bird out of season,
 dropping bright-feathered on my shoulder ... It could have been
 a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way ... I
 was prepared. But it's this, is it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing
 classical, portentous, only this-- a comic pornographer and a
 rabble of prostitutes... (*Ros. and Guil.* 19)

Ros. and Guil. die the casual death of minor characters in a Shakespearean tragedy. It is merely because they fail to act heroically in terms of the conventions of Elizabethan tragedy that they end up dead. This is evident

from the play's title. The play is certainly Stoppard's way of asserting the contemporary relevance of Shakespeare.

Charles Marowitz in *Recycling Shakespeare* shares his experience of staging his collage Hamlet. He claims that it was well received even though "the collage was played before thousands of people who had never read Hamlet or seen the film there is a kind of cultural smear of Hamlet in our collective unconscious ,and we grow up knowing Hamlet even if we have never read it, never seen the film or attended any stage performance. The 'myth' of the play is older than the play itself and the play's survival in the modern imagination draws on that myth" (19). Whenever a new version of the play is assembled, the 'myth' is reactivated in such a way that people are reminded of it again.

However, the tone of the modern play is distinct. Stoppard has not written a lesser action which mirrors a larger. The old text and the new text are not simply joined; they form two separate spheres of human activity which impinge upon each other because of their respective gravitational fields. Helene Keyssar Franke speculates that the juxtaposition of *Hamlet* scenes and invented scenes "creates a sense of the possibility of freedom and the tension of the improbability of escape" (87). In their record breaking succession of coins, the coin which falls "heads" scores of times "defines a boundary situation"; the technique being notably Shakespearean.

In Shakespeare, these characters are time-servers, cold calculating opportunists who betray a friendship for the sake of a preferment. Therefore, their deaths leave Hamlet without a pang of remorse. In Stoppard, they are garrulous, child - like, simpletons, bewildered by the parts they must play. Brustein claims that "Stoppard omits their most crucial scene the famous recorder scene where they are exposed as spies for Claudius- for it is here that their characterological inconsistency would be most quickly revealed" (150). Though Stoppard justifies his violation of the integrity of Shakespeare's original conception, Brustein suspects that his real purpose must have been to amuse the audience with winning heroes.

However, the fact remains that the irony and brilliance of Stoppard's work derive from his placing two minor characters of Hamlet at the centre of dramatic action. He drives home his theme that humans are only minor characters in the greater scheme of things and are controlled by incomprehensible forces. The shadowy history of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern always sticks in the mind as a classic instance of the fate that befalls little men who are swept into great events. The context of men's action remains forever a mystery. It has been a mystery for Hamlet, a mystery for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and a mystery for us.