



[Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead](#), by Tom Stoppard

In A Nutshell

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead was Tom Stoppard's breakthrough play. It was a huge critical and commercial success, making him famous practically overnight. Though written in 1964, the play was published in 1967, and it played on Broadway in 1968, where it won the Tony for best play.

The play cleverly re-interprets Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from the point of view of two minor characters: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The Laurel-and-Hardy-like pair are totally incidental to the action of *Hamlet*, subject to the whims of the King Claudius – who gets them to betray Hamlet – and then tricked by Hamlet into delivering a letter that condemns them to death (check out the Shmoop's guide to *Hamlet*; it's useful to know the basic plot). Stoppard's play turns *Hamlet* on its head by giving these two the main roles and reducing all of Shakespeare's major characters (including Hamlet) to minor roles. Written around and in-between the lines of Shakespeare's play, Stoppard brilliantly takes the main concerns of contemporary theater – absurdism, the inevitability of death, breakdown in communication and feeling – and inserts them into the text of a much earlier play.

The absurdist tradition that Stoppard is writing in suggests another enormous influence: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952). Beckett's play is just as important to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as *Hamlet* is. *Waiting for Godot* consists of two tramps sitting on-stage bantering back and forth and waiting for someone named Godot, who never comes

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(check out Shmoop's guide to *Waiting for Godot* for more detail).

Waiting for Godot changed theater by undermining many of its traditional values: plot, characterization, and dialogue that move the action of the play forward. By portraying the act of "waiting" on stage, Beckett's play also opened up new ideas about meta-theatrics (plays that are about plays – how they're made, how they're seen, and/or how they interact with society). Since the characters in *Godot* are in the same position as the audience – waiting for something to happen – much of their dialogue works on multiple levels and seems to hint at awareness on the part of the tramps that they're actually two characters in a play.

Stoppard wrote *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in this absurdist and meta-theatrical tradition. It is very much influenced by Beckett, and much of the silly dialogue between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simply would not have been seen in the theater before *Waiting for Godot*. It's as if Stoppard uses the innovations that Beckett brought to contemporary theater in order to pry open the minor Shakespearean characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Some critics think that Stoppard was too much under the influence of Beckett at this point in his career, but we think that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is something unique and independent of both *Waiting for Godot* and *Hamlet*. It is an almost universally acknowledged masterpiece of contemporary theater.

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- 1 Given the Player's description of a tragedy in Act Two, is Stoppard's play a tragedy ("The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily")? (2.316)
- 2 Why are Ros and Guil so lost and directionless when not caught up in the action of *Hamlet* ?
- 3 What are the major similarities and differences between Ros's view of what a play should do, and Guil's view of how a play should relate to reality?

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