



**"Every exit is an entry somewhere else"  
(Tom Stoppard)**

"He took such liberties with the play. Who else would have dared? Very rarely can an author -who likes the value of his stage play - translate his work cinematically." said Emanuel Azenberg, one of the co-producers of the film 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead'.

Only Stoppard would have dared to 'tamper' so radically with the play in transferring it from the stage to the cinema. As he said: "I am probably the only director who could persuade the writer to do the necessary violence to his original play." In filming 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead', do you think that Stoppard has done 'violence' to his play?

**ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN  
ARE DEAD**

The opening stage direction

for the play is 'Elizabethans passing the time in a place without any visible character'. But the opening scene of the film gives us a 'realistic' though bleak, 'place' which certainly does have 'character', as well as two 'realistically' lit and costumed riders on real horses - and Stoppard quite deliberately holds back the celebrated coin-flipping opening of the play. Why do you think Stoppard has delayed the arrival of the 'coin-spinning' sequence and how effective do you think this sequence is to the opening of the play?

**"Much that is inexpressible would be hardly worth expression, if one could express it" (Lichtenberg)**

The decision to turn 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' into a feature film came from Stoppard's reluctance at having his work made into a filmed play - initially for television. He decided that his successful work for the theatre required a total overhaul if it was to become a film.

This is how Stoppard explains one of the fundamental differences between the play and the film: "The play is about two people - who are on stage, naturally - and Shakespeare's Hamlet goes by them periodically. They're like a railway station with a train going by, but the film is the opposite of that. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rush around Elsinore - Elsinore is like a mysterious, gigantic railway station - and they're a train that keeps making its way through it looking for things. In the film they are in search of Hamlet; they don't wait for him to show up." How effective is this comment by Stoppard at summing up the essential difference between the film and the play?

Michael Brandman, the co-producer, adds to Stoppard's comments: "In the movie, from the moment we find them, they are in relentless pursuit of the play, always moving, never still. They're always moving into places where they shouldn't be, and they are invariably in the wrong place at the wrong time."

### **"Art is a lie that makes us realise the truth" (Pablo Picasso)**

Film opens up tremendous possibilities for movement that stage cannot offer. How does Stoppard, on the one hand make a virtue of, and, indeed, draw attention to the limitations of the stage in his play, compared to the way in which he makes use of the resources of the cinema in his film?

Stoppard's screenplay is a radical re-writing of his original theatre work.

### **"In principle I am against principles" (Tristan Tzara)**



According to Stoppard, the original script for 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' arrived at the play's initial rehearsal so badly mis-typed that he was obliged to revise -from memory - on the spot. The version of 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' first performed at the 1966 Edinburgh Festival was expanded by Stoppard (partly from suggestions by Laurence Olivier) for the play's first professional production, a year later, at The Old Vic, London.

Stoppard does not regard his own work with any more reverence than he regards Shakespeare's 'Hamlet'. Talking about his screenplay Stoppard remarks "The play hasn't been protected at all. Certain speeches I'd written 24 years ago that I don't like anymore I was glad to chuck out." How much should a writer be permitted to alter a 'finished' work? How 'finished' can a piece of work ever actually be? Are there parts of the play which Stoppard has jettisoned which you believe should have been left in the screenplay? And which parts of the play do you think could be removed in order to 'improve' either the play or the film? For

example, some critics have suggested that the whole of the last act of 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' is unnecessary? Do you agree?

## **'All generalisations are dangerous, even this one' (Dumas fils)**

Why did Stoppard choose 'Hamlet'? According to Richard Corballis in his 'Stoppard - The Mystery And The Clockwork', that the play 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' was very much a product of its time: "Stoppard realised that the 'death of tragedy' in our century meant that Hamlet had to be redefined" and he mentions David Warner's "unheroic, alienated young intellectual" Hamlet and Nicol Williamson's "down to earth prince" in respectively 1965 and 1969 productions. How relevant can Stoppard's film of 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' be in the 1990's? - bearing in mind that we could also ask the same question about 'Hamlet'; see Jan Kott's chapter on 'Hamlet' in his book, 'Shakespeare, Our Contemporary'.

## **"Reason has always existed, but not always in a reasonable form" (Karl Marx)**

In an interview with Giles Gordon, Stoppard supplies his reason for selecting 'Hamlet' as source play for 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead': "The play 'Hamlet' and the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the only play and the only characters on which you could write my kind of play." Yet there are several other minor characters whose perspective of 'Hamlet' it would be worth considering. The ambassadors to Norway, Voltemand and Cornelius, appear in fewer scenes than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, yet they may have a great deal to say about court life at Elsinore - as could that ultimate product of the court, Osric.

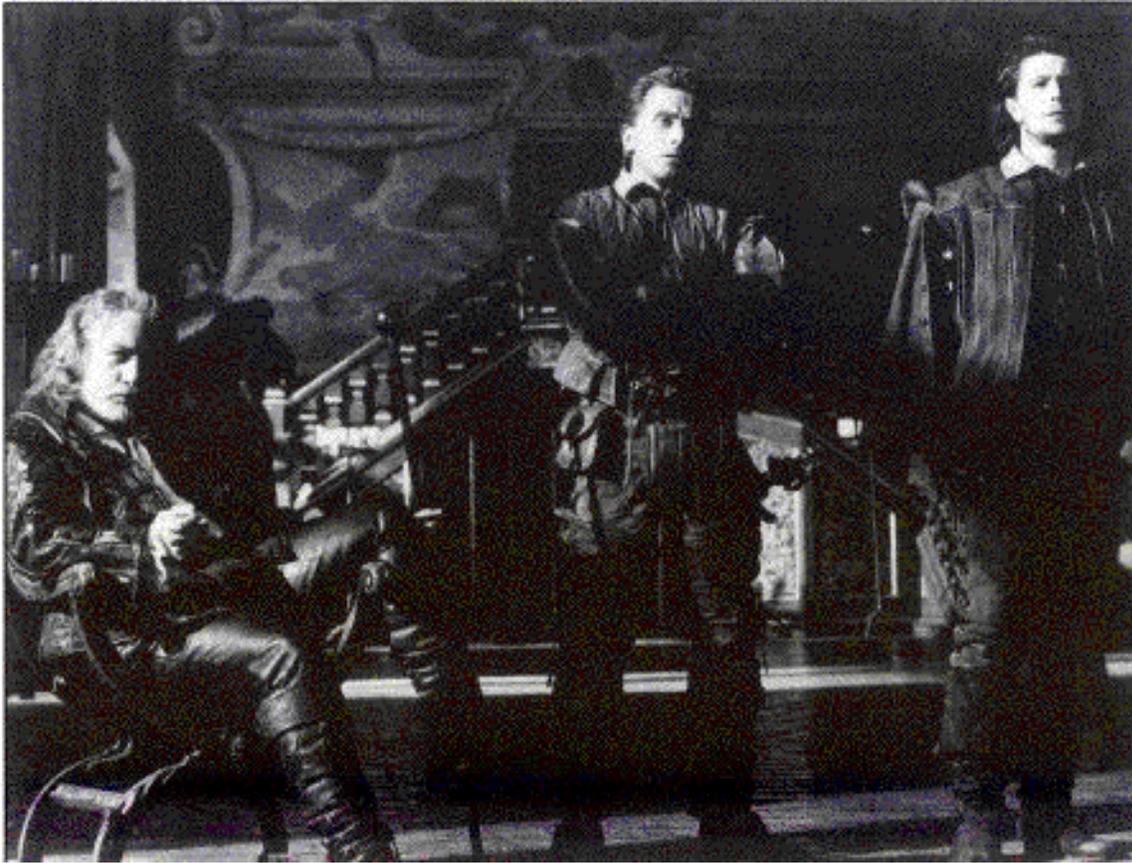
## **"The supreme triumph of the reason is to cast doubt upon its own validity" (Miguel de Unamuno)**

Of course, despite Stoppard's remarks above, his method can be applied to cast fresh light on other texts. Consider Angus's view of 'Macbeth', Curan's view of 'King Lear' or Adrian's view of 'The Tempest'. We don't have to stick with Shakespeare; what about Alfred's view of 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead'?

Stoppard has always claimed that his play was not intended to be specifically a criticism of 'Hamlet'. Faced with Rosencrantz's attempt to encapsulate Hamlet's situation "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 onto his throne and into his sheets, thereby offending both legal and natural practice. Now why exactly are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?" - it becomes clear that, nevertheless, Stoppard does occasionally seem to criticise 'Hamlet' quite directly. Which other parts of the play offer criticism of 'Hamlet'?

## **"There is nothing in this world constant but inconsistency" (Jonathan Swift)**

Stoppard offers further information as to why he selected 'Hamlet' and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "They are so much more than merely bit players in another famous play. 'Hamlet' I suppose is the most famous play in any language, it is part of a sort of common mythology .... There are certain things which they bring on with them, particularly the fact that they end up dead without really, as far as any textual evidence goes, knowing why. Hamlet's assumption that they were privy to Claudius's plot is entirely gratuitous. As far as their involvement in Shakespeare's text is concerned they are told very little about what is going on and much of what they are told isn't true. So I see them much more clearly as a couple of bewildered innocents rather than as a couple of henchmen, which is the usual way they are depicted in productions of 'Hamlet'".



There has certainly been a long tradition of tampering with Shakespeare's plays; in 1680 Nahum Tate's adaptation of 'King Lear' cut the Fool and married Cordelia and Edgar. You should try to read the last scene of the first half of David Edgar's adaptation of Dickens' 'Nicholas Nickleby' which is an amusingly contrived and incompetent happy ending to the Bard's 'Romeo and Juliet'. Also well worth seeking out is 'Blackadder' writer, Richard Curtis's 'Skinhead Hamlet'; it's brief, very rude, hilarious and available in 'The Faber Book of Parodies' (edited by Simon Brett) along with some other entertaining parodies of works by both Shakespeare and Stoppard.

Select one of the texts you are at present studying and write an alternative ending for it. Shakespeare's plays lend themselves particularly well to this, his comedies frequently seem headed towards a tragedy which is narrowly averted in a coincidence-ridden final scene.

## **"Trying to define humour is one of the definitions of humour" (Saul Steinberg)**

Laurel and Hardy. Abbott and Costello, Crosby and Hope, Martin and Lewis, Morecambe and Wise, French and Saunders. Fry and Laurie, Bill and Ben, Hale and Pace, Ron and Ron, Titus and Ronicus..., Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? Its origins may be lost in the mists of antiquity (a little to the left of comic monologues) but the comic double act exists even today; you've certainly heard of some of the double acts mentioned above.

The basic double act consists of two people - this is both obvious and vital. It is a relationship of mutual dependence; when the 'funny' says "My dog has no nose" the 'straight man' must respond by asking "How does he smell?" so that the 'funny man' can deliver his 'punch line': "Terrible" (well, someone's not heard it!). But, though we laugh at the 'funny man', his jokes don't 'function' without the response of the 'straight man'; without him the 'funny man' is just talking to himself surrounded by an audience incapable of 'helping' him because to do so would be to break the performer/spectator relationship. To what extent are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the tradition of classic comedy 'double acts'? Can you find examples either in the film or in the play where either Rosencrantz or Guildenstern plays 'straight man' to the other?

**"If I don't know I don't know, I think I know. If I don't know I know, I think I don't know." (R.D. Laing)**

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's circuitous conversations and pointless games are ways of encapsulating/controlling/enduring/understanding their existence. Life, like being in the theatre or cinema, is a time-consuming process so Ros and Guil - if they cannot control or understand their lives can at least endure them by consuming the time they take.

**"All modern thought is permeated by the idea of thinking the unthinkable" (Michel Foucault)**



When we look at 'double acts' we enter the paradoxically simple but complicated realm of binary opposition i.e. up/down, day/night, black/white, in which a person/thing is defined by his/her/its opposite.

This is a dangerously simplistic way of viewing things for when we think in terms of day/night opposition where do we place sunset, twilight, dawn, evening, morning? Both Laurel and Hardy were funny yet we'd identify Hardy as the 'straight man'... and the comic duo, Little and Large, has been referred to as 'the only double act with two straight men'.

To what extent is Rosencrantz to be viewed as the 'Stan Laurel' character, the 'funny one, in both the film and the play? And is Guildenstern, therefore, merely the 'feed'? Surely not.

**"Unless you expect the unexpected you will never find truth, for it is hard to discover and hard to attain" (Heraclitus)**



In the play the stage directions are clear about Guildenstern's reaction to the constant appearance of 'heads':

'The run of 'heads' is impossible... GUIL is well alive to the oddity of it. He is not worried about the money, but he is worried about the implications; aware but not going to panic about it' (Guildenstern's character note).

Guildenstern seems to be the thoughtful, troubled intellectual one, he is not the victim of Rosencrantz's wit/cunning/skill, but he certainly operates as a 'feed' for Rosencrantz. He is also the protective, comforting character - for the fool is paradoxically vulnerable and elicits our sympathy; think of fragile Stan Laurel ready to burst into tears, being comforted by the blustering bully Oliver Hardy.

However, despite his compassion, the 'intellectual' Guildenstern has, paradoxically, a capacity for cruelty that Rosencrantz lacks. Guildenstern treats Ros callously (thus being able to comfort him) and, in the film, he is quite unaware of Ros's inventive and imaginative abilities (Ros's wonderful inventions are crumpled and trampled underfoot by an indifferent, indeed quite ignorant, Guildenstern). We should also recall that Guildenstern's only real (albeit pathetic) 'existential' act of defiance is a violent one (stabbing the Player) - need it have been?

## **"He who thinks he is raising a mound may in reality be digging a pit" (Ernest Bramah)**

In order to demonstrate Guildenstern's capacity for compassion Stoppard needs Rosencrantz's vulnerability - in this symbiotic 'double act' each (to some extent) defines the other. Who/what is Rosencrantz without Guildenstern? Similarly, what are actors without an audience, the film/play 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' without the play 'Hamlet', Hamlet without Claudius and so on?

## **"The golden rule is there are no golden rules" (George Bernard Shaw)**

The audience defines Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the action of 'Hamlet' defines the action of 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead'. How much has the action of the play 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' defined the action of the film 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead'?

Just as we come to a stage performance or reading of the play 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' with a certain amount of knowledge about the play 'Hamlet', so, when we enter a cinema to see the film 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' we bring with us our knowledge - not just of 'Hamlet' the play, the film, the cigar - of the play 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead'.

## **"I'm still an atheist, thank God" (Luis Bunuel)**

In the play 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead', Stoppard constantly plays with the 'fact' that actors are the link between the printed text and the actual 'bringing to life' of 'the world' of the play in the theatre; which, in turn, leads to the 'fact' that the actors' performances have no validity without our 'willing suspension of disbelief' ("That willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" - Coleridge). The players perform in the belief that they have an audience; they are most upset when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern desert them (p.46)...which in turn leads on to the validity of our 'performance'; with no 'audience' (=other people/God'?) how valid is our 'performance'? Is Stoppard suggesting that a belief in 'God' requires 'a willing suspension of disbelief'?

The players form a curious link for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern between the 'real' world of 'Hamlet' and the 'theatrical' world of 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead'. The player makes clear the players' link with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "We do on stage the things that are meant to happen off." (p.22) But there is a 'knowing' quality to all the Player's pronouncements; his real 'allegiance' is to the world of 'Hamlet'. The Player's oblique references to death and 'heads' - "I should concentrate on not losing your heads" (p.48) - make it clear to us that the Player already knows what will happen to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In the film, however, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are hanged - not beheaded. Why has Stoppard made this substantial change which seems to remove some of the importance or significance from both the Player's remarks and the coin-spinning sequences?

## **"Although our information is incorrect, we do not vouch for it' (Erik Satie)**

The knowledge the Player has concerning Ros and Guil's fate is paradoxically useless since he can no more warn them of their eventual death - or prevent it - than we, the audience, can; we share his knowledge of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's eventual execution right at the beginning of 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead!' through the play's title and through our knowledge of the plot of the 'source play', 'Hamlet'.

The Player and his troupe are quite different from the players of 'Hamlet'; they've become (through 'theatrical' time or Stoppard's 'deliberate' transformation) a rather sordid company, prepared to compromise their 'artistic integrity' by putting on a 'porno' show (p.20)... but only for interested spectators; the audience dictates what it sees. Is Stoppard commenting on declining modern theatrical standards - just as Rosencrantz's remarks in 'Hamlet' about children's companies ("... an eyrie of children, little eyases" -'Hamlet', Act 2 Scene ii) is viewed as a contemporary comment on a theatrical 'fad' by Shakespeare?

## **"Your imagination, my dearfellow, is worth more than you imagine" (Louis Aragon)**

The tawdriness of the players combined with the Player's 'knowingness' help to make the players faintly sinister. They enact Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's death for them, occasionally behave in a menacing fashion towards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and in the play - when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern eventually read their own death warrants - the players emerge from a barrel and form a casually menacing circle around Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. (p.90)



At the end of 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' the players' various acted 'deaths' are those of the final scene of 'Hamlet'. As well as reinforcing one of the play's principal preoccupations - death - the players' performance suggests here that they can 'negotiate' between the worlds of 'Hamlet' and 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' in a way that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot. It's as if both the players and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are working from a script - but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unaware of this fact. Stoppard is asking us to consider the difference between free-will and destiny, between spontaneous action and action dictated by a script.., and the nature/motives of the scriptwriter. Stoppard's film even suggests that the script is the players' theatre/wagon; but we know better. Where else in the play does Stoppard deal either directly or obliquely with notions of predestination and free-will?

## **"If you work on your mind with your mind, how can you avoid an immense confusion?" (Seng - Ts'an)**

The film gives Stoppard a chance to further complicate the 'Chinese Boxes' structure of his work. At one point in the film 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' we watch the players, characters in a film version of a play which is inextricably involved in the play 'Hamlet'; they have already enacted, in front of Ros and Guil, a version of the 'Hamlet' story. Now they are themselves watching, with Ros and Guil (and us!) a puppet show which tells a stilted, artificial version of the 'Hamlet' story - and one of the puppets seems to cry real tears! Phew! It would be useful for you to identify the different 'realities' on which Stoppard seems comfortable to operate.

## **"The chicken was the egg's idea for getting more eggs" (Samuel Butler)**

In the play 'Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead' Stoppard examines the relationships between the performer and the spectator, a relationship which is analogous to that between the 'straight man' and the 'comic' referred to earlier - but which is which .... and is the relationship 'fixed'? Both Ros and Guil frequently threaten to 'break' this relationship; by vomiting on the audience in Act 3 (p.74) or by simply walking off the stage (p.24): 'Guil: You and I, Alfred - we could create a dramatic precedent here'.

However, the actors on screen do not have this option open to them; it's too late. They could have walked off the set and left the film crew and the director to their own devices but now the film is made and the initiative is entirely with us; we may leave the cinema but the film will continue to run without us. We could shoot the projectionist and destroy the film but there are other copies, none of which permit any of the spontaneous acts that a stage actor can perpetrate in the theatre. In the theatre an actor may deviate from the writer's script; they may give a fresh interpretation of a role every night. However, a performance on film is fixed and absolute. You should consider what Stoppard has gained or lost by converting his play into a film.

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