

## “ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD”

(excerpted from “Philosophy and Mr Stoppard”)

**Jonathan Bennett**

Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is primarily a display of conceptual interrelationships of the same logical kind as might occur in an academic work of analytic philosophy. Its pyrotechnic show of jokes, puns and cross-purposes consists mainly in sparks thrown off by the underlying conceptual exploration. That philosophical insights are closely connected with jokes is a fact which Carroll exploited in *Through the Looking Glass*, a work which is brim-full of small-scale philosophy. Stoppard, unlike Carroll, works intensively at a small cluster of intimately connected concepts. The central one is the concept of *reality*, and grouped around it are *identity*, *memory*, *activity* and *death*.

One source of the play’s power - to move and disturb, as well as to amuse - is that these concepts are so important in our thinking about ourselves; but the power derives also from the sheer pertinacity and complexity and depth of the conceptual exploration. Although this can be felt by someone who does not fully realize what is going on, one’s experience of the play can be heightened, and the play made more illuminating and memorable, if one becomes consciously aware of its underlying structures. My aim here will be to make such an awareness available - both as a service (I hope) to readers who will subsequently encounter the play, and also as a defence of my judgment about what kind of play it is and how good it is of its kind.

I shall write as though for readers who are ignorant of Stoppard’s play but not of Shakespeare’s. All quotations are from the Faber editions of the play. There will be no omissions within anything I quote, so any rows of ellipses in my quotations are Stoppard’s own.

The chief personages are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and “the Player” - the leader of the band of tragedians who perform for Hamlet the play within the play. Asked to describe his company’s repertoire, the Player says (p. 20): “We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit as being an entrance somewhere else.” On the surface, this is an offhand apology for the band’s preparedness to give indecent performances, but it is also the key to Stoppard’s play. Every exit is an entrance somewhere else, and so whenever Shakespeare writes “exeunt Rosencrantz and Guildenstern” we follow them off his stage onto Stoppard’s.

Shakespeare’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are mere stage machinery, as unreal as anyone with a significant role in any major Shakespearian play. One has no sense of which is which, and the text gives some support to the idea that even Claudius is apt to get them the wrong way round. Although they matter to the plot, they don’t do anything: they are brought to court, asked to explore Hamlet’s state of mind (in which they fail, and indeed hardly get a chance to try), are sent with him to England, are tricked by him, and are done to death. Their actual role in the play is purely passive. When at the very end one hears of their death, in the words of Stoppard’s title, one has no sense of deprivation: they were unreal to begin with, and so their going out of existence is no loss to us - or even to them.

Someone might decide to follow Rosencrantz and Guildenstern through to their “entrance somewhere else” with the idea of showing that Shakespeare was unfair, so to speak - showing them as real people, active and structured and distinct from one another, and rendering this consistent with the fragments of them that Shakespeare has given us. There might have been a

play in that. But what Stoppard does is brilliantly different. His Rosencrantz and Guildenstern turn out, when seen in the round, to be flatter than ever; even they are not sure which is which; and the entire play consists in their desperate attempts to cling to their few shreds of reality. Connected with that is their constant fight to remain active, and in particular to initiate action rather than merely “acting” in ways prescribed by Shakespeare’s plot; and also their perpetual inability to understand their present by connecting it with their past through memory. The events on Stoppard’s stage, rather than conflicting with those on Shakespeare’s, reinforce and elucidate them.

Although the human content of the play is utterly minimal - that being the point - there is just enough of it to evoke and merit pity, the minimal emotion.

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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are haunted by the fear that they will become entirely unreal, or perhaps that they will discover that they are already unreal. Early in the play this is expressed movingly in Guildenstern’s wanting to be assured that Rosencrantz is really there - an assurance which he gets in the most elemental way, through the sense of touch. They are playing a coin-tossing game (which occasions some beautiful play with the concept of probability, which I shan’t discuss); Rosencrantz has won 85 times in a row; and when asked what he’d have done if he had lost that often, he says “Well, I’d have a good look at your coins for a start.” Guildenstern replies (p. 9): “I’m relieved. At least we can still count on self-interest as a predictable factor. . . . I suppose it’s the last to go. Your capacity for trust made me wonder if perhaps. . . you, alone. . . . *(He turns on him suddenly, reaches out a hand.)* Touch.”

Most of the time, though, the fear of unreality is felt by each for himself or for them both. It is intimately connected with the idea of activity. The basic connection here is one which various philosophers have insisted upon: the criteria for something’s being real involve its having causal properties, including capacities for initiating action. As Leibniz said: “The very substance of things consists in the force of acting and being acted on.” If one’s reality is to be maintained, then, the need for something to do is as basic and absolute as the need for bread, and accordingly Guildenstern prays: “Give us this day our daily round” (p. 68). The same idea is expressed with great urgency when Guildenstern tells Rosencrantz to do something “Quick - before we lose our momentum” (p. 82).

Here is a more complex example (p. 76):

Ros: We take Hamlet to the English king, we hand over the letter - what then?

Guil: There may be something in the letter to keep us going a bit.

Ros: And if not?

Guil: Then that’s it - we’re finished.

Ros: At a loose end?

Guil: Yes.

The antithesis between “something to keep us going” and “we’re finished” can be merely the contrast between having a job to do and finishing it; and this reading is confirmed by the humdrum phrase “at a loose end.” But there are overtones of the antithesis between having the means for staying in existence and being annihilated - being “at a loose end” in the sense not of being idle but of being at the end of one’s ontological tether. These puns, of course, are not mere puns: there are reasons why our language should contain phrases which cover activity and reality, inactivity and unreality.

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All of that hides a complexity within the concept of activity, or at any rate an ambiguity in the verb “to act”. It is beautifully exploited here (p. 48):

Guil: But we don’t know what’s going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don’t know how to *act*.

Player: Act natural.

But if conduct is “natural” - truly natural - then it is not “acting” in the Player’s sense. The Player himself brings this out, when he says: “Don’t you see?! We’re *actors* - we’re the opposite of people!” (p. 45). He indicates a reason for the difference when he refers to “the single assumption which makes our existence viable - that somebody is *watching*” (p. 45). It is indeed essential to a real person that his actions can be experienced and enjoyed for their own sake and not just as objects of contemplation by others.

There is also another difference. A real person can initiate actions, spontaneously generating them out of his own needs and wants and ideals and appetites, whereas the actor - the opposite of a person - must act according to the given text. In a context where the Player is elucidating his remark that “There’s a design at work in all art”, this occurs (pp. 57-58):

Player: 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*): *Decides?* It is *written*.

That introduces the deeper difficulty that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have about activity. Despite their fear of ending up “at a loose end”, with no further activities prescribed for them, they know that they really need to be able to act in ways that are not “written”, not prescribed by someone else. This theme is handled through a subtle intermingling of two ideas. One is that they have been brought to court merely to further the King’s plans, and at that level they are not their own masters, are not ends but only means. The other is that they have been called into existence, or pseudo-existence, merely as stage-machinery for Shakespeare’s play. In their terror and resentment over the idea that they are mere instruments in someone else’s plot, Rosencrantz and - especially - Guildenstern try in various ways to convince themselves to the contrary. For example, their total captivity is described as a mere setting of “limits” (p. 84):

Guil: Spontaneity and whim are the order of the day. Other wheels are turning but they are not our concern. We can breathe. We can relax. We can do what we like and say what we like to whomever we like, without restriction.

Ros: Within limits, of course.

Guil: Certainly within limits.

The “limits” are imposed by the demands of court etiquette, or, at a deeper level, by the demands of Shakespeare’s plot. Either way, the protagonists are deceiving themselves - spontaneity and whim are emphatically not the order of their day.

In one profound passage, Guildenstern accepts that they are “condemned” to follow the assigned plot - to conform to “their order”, as he calls it - yet he still entertains the idea that they could exercise their freedom. This introduces the most frightening thought of all, the final death-knell to their reality, namely the thought that even if they did exercise free spontaneity, did “start being arbitrary”, it would make no difference (pp. 42-43): “Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are . . . condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one - that is the meaning of order. If we start being arbitrary it’ll just be a shambles: at least, let us hope so. Because if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity

was part of their order, we'd know that we were lost." This line of thought comes to a head in the third Act when they are on the ship carrying them, with Hamlet, to England (p. 78):

Ros: I wish I was dead. (*Considers the drop.*) I could jump over the side. That would put a spoke in their wheel.

Guil: Unless they're counting on it.

Ros: I shall remain on board. That'll put a spoke in their wheel. (*The futility of it, fury.*)

All right! We don't question, we don't doubt. We perform. But a line must be drawn somewhere.

Sea-travel involves a curious mixture of freedom and unfreedom, and this is used as a subtle symbol for the paradox in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are caught. On the one hand, Guildenstern says (p. 72): "I'm very fond of boats myself. I like the way they're contained. You don't have to worry about which way to go, or whether to go at all - the question doesn't arise, because you're on a *boat*, aren't you?" Yet a moment later he also says: "One is free on a boat. For a time. Relatively." Those two remarks together tell the whole story. Where there is not enough inner reality to generate free and creative and original action, the freedom to act creatively is mere bondage; and escape from bondage, when one is in such a condition, is precisely escape into having all one's actions prescribed for one. Guildenstern is "free on a boat" not because ship-board life does leave the small-scale decisions to him, but because it does not leave the large-scale ones to him.

Finally there is the recognition of complete loss of freedom, and the acknowledgment that this implies unreality: assigned activity is no better than inactivity, unless the assignment is chosen. I quoted "Quick - before we lose our momentum", which speaks of momentum as a source of movement, the opposite of stasis - momentum as activity. But there is also momentum as passivity, as Guildenstern knows (pp. 87-88): "We've travelled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation." A little later, the same thought is expressed with sad, dim colloquialism, when Guildenstern says (p. 89): "Where we went wrong was getting on a boat. We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current . . ."

That, incidentally, introduces another minor theme of the play - the recurrent concern with "where we went wrong", a concern that is grotesquely inappropriate to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who don't ever really *do* anything and whose unreality can't be set down to anything like an identifiable mistake. The "boat" that really limits their freedom is Shakespeare's play, which, as well as enforcing their unreality, also gives them all the reality they can ever have. This theme gets almost the last word in the play. Guildenstern knows that he is about to follow Rosencrantz in disappearing from view and presumably going clean out of existence, and his last complete sentence is: "Well, we'll know better next time."

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*Next time?* That is the final echo of a continuing muddled difficulty about the notion of one's own death. I quoted the Player as saying "Every exit [is] an entrance somewhere else"; and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern repeatedly struggle to grasp that death is the one exit that is not an entrance somewhere else. They are caught up, as from time to time everyone is, in the thought which Wittgenstein expressed by saying "The world is *my* world" - that is, the thought that I can consider any possibility in terms of what it would mean to me, what difference it would make to

the content of my experience. Plausible as that is, there is something I cannot think of in that form, namely the possibility of my own nonexistence.

Sometimes, they come nowhere near a proper understanding of death, as when Guildenstern says feebly: "As Socrates so philosophically put it, since we don't know what death is, it is illogical to fear it. It might be . . . very nice" (p. 79). He also tries to view death as mere prolonged absence (pp. 61-62): "[Death is] just a man failing to reappear, that's all - now you see him, now you don't, that's the only thing that's real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back - an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death." The Player points out, implicitly, that on this account of the matter everyone is dead all the time to someone else (pp. 86-87):

Ros: Is he dead?

Player: Who knows?

Guil: He's not coming back?

Player: Hardly.

Ros: He's dead then. He's dead as far as we're concerned.

Player: Or we are as far as he is.

Guildenstern sometimes gets it right, as here (p. 78):

Ros: Do you think death could possibly be a boat?

Guil: No, no, no . . . Death is . . . not. Death isn't. You take my meaning. Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being. You can't not be on a boat.

Ros: I've frequently not been on boats.

Guil: No, no, no - what you've been is not on boats.

Also, he sharply challenges the Player's allusion to how death has been "in our experience" (p. 89). Guildenstern says contemptuously: "Your experience! - *Actors!*", and: "You cannot *act* it", and: "No one gets up after death - there is no applause - there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that's - death - ."

At an earlier stage, Rosencrantz also briefly gets it right (pp. 50-51): "It's silly to be depressed by it. I mean one thinks of it like being *alive* in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is *dead* . . . which should make all the difference. . . shouldn't it?" So far, so good, but he can't keep it up: "I mean, you'd never *know* you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being *asleep* in a box. Not that I'd like to sleep in a box, mind you, not without any air - you'd wake up dead, for a start, and then where would you be? Apart from inside a box." Then a moment later: "You'd be in there for ever. Even taking into account the fact that you're dead, it isn't a pleasant thought. *Especially* if you're dead, really . . . *ask* yourself, if I asked you straight off - I'm going to stuff you in this box now, would you rather be alive or dead? Naturally, you'd prefer to be alive. Life in a box is better than no life at all. I expect. You'd have a chance at least. You could lie there thinking well, at least I'm not dead!"

The tussle between death-as-absence and death-as-extinction is perhaps only loosely tied to the central reality theme. The main point of contact, I think, occurs at the end of the passage just quoted, with the idea that life would be worth having even if all it offered were the ability to congratulate oneself on not being dead. That is the thought of someone who hasn't enough reality for his life to have any worthwhile content. At a later stage, Rosencrantz sees the need but misidentifies what would fill it. He says fatuously to Guildenstern: "Be happy - if you're not even *happy* what's so good about surviving?"

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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern usually cannot remember which is which. Once, in the dark, there is even a momentary confusion about the ownership of a limb (p. 70):

Ros: Ah! There's life in me yet!

Guil: What are you feeling?

Ros: A leg. Yes, it feels like my leg.

Guil: How does it feel?

Ros: Dead.

Guil: Dead?

Ros (*panic*): I can't feel a thing!

Guil: Give it a pinch! (*Immediately he yelps.*)

Ros: Sorry.

Guil: Well, that's cleared that up.

Usually, though, the difficulty concerns their names. The trouble about the names, Guildenstern says, is that "each of them is . . . plausible, without being instinctive" (p. 28). The notion of one's name being known "instinctively" is important: the difficulty about the names is not merely one of memory, but also a result of the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern haven't enough reality for either of them to have any firm behaviour-patterns, any "instincts", that mark him off from the other. This just intensifies the situation we find in Shakespeare's play.

During some episodes in the play one is strongly conscious of differences, but not ones that could provide either protagonist with a sense of his own individuality. For one thing, the differences do not last. At the outset, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are each assigned a "character note" (p. 7) which is presumably intended to describe some of his durable character traits; but in the upshot neither protagonist conforms steadily to his differentiating "note". Anyway, the differences which we discern - like the ones embodied in the "character notes" - concern only such matters of intellectual character as the tendency to be curious or sceptical or self-deceiving or the like; and that is too thin and abstract to give someone a solid sense of who he is, e.g. to make his name "instinctive" to him.

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The play's core is the fact that the protagonists are not endowed with anything like normal capacities for memory. This fact emerges early, in a comedy-show routine (p. 11):

Guil: What's the first thing you remember?

Ros: Oh, let's see. . . . The first thing that comes into my head, you mean?

Guil: No - the first thing you remember.

Ros: Ah. (*Pause.*) No, it's no good, it's gone. It was a long time ago.

Guil (*patient but edged*): You don't get my meaning. What is the first thing after all the things you've forgotten?

Ros: Oh I see. (*Pause.*) I've forgotten the question.

The point is made that memory is needed for access to the past. Other sorts of present evidence may be unavailable - if, for instance, the question concerns how a coin fell, or some fact about something which has since been destroyed (p. 43):

(*Ros takes out one of his coins. Spins it. Catches it. Looks at it. Replaces it.*)

Guil: What was it?

Ros: What?

Guil: Heads or tails?

Ros: Oh. I didn't look.

Guil: Yes you did.

Ros: Oh, did I? (*He takes out a coin, studies it.*) Quite right - it rings a bell.

Guil: What's the last thing you remember?

Ros: I don't wish to be reminded of it.

Guil: We cross our bridges when we come to them and burn them behind us, with nothing to show for our progress except a memory of the smell of smoke, and a presumption that once our eyes watered.

Without memory, an actor may forget his lines. The Player says (pp. 15-16): "By this time tomorrow we might have forgotten everything we ever knew. That's a thought, isn't it? (*He laughs generously.*) We'd be back where we started - improvising."

This is echoed by the trouble Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have in remembering why they are there and what they are supposed to do. They have to replay their day with great concentration if they are to hold on to the mere fact that they have been summoned by the king for some purpose. But of course they couldn't be thrown back upon "improvising", for that would involve the spontaneity which is beyond their reach.

Their inability to initiate action stems partly from the lack of memory. For one thing, if one is to act against an assigned scenario, doing so rationally and not in random behavioural spasms, one must have reasons for acting; and reasons require knowledge - for example a reason for refusing to bring Hamlet to his death (p. 79):

Ros: We're his *friends*.

Guil: How do you know?

Ros: From our young days brought up with him.

Guil: You've only got their word for it.

Ros: But that's what we depend on.

At a deeper level, there is the fact that to know what you are doing you must know what you have just been doing. And Rosencrantz and Guildenstern usually don't (p. 14):

Guil: We better get on.

Ros (*actively*): Right! (*Pause.*) On where?

Guil: Forward.

Ros (*forward to footlights*): Ah. (*Hesitates.*) Which way do we - (*He turns round.*) Which way did we - ?

At a deeper level still, one cannot make sense of anything at all without memory. At one point Rosencrantz says "Consistency is all I ask!" (p. 28). Shortly thereafter, Guildenstern asks "Do I contradict myself?" and Rosencrantz answers "I can't remember." The logical relationship between "what I am doing" and "what I have just been doing" is one that Kant explored to good effect: "If we were not conscious that what we think is the same as what we thought before, [our thought] would never form a whole . . . If, in counting, I forget that the units that now hover before me have been added to one another in succession, I should never know that a total is being produced."

Rosencrantz claims to remember that he used once to remember, but the pitifully small content of those alleged earlier memories serves to reinforce how little of reality there is in him, and thus, incidentally, how different his memory-lack is from ordinary amnesia (pp. 27-28):

Ros: I remember -

Guil: Yes?

Ros: I remember when there were no questions.

Guil: There were always questions. To exchange one set for another is no great matter.

Ros: Answers, yes. There were answers to everything.

Guil: You've forgotten

Ros (*flaring*): I haven't forgotten - how I used to remember my own name - and yours, oh yes! There were answers everywhere you *looked*. There was no question about it - people knew who I was and if they didn't they asked and I told them.

This highlights the fact that the lack of memory is to be seen not merely as subverting all activity and as contributing in that way to the unreality of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; it also contributes to it directly, for a person's reality is largely an epistemic matter - how much there is of him is largely to be measured by how much he knows, and that depends upon how much recollectable experience has been packed into him. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, lacking memory, are epistemically empty: they are in touch with no past, and so they can neither construe the present nor direct themselves purposefully towards the future. They end on a note of protest, but even that is hollow (p. 91):

Ros: What was it all about? When did it begin?

(*Pause, no answer.*)

Couldn't we just stay put? I mean no one is going to come on and drag us off . . . They'll just have to wait. We're still young . . . fit . . . we've got years. . .

(*Pause, no answer.*)

(*A cry.*) We've done nothing wrong! We didn't harm anyone. Did we?

Guil: I can't remember.