



## Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead

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## **AUTHOR:**

Sir Tom Stoppard was actually born named Tom Straussler in a Czechoslovakian town called Zlin in July of 1937. Because of the war the family had to flee to England from the Nazi occupation, there he went to school until his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday.

After his father's death his mother married another man called Kenneth Stoppard from whom he got his name Stoppard.

During that time he was already writing for radio stations and for the Western Daily Press as a drama critic in Bristol without ever studying journalism or receiving any

other university education.

While working for the papers and the radio he was writing his own plays and the first play ever to be finished by him was "A Walk on the Water" in 1960. "Arcadia", "Shakespeare in Love" and many other plays followed. In addition to his plays he was also working on the translation of pieces by other writers like Johann Nestroy and Arthur Schnitzler. Czech and Polish writers were influencing him in his absurdist style, ideas and impressions.

Sir Stoppard has also written parts of the screenplays for very popular movies like Indiana Jones and Tim Burton's Sleepy Hollow. He has been married twice and has two sons from each marriage.

In 1983 the Tom Stoppard Prize was created in Stockholm to award authors of Czech origin.

Due to his influence he was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1998 and a year before that he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II.

He is meant to be one of the most influential play writers of the National Theatre and is an internationally performed dramatist. Receiving several prizes like three Tony awards (1968, 1976, 1984), the Shakespeare Prize (1979) and Drama Desk Award (1984) and working for Amnesty International, because of his concerns about a lot of human rights issues he ranks very high in the list of the most influential people in the world.

## Characters:

### Rosencrantz:

- Not a lot of description, who is who?
- Average man, humanity
- more easygoing
- confused about the events of the play and Guildenstern's reactions to them
- pragmatic
- makes Guildenstern believe that he is unable to think seriously, deeply
- direct, straight forward attitude
- cheer up his friend (easy bets)
- encourages G. to find happiness and be strong
- scared of death (not as much as G)
- not as philosophical as G.
- capable of sensible thoughts

### Guildenstern:

- Opposite of R.
- Belief in rational explanation, trying to understand
- Frustrated by indifference of R., not able to understand- strong emotions
- Realize that they are going to die, attack Player
- Rational but passionate
- Empathetic, worried
- Tries to comfort his friend

- Needs Rosencrantz

### The Player:

- Mysterious, seems to know more about the events
- Could reveal the truth?
- Recognizes G. and R. as artists (they don't understand)
- „normal experience of existence is one of confusion and doubt“
- Knows G. and R. better than they do themselves
- control omnipresence
- „pimp“, selling the bodies of his actors, demand- supply bet with G. (immoral attitude)
  - embarrassment – knowledge, confidence
  - ringmaster: „circus of confusion“

### Tragedians:

- group of male traveling actors

### Hamlet:

- prince of Denmark
- childhood friend of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
- Death of father – deep personal crisis
- Strange behaviour confuses everybody

### Claudius:

- Hamlet's uncle
- the new king of Denmark (after death of father)
- dark personality
- exploits the friendship between Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Hamlet

Gertrude:

- Hamlet's mother
- Queen of Denmark
- Marries Claudius after death of husband
- Hopes for Guildenstern's and Rosencratz's help

Polonius:

- Friend of Claudius, member of danish court
- Sneaky

Ophelia:

- Polonius daughter
- Lover to Hamlet

Laertes:

- Son of Polonius
- brother of Ophelia
- Not in the play – apart from appearance of his corpse

**Messages:**

- Absurdity (stating the obvious)
- Everlasting fight: Art vs. Reality –  
G. (and R) vs. The player
- existentialism
- free will vs. determinism
- the search for value
- impossibility of certainty
- insignificance

### **Personal reflection (Inez):**

I loved the idea of putting a play in a play in a play. As I already mentioned in my online journal it took me quite a while to realize what the play was about. If Stoppard would have mentioned Hamlet's name in the title the play might have lost significance. Talking of significance: for me the ultimate message is „insignificance“. Writing a play about two people one can't even properly tell apart, and making them toss coins and try to kill their best friend, eventually killing themselves makes this piece unbelievably dramatic and touching. At least for me.

### **Summary**

The play starts with the two main characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, betting on the outcome of coin flips. Rosencrantz wins more than 90 in a row, always betting on heads. Due to the unlikeliness of this event they go over various reasons and Guildenstern states that they might be under influence of supernatural forces. They then remind themselves why they are where they are: The King has called for them.

Later they meet a group of tragedians offering them a show for a fee. After having won the coin- flipping bet against the player, the leader of the tragedians they leave before the tragedians start.

Afterwards the scene changes and they appear to be in the Royal Castle of Denmark with Claudius explaining why they have been called for; to find out what is bothering Hamlet who is their childhood friend. They discuss who to find out more about Hamlet's feelings but after playing a question-answer game they are actually more confused than before. They realize that Hamlet's disturbed state might be due to the fact that his father, the former king of Denmark, has recently died, and the throne has been usurped by Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, who also has married Hamlet's mother, Gertrude.

Still, the two fail to find out more about Hamlet's feelings. Hamlet leaves and Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and the player, who has arrived with his tragedians, discuss Hamlet's case.

After this the tragedians present a play retelling the recent events and there is also some foreshadowing to the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

The next day, Claudius and Gertrude ask Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to look for Hamlet. Alone again, the pair plans to trap Hamlet with their belts, but they fail as Hamlet enters from an unexpected direction and immediately leaves, carrying the dead Polonius whom he had killed before. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern call Hamlet back, but he refuses to say what he has done with Polonius's body. Hamlet accuses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of being Claudius's tools.

In the next scene it is decided that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have to escort Hamlet to England.

On the boat to England the two are not sure how to deal with Hamlet, due to a letter they received from Claudius ordering that Hamlet should be executed in England. While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are asleep Hamlet exchanges the letter. Surprisingly the next morning the tragedians appear out of barrels again and shortly afterwards the ship is attacked by pirates. Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and the Player manage to hide in the barrels but Hamlet seems to be kidnapped by the pirates. They discover that the letter had been exchanged and now Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to be executed instead of Hamlet.

Desperate due to his approaching execution Guildenstern grabs a knife and tries to kill the player. At first it seems like the player really is dying, but revealing the knife wasn't real but only a stage instrument the player comes to live again.

Finally both, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accept their fate, that there is no way out and they disappear. The play ends with an ambassador from England announcing the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

## **Similarities/Differences to waiting for Godot**

The beginning of the play was very much similar to waiting for Godot with the two main characters just letting time pass, by flipping coins. Also the whole situation seemed to be very similar.

Like in Waiting for Godot the two main characters had difficulties remembering why they are travelling; only knowing that they were called for

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continue to be very similar to Estragon and Vladimir from waiting for Godot throughout the play, with their question- answer games, interrupting themselves or talk not at all for some time they seem to be more or less the two halves of one person

Death and Suicide play even a bigger role in this play than in Waiting for Godot. While Hamlet only considers committing suicide, the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is foreshadowed in a play by the tragedians and they actually have to die in end which is a significant difference to waiting for Godot. In waiting for Godot there is absolutely no progress during the whole play while in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead, they at least advance physically, their actions have consequences and there at least seems to be the possibility to break out of this vicious circle of inertia and lack of communication. The main characters are able to make a life-changing decision when they discover that their letter contains an order to kill Hamlet. Instead, they decide to do nothing and the result is their deaths.

## Personal review (Stefan)

I enjoyed the philosophising about the law of probability although the fact that heads were tossed 92 times in a row was ridiculous.. They are like figures on a chess board, moved by someone (the king, Hamlet, the player?) and after each move (scene) they ask themselves where they are and how they got there. They can't escape their fate, although it seems like they are allowed to make their own decisions, they always end up doing what they are expected to. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not choose to move from setting to setting, but they appear in a new place without deciding to go there.

## FAMOUS QUOTES AND MY INTERPRETATION (steffi):

GUIL: A man talking sense to himself is no madder than a man talking nonsense not to himself. (1.175)

- Something that is very true. Sometimes isolation of the rest of the world will make you even crazier no matter what you do or say. Madness is something that cannot be explained by sense or truth. Their constant isolation is driving them crazy.

GUIL: Is that what you imagine? Is that it? No fear? ROS: Fear? GUIL (in fury – flings a coin on the ground): Fear! The crack might flood your brain with light! (1.47-49)

- In the play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern keep playing the game where one is flipping the coin and the other is constantly losing, not caring about the fact that it is always turning out the same. But while playing they keep talking and Guildenstern finally throws the coin away because he cannot stand the routine anymore.

GUIL: What's 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 a...

- This shows how uncertain their situation is. They talk about everything and nothing, losing track of what has happened and what will happen. They don't remember important things anymore and somehow it seems like even their presence is just an imagination of them.

GUIL: All this strolling about is getting too arbitrary by half – I'm rapidly losing my grip. From now on reason will prevail. (2.200)

- They are losing track of time. Unable to tell what is going to happen because they seem too crazy to recognize it. Guildenstern is aware of the fact that they are wasting their time but does not change anything about that situation.

ROS: 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...

- The question about existence and its absurdity comes out very well in this quote. Basically Guildenstern says that if you live in a box you are dead because life is more than just being in a box unable to escape, unable to see what else there is in life.

### **Personal Note(Steffi):**

I liked the play. But I have to be honest and say that I would have much rather preferred to read a normal novel with a story instead of another play. I don't know, it's just that I don't see a meaningful reason behind the reading of a play! It's meant to be acted out and not read... But that's just my personal opinion on it and I guess that a good reader should have read everything to have a good overall knowledge!

The play reminded me very much of "Waiting for Godot" so for me it was as if the story had been extended.

Of course there were some aspects that I really liked about the play. For example I definitely was amused by the weirdness and confusing way of Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's acting and talking. They seemed to be a single person split up into two with one being the rather normal and intelligent part and the other being the strange and abstract part of one's mind. Sometimes I wasn't even sure who was who!

I think that Stoppard definitely is a good writer. The way he is using the language to either say nothing at all or on the hand say a lot with a little amount of words is fascinating me.

### **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Hamlet**

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are originally characters in William Shakespeare's tragedy Hamlet. They are courtiers who are set by the king Claudius to spy on Hamlet, using their claimed friendship with him to gain his confidence.

Shakespeare does not portray them in a very good light: according to his play they can be characterised as dishonest, arrogant, sycophantic and incompetent, even a bit dumb. (They are easily outwitted by Hamlet and let themselves be exploited)

When Hamlet kills Polonius, Claudius recruits Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to escort Hamlet to England giving them a letter for the king of England containing instructions to have Hamlet killed. Along the

journey, the distrustful Hamlet finds and rewrites the letter instructing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be killed instead. When their ship is attacked by pirates, Hamlet returns to Denmark leaving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to die.

Through Hamlet's comment (Act V, Scene 2) that "They are not near my conscience; their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow"

Shakespeare also used the two of them to show Hamlet's weird decision-making process: Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius, but he has no problems to send his own old friends (he indicates that they went to school together) to death. Additionally Rosencrantz and Guildenstern probably even were just trying to earn some cash without any hidden agenda since they are most likely unaware of the content of the letter.) Their deaths are announced in the final scene by English ambassadors who report that "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead".

Stoppard took this line to write a play parallel to the story of Hamlet, telling what happens to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when they are off-stage in Hamlet. Basically he retells "Hamlet" from their point of view, showing their confusion about what is happening around them and their unawareness of their misbehaving and their coming death.

Stoppard takes the already existing play as a background story, the two already existing characters and without adapting anything (the plot of Hamlet or the personalities of the characters) he creates a new in itself plausible and interesting story (which also makes sense if one does not know the content of Hamlet).