

ABSTRACT

A Director's Approach to Tom Stoppard's
Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead

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This thesis provides an in-depth analysis of Tom Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, followed by a detailed description of Martin Holden's directorial approach to the work in Baylor University's production, which ran from November 14 to November 19, 2006. Chapter One will provide a short biography of the playwright, an overview of Stoppard's work in the theatre, reoccurring themes within his plays, and a production history of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Chapter Two will focus on the analysis of the play, emphasizing on its style, dramatic action, and ideas. Chapter Three addresses the collaboration process between the director and designers of the production. Chapter Four traces the production's journey at Baylor University, from the auditioning and casting of the actors, the play's rehearsal process, to the actual performance. Chapter Five provides a critical self-evaluation of the director's work with the play.

A Director's Approach to Tom Stoppard's
Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	v
Chapter One: Tom Stoppard and <i>Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead</i>	
Introduction.....	1
Tom Stoppard: Playwright.....	2
Connecting Themes in Stoppard’s Plays	9
Inspiration, Influences, & Evolution of the Play	13
Critical Reaction to the Play	20
Conclusion	23
Chapter Two: An Analysis of <i>Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead</i>	
Introduction.....	24
Synopsis	24
Postmodern Theatre	26
Semiotics.....	29
Metatheatre	30
Director Interpretation	33
Given Circumstances	35
Dialogue.....	40
Dramatic Structure	43
Character Analysis:	
Guildenstern.....	47
Rosencrantz.....	51
The Player.....	53
Tragedians.....	56
Hamlet.....	58
Elsinore’s Royal Court– Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius & Ophelia	59
Final Image of the Play	59
Conclusion	63
Chapter Three: The Director/Designer Collaboration	
Introduction.....	65
Scenery.....	65
Costumes.....	71
Hair and Make-Up	73
Lighting.....	76
Sound Design	80
Choreography.....	90
Properties	93
Conclusion	95

Chapter Four: Production Process- The Director/Actor Collaboration	
Introduction.....	96
Preparing for the Actor	96
Auditions & Casting	100
First Read-Through.....	106
Rehearsal Process.....	108
Technical Rehearsals	115
Dress Rehearsals	116
Conclusion	118
Chapter Five: Production Evaluation	
Introduction.....	120
Evaluation of Final Production Design:	
Scenic	120
Costuming	123
Lighting & Sound	125
Choreography.....	127
Acting.....	128
Production as a Collaborative Act	129
Director Self Evaluation	130
Conclusion	132
Appendices.....	134
A— <i>Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead</i> Production Photos	135
B—Photo Permission Letters.....	141
References.....	144

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Only you know what it took to do this.

CHAPTER ONE

Tom Stoppard and *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*

Introduction

A widely held theatre legend alleges that soon after the 1967 New York premiere of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, playwright Tom Stoppard was asked: “What is it about?” With a true postmodern, ironic sensibility, Stoppard immediately replied, “It’s about to make me a very rich man” (Nadel 193). As director of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* at Baylor University (2006), my relationship with the play has proven to be a bit more complex. Beginning with the play’s approval as my thesis production by the Theatre Arts faculty in the fall of 2005, through the pre-production phases during the spring and summer of 2006, the rehearsal and performance stages in the autumn of that year, and now in the post-production/reflection stage, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* has been a journey of challenges and growth for me as a director.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter explores the playwright and play. It includes a brief biography of Tom Stoppard, his roots as a writer, the evolution and influences at work in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, critical reactions to the play, and an overview of Stoppard’s work that has resulted from his first success in the theatre. Chapter Two is an analysis of the play, focusing on the postmodern intertextual and metatheatre elements at work in the script, the play’s characters, style, given circumstances, character, dialogue, setting, metaphor, and dramatic action. My collaborative relationship with the production’s designers is the

focus of Chapter Three, while Chapter Four is devoted to the director/actor collaboration from auditions through performance. Chapter Five offers a critical assessment of the production process and my strengths and deficiencies as a director, as well as the lasting impact of the production.

Tom Stoppard: Playwright

Tom Stoppard's life has had a profound influence on his work. His experiences as a refugee during World War II, enduring the loss of a parent, a culturally eclectic education in India and England, his career as theatre critic, and finding his own creative voice in the chaotic decade of the 1960s, have impacted Stoppard's work for the stage. Born Tomas Straüssler on July 3, 1937, in Zlin, Czechoslovakia, to a Jewish father and Catholic mother, Stoppard's world was already in a state of transition (Nadel 7). The rise of Hitler in Germany, along with the erosion of Czechoslovakia's territory, known as Sudetenland, with the Munich agreement of September 1938 and growing anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe, motivated Stoppard's father, Dr. Eugen Straüssler, to look beyond his homeland's borders for his family's future. On April 19, 1939, Dr. Straüssler departed Prague with his wife, Martha, and two sons, three-year-old Petr (Peter) and two-year-old Tomas, bound for Singapore. Their brief period of tranquility provided by the English colonial island in the South China Sea proved to be short-lived, however; it was shattered by the Japanese invasion of Malaysia on December 8, 1941 (Nadel 21). With the bombings of Singapore becoming more frequent and the news of Japan's army landing on the island in a matter of days, the family once again had to flee for their lives. During the last week of January 1942, Martha Straüssler departed the burning city with the two boys on a freighter bound for India. Dr. Straüssler, as part of the local defense corps

tending to the wounded, held off evacuating the besieged city for another two weeks. Part of a forty-four-ship armada that was the last hope of escape from Singapore, Dr. Straüssler's boat was torpedoed by Japanese fighter planes and sank on February 13, 1942.

After a two-week voyage at sea, Mrs. Straüssler and the two boys were able to find safe haven in Darjeeling, India. Despite the loss of their luggage in transit, leaving mother and sons with little more to their names than travel papers and the clothes they wore, the refugees were able to start again (Nadel 28). While their mother managed a shoe shop, Stoppard and his brother attended an American Methodist international school for the next three and half years (Rusinko ii). Efforts by Mrs. Straüssler to find out the fate of her husband through the Red Cross and Czech Consulate were unsuccessful during their first two years in India.

While the actual date is unclear, eventually Stoppard's mother was invited to the Consulate in Calcutta where she was told that Dr. Straüssler was still among those missing and presumed dead. Upon her return to Darjeeling, Mrs. Straüssler asked a friend to break the news to the two boys of their father's death. Reflecting upon the event, Stoppard remembers, "For my part, I took it well, or not well, depending on how you look at it. I felt almost nothing. I felt the significance of the occasion but not the loss" (Nadel 28). In 1946, Martha married Major Kenneth Stoppard, a British officer who adopted the two boys and moved the family to England. Because of a post-military career in the machine tool industry for Major Stoppard, the family moved multiple times before settling in the city of Bristol. A rootless British existence, disrupting the comfortable and predictable patterns of school, may have influenced Stoppard's attitudes

about education. Reflecting upon this period, Stoppard is blunt in his assessment of his early life as an English schoolboy: “I was thoroughly bored by the idea of anything intellectual, Shakespeare and Dickens did nothing but bore and alienate me. I would gladly sell all of my Greek and Latin classics to George’s Bookshop in Park Street” (Rusinko 2). There is no small irony in the fact that one of modern Britain’s most intellectually nimble playwrights should profess disenchantment with school. This perspective was certainly a motivation for the next step in Stoppard’s development.

At seventeen years old, Stoppard left school after completing his O Levels exit exam, choosing not to go on to A Levels, as this would have meant another two years of study followed by university (Nadel 52). After his completion of the most basic British educational requirements, Stoppard gained employment as a newspaper reporter for Bristol’s *Western Daily Press*. His four years spent at the paper evolved from covering municipal meetings and bus strikes to writing a regular arts feature. Graduating to the *Bristol Evening World* as drama critic gave Stoppard entrée to the theatre community of southwestern England. A 1958 review of *Hamlet*, produced by one of Britain’s most prestigious repertory companies, Bristol’s Old Vic, began Stoppard’s friendship with the play’s lead, Peter O’Toole. The production of *Hamlet* along with John Osborne’s *Look Back In Anger*, again with O’Toole in the lead during the Old Vic’s 1957-58 season, sparked Stoppard to write his first play. Known only as *Untitled*, the play was abandoned after a few dozen pages and was by Stoppard’s own admission derivative of the social plays of the time (Fleming 11). A second full-length play, *A Walk on the Water*, was written by Stoppard in 1960 and then promptly rejected by the Old Vic. It was through friends at the Old Vic that Stoppard was able to contact literary agent Kenneth Ewing.

On the strength of his full-length play and a new one-act called *The Gamblers*, Stoppard impressed Ewing enough for the agent to agree to represent him. By January 1962, Stoppard was now a playwright, albeit a struggling one.

A connection with the director John Boorman –another Old Vic friend– led Stoppard to a series of radio and television script commissions for the BBC. One of Stoppard’s first assignments was a television adaptation of *A Walk on the Water* in the spring of 1963. The experience proved to be a mixture of success and disappointment for the writer. Financially lucrative, the project offered a much-needed paycheck of £350, but the producer’s demand of script cuts totaling forty-two minutes left a lingering bitter taste for Stoppard (Fleming 14). A BBC series of fifteen-minute plays, inaugurated in January 1964 proved to be a more positive experience. Stoppard’s first radio play, “The Dissolution of Dominic Boot,” illustrates the writer’s strengths of interesting dialogue and situations rather than a drawn out plot. The demand for more radio plays inspired Stoppard to recycle a previously rejected short story; “‘M’ is for Moon Among Other Things.” This ethic of wasting nothing written has remained with Stoppard throughout his professional life. Another short story, “The Critics” (1963), would find its way to the stage five years later as *The Real Inspector Hound*, while his teleplay for “A Walk on the Water” would later be incarnated as the play *Enter a Free Man* in 1968 (Fleming 29).

A conversation with agent Kenneth Ewing in the fall of 1963 planted the seeds of Stoppard’s ultimate breakout success. Ewing suggested that a play about Hamlet’s two friends from school, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, might hold possibilities. The play would be Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s journey from Elsinore to England where the two spies, and ultimately pawns, would encounter Shakespeare’s mad King Lear. While

the suggestion resonated with Stoppard, it would be another year before the idea found its way to the page. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Meet King Lear* was developed as a one-act play during an artistic retreat in Berlin during the summer of 1964. Stoppard toyed with the play's full-length or teleplay potential upon his return to London in the fall, but the idea was put on hold due to other writing commitments. A one-year option by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) for the new work in May 1965, along with words of encouragement from O'Toole and director Peter Hall, inspired Stoppard to revisit the play. A year later the play was expanded to three acts and given a new title, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Stoppard eventually gave the play to the Oxford Theatre Group after the RSC's option expired. An amateur staging of the play by the Oxford Theatre Group during Edinburgh's Fringe Festival brought *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* to the attention of Kenneth Tynan. As Literary Manager for the National Theatre in London, Tynan contacted Stoppard and started the process for the play's first professional production (Fleming 44). The West End premiere of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* occurred on April 11, 1967 at the Old Vic Theatre, London, with the National Theatre Company producing the play. Success in England led six months later to New York and the debut of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* at Broadway's Alvin Theatre on October 16, 1967.

The financial security and critical accolades that followed in the wake of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* proved to be the first of many triumphs in the theatre for Stoppard. To date, he has written or translated thirty-five produced plays. Original works include *Enter a Free Man* (1968), *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974), *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977), *Night and*

Day (1978), *Dogg's Hamlet and Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979), *The Real Thing* (1982), *Arcadia* (1993), *Indian Ink* (1995), *The Invention of Love* (1997), *The Coast of Utopia*: A trilogy of plays: *Voyage*, *Shipwreck*, and *Salvage* (2002) and *Rock 'N' Roll* (2006). As a translator, Stoppard's work includes Federico Garcia Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1973), Arthur Schnitzler's *Undiscovered Country* (1979), and Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1997). Stoppard has received four Antoinette Perry ("Tony") Best New Play Awards for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, *Travesties*, *The Real Thing* and *The Coast of Utopia*. The playwright has also received London Theatre's Evening Standard Award for Best Play with *Jumpers*, *Travesties*, *The Real Thing*, *Arcadia*, *The Invention of Love*, and *Rock 'N' Roll*.

Stoppard also continued his other career as a script writer for BBC radio and television into the 1990s. His 1984 teleplay, *Squaring the Circle*, was hailed as an innovative "pseudo-documentary" about Poland's Solidarity movement and won a Gold Award for Drama at the International Film and Television Festival (Fleming xiv). The 1991 radio play, *In the Native State*, garnered Stoppard the BBC's Giles Cooper Award, some twenty-seven years after his first attempts at radio and television work.

After writing a string of unproduced screenplays in the late 1960s, Stoppard moved into the lucrative world of film. His success with movies began in 1975 with *The Romantic Englishwoman*. Director Terry Gilliam's Orwellian-influenced film *Brazil*, produced in 1985, and the World War II drama *Empire of the Sun*, directed by Steven Spielberg in 1987, are two notable Stoppard projects from the 1980s. The following decade, Stoppard wrote the screenplay for *The Russia House* in 1990 and *Billy Bathgate* the following year. His work in 1998 for *Shakespeare In Love* won the Academy Awards

for Best Picture and Best Screenplay. In 1990, Stoppard also displayed his creative virtuosity by adapting and directing the film version of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. For his film directorial debut, Stoppard was given the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival in September of that year. While critical reaction to the film was mixed at best, Stoppard's work was the first British entry since Sir Laurence Olivier's 1948 *Hamlet* to win the Golden Lion (Kelly 98). Stoppard's most recent work as a screenwriter, the action movie *The Bourne Ultimatum*, is scheduled for release the summer of 2007. As a "script doctor," Stoppard has also done uncredited work on numerous film projects, including *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* in 1989 and Tim Burton's 1999 *Sleepy Hollow*.

The autumn of 2006 proved to be a highpoint in Stoppard's career as playwright, due to the Lincoln Center Theater's production of *The Coast of Utopia* trilogy in New York. All three full-length plays (*Voyage*, *Shipwreck*, and *Salvage*) were produced in repertory during a six-month run, both with individual performances of each play and with special Saturdays designated for a marathon nine-hour performance of the trilogy. With sold-out performances and favorable press, the event garnered an enthusiastic response from New York's audiences and critics alike. As of June 2007, *The Coast of Utopia* has won six Outer Critic's Circle Awards and seven Drama Desk Awards. It also won the New York Drama Critic's Circle "Best Play of the Year" and the Drama League Award for "Distinguished Production of a Play." *The Coast of Utopia* received ten Tony Award nominations and won seven awards, including "Best Play" for 2007. A 2006 *New York Times Magazine* article by Daphne Merkin, covering Stoppard's involvement in the rehearsal process for the Lincoln Center production, allowed the playwright to address

his continued relationship with theatre: “The standing of the theater in 1960 did have a lot to do with it. But it’s not just that. I like the smell of it, and the immediacy. Also the danger: getting it wrong in public. Also the thrill when you get it right in public” (Merkin 42). Clearly, Stoppard’s passion for the theatre is showing no signs of waning. With a writing career approaching its sixth decade, Tom Stoppard continues to flirt with the dangerous nature of live theatre and finds satisfaction in the intimacy created between an audience and the words spoken onstage.

Connecting Themes in Stoppard’s Plays

While the plays of Tom Stoppard have explored an eclectic array of ideas and topics, two consistent themes exist within his work: the malleable nature of identity and the transformative power of ideas. As one separated from his home country, enduring the loss a parent and estrangement from his Jewish heritage, Stoppard’s exploration of the nature of identity has been an ongoing process. Having personally experienced the simple, and yet, life-altering process of changing names, Stoppard has addressed this point numerous times in his work. Stoppard’s response to Shakespeare’s question, “What’s in a name?” seems to suggest that one’s name is an unreliable connection to self. If the name is taken away or replaced, what remains of the individual? Stoppard’s query is addressed in a variety of ways within his work.

Changing names and roles in life is the focus of *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), Stoppard’s first work to follow the success of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. In the course of the play, two theatre critics are pulled onstage and become differently named characters within the play they are reviewing (Nadel 201). Stoppard creatively uses the device of the play-within-the-play (metatheatre) to blur the lines

between identity and assumed roles. In *The Real Thing* (1982) Stoppard again uses the play within the play technique to examine the nature of actor in character and the differences between life on and off stage (Fleming 156-57). An actor controlled and articulate onstage, is suddenly at a loss for words and actions when required to be authentic in the “real” world.

A shared name between two men, one mentally unbalanced, the other a political dissident, generates a strong examination of identity in *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977). An institutionalized character named Alexander Ivanov shares a cell with a man, also named Alexander Ivanov. The second Ivanov believes himself to have a symphony orchestra under his command (Nadel 270). In this instance, the playwright suggests that an individual’s mind and perceptions –sane or not– are the foundations upon which a sense of self is built. To theatrically enhance this question of perception and self, the playwright includes an actual orchestra performance onstage during the play.

The connection between language and social perceptions of identity informs Stoppard’s, *Dogg's Hamlet* and *Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979). Both plays contain a common character named “Easy.” The character arrives in *Dogg's Hamlet* to deliver the planks, slabs, blocks, and cubes necessary to build the platform and unlike the other characters, he speaks in what is recognizably a twentieth-century, working-class English dialect. This trait is switched however, when “Easy” appears in the living room audience of *Cahoot's Macbeth* and speaks in the language of Dogg (Hunter 254-55). Through the playwright’s use of dialogue in the two plays, the character-defining quality of language becomes the focus.

Defining oneself and the capricious nature of perceptions are ideas running through *On the Razzle* (1981). Translated and adapted from Johann Nestroy's *Einen Jux will er sich machen*, the farce contains cross-dressing characters and multiple mistaken identities (Nadel 309). This play uses the reliable comic device of men in dresses as a way of humorously commenting on the malleable nature of self. Stoppard's exploration of self and the creation of persona, and the possible conflict between the two, are at work in *The Invention of Love* (1997). The play's main character A.E. Housman (a closeted homosexual) is split in two. One actor plays a young university student in Victorian England and a second actor portrays the older Housman as a spirit who comments on and occasionally talks to the characters on stage, including his younger self (Fleming 226).

This theme of identity is expanded within Stoppard's most recent work, *Rock 'N' Roll* (2006). Inspired by the President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel and his non-violent approach to political reform, Stoppard examines the use of art as a catalyst for personal and national change (http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/02/17/030217fa_fact1). The play connects the significance of rock and roll music in the emergence of the democratic movement in Eastern Bloc Czechoslovakia between the Russian invasion of 1968 and the Velvet Revolution of 1989. *Rock 'N' Roll* focuses on the worldview of "Jan," a young Czech student and rock music fan in England who becomes appalled by the repressive regime in his home country. Inspired by the rebellious nature of popular music, Jan becomes free to forge a new identity. The play also encompasses change within three generations of an English family at Cambridge and the evolution of a Czech rock band called "The Plastic People." This change of the individual becomes a microcosm of a larger movement that followed the 1989 fall of

Communism in Czechoslovakia. Stoppard's home country becomes a democracy and is presented with the opportunity to redefine its national sense of self.

The second and much wider connecting thread running through Stoppard's plays is his use of intellectual concepts. As a means of defining the individual character and interpersonal relationships onstage, Stoppard infuses his work with a variety of schools of thought. The playwright also draws from multiple intellectual sources in order to give his characters a sense of control, purpose, and meaning. Conflicting ideas within Stoppard's work also provide dramatic fuel for debate between characters and a focus on potential deficiencies within a particular value system. John Fleming writes in his book

Stoppard's Theatre: Finding Order Amid Chaos:

From the world of science, he (Stoppard) has tapped into the metaphorical potential of quantum physics and chaos theory. From philosophy, he has dramatized logical positivism, Wittgenstein's language games, and debates over whether morality is relative and socially constructed or grounded in metaphysical absolutes. Questions about the social responsibilities of the artist, journalist, and politician appear in plays that examine the role and nature of art, the relative merits of free press, and the injustices and human rights violations of pre-perestroika Eastern Bloc politics. He has explored the nature of love and the requirements of intimate human relationships. [...] Cumulatively, Stoppard's work has been concerned with the social, moral, metaphysical, and personal condition of being human in an uncertain world (2).

No matter the form or setting of the play, Stoppard has consistently created challenging worlds of ideas for a contemporary theatre audience. Plays that express multiple viewpoints, but offer no single clear answer, gives audiences of Stoppard's work the freedom to discern their own ideas of truth. This shift from passive viewer to active contemplation and discernment makes the theatre event a living, personal experience for the individual. Because of this openness to interpretation of Tom Stoppard's plays, the work has continued relevancy and vitality within the world of live theatre.

Inspiration, Influences, and Evolution of the Play

In 1963, what began as a passing exchange between Stoppard and his agent, Kenneth Ewing, slowly evolved over the next four years into the play *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. A grant from the Ford Foundation in spring 1964 afforded Stoppard the time needed to begin the writing process. After finishing his forty-four-page first draft in June 1964, Stoppard wrote to a friend from Berlin outlining his idea for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Meet King Lear*:

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Hamlet are joined on the boat by the Player, and since the Player represents the Hamlet-like figure in *The Murder of Gonzago*, the Player is made up to look like Hamlet. On the boat, Hamlet and the Player change identities, and the Player is captured by pirates and goes off to fulfill Hamlet's role in the rest of Shakespeare's play. Meanwhile Hamlet goes to England, witnesses the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and then returns to Elsinore in time for the final tableau of carnage, but too late to take over. He is a man stuck in space, a man caught out of the action. It is a bit screwy, but fun (Fleming 30).

It is fascinating to read this brief synopsis and recognize which of the playwright's ideas survived the transition from a one-act to full-length play. Themes of identity, role-playing, and a life without purpose remained to form the core of the work. During the next two and a half years of revisions, plot points would change; the King Lear connection was jettisoned; and the Hamlet story would be usurped by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's journey as the story's main focus. Stoppard's rewrites would also touch upon the influences of Absurdist theatre within the work and the play's concepts of fatalism and existentialism.

Theatre scholar Martin Esslin (1918-2002) named and described the movement known as the Theatre of the Absurd as "striving to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open

abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought” (Esslin 6). The works of modern playwrights such as Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), Eugene Ionesco (1921-1994), and Harold Pinter (1930-) are most often categorized in this theatrical genre. Their works for the theatre appear in many ways to be in opposition to the accepted conventions of the distinguishable and unswerving logic found in traditional drama. In Theatre of the Absurd, the single assurance is that there will be no clear “horizon of significance,” or “a world ordered by certain normative understandings,” or even a “sense of moral meaning” (Johnson 2). Instead, the audience of an absurdist play could expect to see characters stumble their way through a world devoid of meaning, unaware and uneducated about their purpose in life, and utterly lacking in moral values or the characteristics most typical to modern mankind.

According to Esslin, absurdist drama abandons all the conventional theatre elements of plot, language, setting, and character and emphasizes the illogical nature of reality by making these elements appear illogical (6). An absurd play reflects the chaos of modern life—existence that is lacking order, symmetry and purpose. Life does not process rationally from point to point, manifesting in a dramatic climax in which all questions are answered, and neither does the theatre of the absurd (Cahn 21). Mysteries remain unknowable, and characters stay fixed in a rigid stasis of indecision and inaction. Any kind of final, definite ending may yield a certain value to the story, which, in turn would transfer value to an insignificant, incongruous world (Johnson 3).

Communication in this absurd world is ineffective. Characters may speak often and hold frequent discussions between each other or with themselves, but nothing substantial is communicated during the course of the play. Language that is erratic,

untrustworthy, and illusory proves to be an exercise in futility. The verbal confusion only compounds the chaos and isolation the character feels within (Esslin 63).

Setting for the Theatre of the Absurd often suggests a world of chaos and isolation. Characters often awake to find themselves in a nondescript void, which they are unable to understand or control. The world of the play is usually a strange, unrecognizable locale or an ostensibly realistic world that suddenly becomes warped. Characters in this world lack the ability to act from any position of power and therefore do not behave with any semblance of independence. They possess no self-knowledge, purpose, or reliable memory on which to base choices. Relationships in this world are almost devoid of depth, with the desires for friendship and love at odds with the forces of isolation and the unknown. Characters may have connections in the Theatre of the Absurd, but much of their motivation for remaining together is out of their fear of being left alone (Cahn 19).

Finally, plays that adhere to the Theatre of the Absurd's perspective take a clear stance on the devaluing of man's life and in the final absurdity of death. To the characters, "death holds no terror" since a life in this chaotic world "is hardly precious" (Cahn 20). Human contact and true love is unattainable, there is no divine god to guide or judge, to define morality or dispense justice, so values are non-existent. Characters within the absurdist world are oblivious to the basic circumstances of their shallow lives. "Horrors may pass unnoticed as they drown themselves in the pathetic day-to-day sequence of their lives" (Cahn 20). Consequently, life, worldly pursuits, material goods, and death are ultimately defined as meaningless. The Theatre of the Absurd shows this

meaninglessness by distorting the traditional theatre elements of plot, language, setting, characters, and their world perspective.

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead is certainly indebted to the Absurdist movement. Susan Rusinko believes that “through their Beckettian word games, Stoppard’s Eliotic main characters act out Pirandellian contradictory truths of reality and appearance, sanity and insanity, relativity and absoluteness” (Rusinko 36). More than any other writer mentioned by Rusinko, Irish playwright Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953) influenced Stoppard’s work. For some of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*’s early reviewers, this connection was the source of some very pointed criticism. Ronald Bryden wrote that Stoppard’s play is “unabashedly indebted to *Waiting for Godot*,” and *New York Times* literary critic, Irving Wardle, argued that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is “a highly literary play with frank debts to Beckett” (Wardle, 8C). Comparing the subject matter and characters of the two plays leaves no doubt of Stoppard’s connection to Beckett. In both plays, conflict is a result of characters’ indecision; time is spent playing physical and verbal games; strange situations are further emphasized with slapstick humor; and dialogue is often a vaudevillian pattern of one-liners between the two main characters. Stoppard spoke to this Beckettian influence of humor and language during a 1968 interview with Giles Gordon for the *Transatlantic Review*: “I find Beckett deliciously funny in the way he qualifies everything as he goes along, reduces, refines, and dismantles [...] the way in which Beckett expresses himself, and the bent of his humor” (Delaney 21). The playwright’s acknowledgement of Beckett’s use of humor within his plays is a commentary on Stoppard’s own employment of comedy to communicate larger ideas within his own work.

Perhaps the most telling legacies from Beckett are Stoppard's title characters and their feelings of entrapment. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are manipulated by outer powers, logic and facts fail to inform and only feed their confusion. Ultimately, they are left to wait in the shadow of death until they both disappear from the stage:

ROS: How intriguing! I feel like a spectator—an appalling business. The only thing that makes it bearable is the irrational belief that somebody interesting will come on in a minute...

GUIL: See anyone?

ROS: No. You?

GUIL: No (41).

While the Theatre of the Absurd's influence on *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is irrefutable, Stoppard freely references other schools of thought within the play. There are clearly echoes of fatalism in the play, for example. Known also as determinism or predestination, fatalism is the belief in the inevitability of all events due to the existence, intervention, and or interference of a major unseen force, such as fate or God. A fatalist also believes that every action or choice of action is the result of a series of cause and effect situations, once again, set in motion by some outside control. Everything in life is preordained, a play in which all have been assigned a role and a specific journey. Any hope of free will and choice in changing one's destiny is for naught. For Stoppard, this fatalistic view is voiced by the Player's admission that his purpose is to follow directions, and "there is no choice involved," and that "the bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means" (80). Stoppard revisits this idea of a pre-written script in the final conversation between Guildenstern and the Player:

GUIL: But why? Was it all for this? Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths? Who are we?

PLAYER: You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's enough (95).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are fated to die by the play's end. A letter written by Hamlet to the King of England is proof enough of their destiny. Whether Stoppard uses this position to illustrate the fatalistic behavior of his two characters or views their dependence upon outer authority as the duo's fatal flaw is unclear. Despite the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern recognize their impending doom in the letter, in their own minds the script cannot be changed. So it is written, so it shall be. Stoppard himself noted, with some ambiguity, this element of fate within the play:

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two people who have been written into a scheme of things and there's nothing they can do about it except follow through and meet the fate that has been ordained for them[...] I'd have to say that I'm using Shakespeare as a symbol of God, which I'm not prepared to say. I have written about two people on whom Shakespeare imposed inevitability, but I haven't got a philosophy figured out for you. (Fleming 5-6)

Either through a belief that his audience will make up its own mind, or a reluctance to give a definitive answer, Stoppard has remained neutral in the predestination debate over his play.

The most acknowledged philosophy in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, however, is existentialism. According to William S. Sahakian, existentialism contains five central facets. First, to Existentialists, human reality exists in two forms—the subjective realm and the objective realm. The objective world is also known as the outside world, composed of an “inexorable law, of cause and effect, of chronological, clock-ticking time, of flux, of mechanism” (Sahakian 355). Our natural world, sun, moon, planets, and other material objects are unconscious and remain true to their being. The subjective world, or inner world of the mind, of consciousness, of awareness, of freedom, of stability (355-56), is only available to human beings. This state of being cannot be accessed through logic or science, as both are rooted in the material, objective

world. Guildenstern's failure to glean the purpose of his and Rosencrantz's situation through scientific and logical methods highlights this point throughout the play.

Secondly, an Existentialist is responsible for creating her own value system and defining who they are as an individual. The third belief is that each human is a free agent, capable of choosing his or her own destiny, that "each of us is king of our own subjective world" (Soccio 566). Life is what each Existentialist chooses it to be. For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, this failure to choose, to take control of their lives, is the source of much anxiety for the duo. This deficiency of personal responsibility also leaves the two vulnerable to outer manipulation.

The fourth tenet is "the highly wrought and tightly organized objective world that stands over and against human beings and appears absurd" (Soccio 568). Free will can be exercised, hopes and dreams may be held by the individual, but factors in the objective world can work to prevent those goals from being realized. The hard truth for the Existentialist is that much of the outer world is beyond his or her control and therefore, absurd. Stoppard's dialogue in Act 3 speaks directly to this point:

GUIL: Yes, 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? [...]
One is free on a boat. For a time. Relatively (100-101).

The idea at work in the play is the paradox of free will at odds with greater forces outside the realm of personal control. A person is free to move in the world, but the world itself is bound to its own rules and limitations.

The final existentialist belief is that while the world may appear to be incomprehensible and absurd, the independent person must revolt against such absurdity. Choice of action and the vigilant holding to one's own code of values is the standard. To

this point, the French philosopher and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) adds, “Man makes himself whatever he chooses to be; he also creates his own values. Man’s nature consists of his past, which he has freely chosen. He is an existence which chooses its essence” (Qtd. in Sahakian 355). That is to say, freedom of choice should be regarded as a birthright, and that value of the self and outer worth is a personal creation. For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, this idea of personal independence and choice is only touched upon during their final moments onstage. Their inaction, an unconscious choice made by the duo, is what seals their fates at the play’s end. Having to forge his own identity through choice, rather than outward circumstances, it could be argued that Stoppard has employed the elements of existentialism for himself. As “A bounced Czech” (Qtd. in Nadel 3), living and working in a foreign country, the playwright has had to create essence for himself from his own existence.

Critical Reaction to the Play

Initially, this mixing of styles and ideas filtered through the world of Shakespeare was met with little enthusiasm by the critics. The first performance of the full-length play was staged by the amateur Oxford Theatre Group as part of the “fringe” of the Edinburgh Festival the summer of 1966. Reviewing the August 24 premiere, Harold Hobson of *The Sunday Times* wrote that the play would not guarantee Stoppard’s success, while Allen Wright in *The Scotsman* called it “no more than a clever revue sketch which got out of hand” and was “peppered with incriminating phrases that could be taken down and used in evidence against it” (Nadel 172-73). A lone positive review from Ronald Bryden in the *Observer* generated interest for the play’s performance in Edinburgh and netted Stoppard a telegram from the National Theatre in London. As literary manager for

the National Theatre, Kenneth Tynan organized a meeting between himself, Stoppard, and the National's artistic director, Sir Laurence Olivier. Eager to champion the new playwright and work, Tynan quickly scheduled *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* to be produced in the spring of 1967 at the National Theatre's Old Vic stage.

The play went into an eight week rehearsal process, with Stoppard expanding the cast size from eleven in the Scottish production to twenty-seven for the London stage and adding a new scene (suggested by Olivier) featuring Rosencrantz and Guildenstern searching for Hamlet as the prince tries to hide Polonius's body (Nadel 179). For Stoppard, edits and rewrites became an almost daily occurrence in the collaboration with director Derek Goldby. At twenty-six, the Oxford-educated Goldby had gained experience at the National as an assistant director, but *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was to be his first main stage play. To keep costs down, the production used costumes pulled from the Old Vic's storage. Out of pure coincidence, it so happened that the faded Victorian-Jacobean outfits for the new play had been previously used in Peter O'Toole's 1963 *Hamlet* (Nadel 179-180).

After considering several different endings and a short-lived title change to *Exit Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, Stoppard finally settled on giving Shakespeare's Horatio the play's final words and on keeping the title, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Because of the National Theatre's scheduling as a repertory company, the production moved into the actual performance space with only two rehearsal days remaining (Nadel 183). *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* opened at the Old Vic Theatre in London on Tuesday, April 11, 1967. Critical response to the professional production was

resoundingly more positive than the previous ones from Scotland. Harold Hobson's review in the *Sunday Times* all but retracted his first review of the Edinburgh production:

If the history of drama is chiefly the history of dramatists—and it is—then the National Theatre's production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard is the most important event in the British professional theatre of the last nine years (Nadel 185).

After seven years of disappointment in his playwriting career, Stoppard was about to become an overnight success.

At twenty-nine, Tom Stoppard had become the youngest playwright ever to be staged at the National Theatre (Nadel 149). Within six months the production transferred to Broadway, another first for the National, for a yearlong, four hundred twenty-performance run. In 1968, the play received eight Tony Award nominations and won four: Best Play, Best Costume Designer, Best Dramatic Producer, and Best Scenic Designer. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* also received the Drama Critic's Award for Best Play, the John Whiting Award, and *Plays and Players* Best Play Award. The influential British newspaper, *The Evening Standard* gave Stoppard its Most Promising Playwright Award (Fleming xii). Between the years 1967-68, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* would be staged in twenty-three countries and within a decade, the play would be professionally produced more than 250 times in twenty languages (Fleming 48). Notable subsequent productions of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* have included a 1974 revival at the Young Vic (an offshoot of the Old Vic), a Broadway production at New York's Roundabout Theatre in 1987, and a 1995 staging at the National Theatre in London.

Conclusion

An eclectic, rootless childhood and adolescence has indelible colored Tom Stoppard's life as a playwright. Despite no post-secondary education, Stoppard has consistently offered intellectual, engaging theatre and has moved to the forefront of respected and acclaimed British dramatists. At seventy years old, Stoppard continues his creative journey as a writer for both theatre and film. In a 1995 interview with the *New York Times* drama critic Mel Gussow, Stoppard described the satisfaction he still finds in exploring his artistic voice:

It's the equivalent of the potter and the clay. I just love getting my hands in it. Clearly there are many writers who can mail the play in [. . .] It stays the way they write it, I am told. I think they miss all the fun. I change things to accommodate something in the scenery, or something in the lighting. Happily, I love being part of the equation. I don't want it to be what happens to my text. I like the text to be part of the clay, which is being molded. (Merkin 41)

Through his free use of the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd and the mixing of various philosophies, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* has been hailed by critics as a landmark, postmodern play. Under the guise of a comedy, the play has also had a successful forty-year relationship with audiences worldwide. The next chapter in this thesis examines *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* through the lenses of dramatic postmodernism in the theatre and play analysis. My goal for this multiple approach is to clarify my vision as director and illuminate how the play evolved from page to stage.

CHAPTER TWO

An Analysis of *ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD*

Introduction

ROS: What's the game?

GUIL: What are the rules? (34)

The two questions posed by the duo are a perfect place to start an analysis of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Tom Stoppard's script is, in fact, a figurative and literal series of questions. My first theatre teacher, Douglas Hoppock, passed along this piece of director-related wisdom: "The play is a mystery. Your job as director is to follow the clues in the script, interpret the signs, and connect the pieces until you know what the mystery is and what story you want to tell." With Stoppard's postmodern approach to the play, getting to the heart of the mystery requires focus, clear parameters, and interpretations supported by the source material.

This chapter explores the questions posed by the playwright in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, and finds answers to inform directorial choices. Attention will also be given to Stoppard's use of postmodern dramatic theory within the text as illustrated by paradoxical, ironic language, ambiguous meanings, and contradictory philosophies, as well as his employment of semiotics and metatheatre.

Synopsis

Two men sit flipping coins to pass the time. Rosencrantz is betting heads and winning; Guildenstern is left the loser for an impossible and improbable ninety-two

times. Through methods of logic and scientific inquiry, questions and answers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are able to piece together the beginning of their lives' journey. They received an early morning summons from a royal messenger with official business for the duo—no questions asked. While debating their next step, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern encounter a traveling troupe of actors. Led by the Player, the actors are initially seen as an omen by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a sign that will point the way to their destiny. To their disappointment, the troupe's main motivation is one of payment and performance. As the Tragedians find their positions for an impromptu performance on the road, Rosencrantz discovers that the last coin to be flipped has come up "tails." Without warning or explanation, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dropped into the middle of Elsinore Castle and the world of *Hamlet*. Surrounded by Shakespeare's royal court, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are able to grab hold of some semblance of purpose. They are charged by King Claudius and Queen Gertrude to monitor Prince Hamlet and his mysterious melancholy. The King and Queen cast Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet's friends from school, as spies. This royal employment leads the two to a new litany of questions. While in the castle, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are reunited with the Player and Tragedians. The actors are there to perform for the royal court because Hamlet intends to use "The Murder of Gonzago" as a means of revealing his father's murderer. The dumbshow goes beyond the poisoned King, unfaithful Queen, and murderous Brother scenario to include more plot points to show Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's journey. The Tragedians, in pantomime, perform the duo's voyage to England and their tragic fates. The play is interrupted by a guilt-ridden Claudius, who immediately orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to escort Hamlet to England. The

Danish King gives the two a letter of introduction to the King of England, but the correspondence actually contains a command for Hamlet's death. On the boat to England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern open the sealed letter and discover the true meaning of their journey. Hamlet overhears the plot for his execution and later replaces Claudius' letter with a forgery that calls for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's death. After a pirate attack and the disappearance of Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern open the false letter and realize their fates. Frantic over the news of their own demise, Guildenstern takes the Player's knife and stabs the actor. The Player, gasping for breath, falls to the floor and is still. A moment of respectful silence from the Tragedians is replaced by applause as the Player rises to his feet, and takes a bow. The troupe of actors then performs the final dumbshow, Hamlet's duel at Elsinore and the death of the royal family. The Tragedians exit the stage, leaving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to consider the purpose of their roles. After a moment of contemplation, with little fanfare, the two disappear from the stage. The stage setting is immediately replaced with the end tableau from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The Ambassador from England delivers the news that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Horatio, surrounded by the corpses of Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes, offers to speak of this tragedy as the lights slowly fade.

The following sections of this chapter will focus on a postmodern approach to directing Stoppard's script and how this analysis informed my decision to include an additional scene at the play's end.

Postmodern Theatre

Postmodern theatre rose to prominence in the socially turbulent 1960s. In "A Poetics of Postmodernism," Linda Hutcheon calls postmodern art a means of

undermining principles of value, order, meaning, control, and identity that have been the basic premise of bourgeois liberalism. Those humanistic principles are still operative in the culture, but for many they are no longer seen as external and unchallengeable (Qtd. in Schechner 115). Postmodern theatre strives to challenge societal rules by challenging the rules of traditional, neatly organized theatre. While many theatre theoreticians argue over the exact defining qualities of postmodern theatre, there are a few basic tenets, common to the majority of plays considered to be postmodern.

Reacting against the boundaries of traditional theatre, plays within the postmodern genre contain a pastiche of different textualities and media forms. A postmodernist playwright borrows, if not outright steals, from any and all art forms to create new work (Gaggi 21). Examples of this is Julie Taymor's use of Asian puppetry in her adaptation of the Disney animated film *The Lion King* (1997). Taymor's production of *Oedipus Rex* (1992) combined the classic Greek text with Stravinsky's opera and once again, combined puppets and live actors in the performance.

Moreover, as a means of verbalizing the chaotic nature of modern life, the postmodern play often contains an incomplete narrative. Ambiguity and paradox are also hallmarks in this construct, creating what many have termed as the "Theatre of the unknowing" (Acheson 118). Questions raised within the postmodern play are often left unanswered by the playwright. Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* (1983), for example, contains three characters, each sharing a common history and yet each telling the same story from widely different point of view.

Questioning the status quo is also at the forefront of the postmodernist theatre focus. Plays that question existing ways of viewing society and contain subversive

characters are devices that bring attention to this questioning of contemporary values. British playwright Caryl Churchill's play *Cloud Nine* (1979) is an excellent example of postmodernist drama. Churchill focuses on the societal labels of gender, sexuality, race, and class for both Victorian and contemporary British life.

Theatre following the postmodern template is often self-referential and freely uses pop culture as a means of commenting – often with irony or humor – on society's ideas of art (Whitmore 3). Steve Martin's *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* (1993) is illustrative of this tactic. Martin places the artist Pablo Picasso and scientist Albert Einstein in a bar in Paris. By the end of the play's discussion on art and science, Elvis Presley inexplicably shows up.

Intent on connecting with the viewer on an intimate and potentially transformative level, postmodern theatre often integrates the audience into the performance. This relationship between audience and play is key to unlocking a "shared meaning" within the work (Gaggi 33). Director Jerzy Grotowski has experimented with different ways of having performers relate to spectators. Rejecting the orthodox proscenium stage, Grotowski has staged plays in "found" spaces such as parks and abandoned buildings. He has also constructed performance space that specifically places the audience within the world of the play (Schechner 220).

Stoppard's free use of Shakespeare's source material and his inclusion of questioning values and the nature of truth and reality through humor all point to a postmodern approach to theatre. Even the established theatre devices of semiotics and metatheatre, within *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, are reconfigured to suit the

needs of the play and the playwright's intent, rather than adhering to the limitations of standards of the past.

Semiotics

Theatre, as an art form communicating ideas, experiences and emotions connected to the human experience, utilizes what can be termed as “signs” within the performance. Semiotics is a system that analyzes signs and offers explanations as to how these signs are used to communicate meaning (Whitmore 5). To understand the power of semiotics in the theatre is to acknowledge all five senses of the spectator as potential receptors of this onstage communication. As Martin Esslin (1918-2002) states in *The Field of Drama*:

All the elements of a dramatic performance—the language of the dialogue, the setting, the gestures, the costumes, make-up and voice inflection of the actors, as well as a multitude of other signs—each in their own way contribute to the creation of the “meaning” of the performance. [...] Each element of the performance can be regarded as a sign that stands for an ingredient of the over-all meaning of a scene, an incident, a moment of the action (16).

The challenge for the director is to make conscious choices in the presentation of a play's signs. This responsibility at the forefront influenced each choice I made in editing the script, collaborating with designers and actors, and also motivated me to examine the final image of the play with great care. My priority for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was to create a unified and satisfying experience for the Baylor audience. This meant understanding and communicating all of the play's signs as effectively as possible. Following sections of this chapter will examine individual signs within the play and how they were translated from the page to the stage.

Metatheatre

Stoppard's mixing of theatrical styles within *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is apparent through his use of metatheatre. Metatheatre is the use of a play (the inner play) within an existing play (the outer play). Skillfully implemented by Shakespeare in his plays *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this play-within-a-play technique allows the outer and inner plays to fuse together, causing the barriers between fiction and reality to break down (Berlin 270). One example of metatheatre in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the acting troupe's performance of "The Murder of Gonzago," which acts as a mirror image of reality—convicting Claudius for the murder of Hamlet's father and accusing the Queen of possible foul play. In this forum, the worlds of reality and theatre meet, and truth, though staged as a theatrical fabrication, is revealed as authenticity after all. Stoppard's use of this device in his play is taken a step further by creating two fictive worlds. Theatre scholar, June Schlueter suggests, for example, in a typical metatheatrical play, the audience would see Stoppard's invention as the outer play and the world of *Hamlet* as the inner play. The audience would, in turn, view Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "the coin flippers, the occupants of the frame play, as real, and Hamlet's spy friends, the occupants of the inner play, as fictive" (Schlueter 5).

Yet, since most of the audience is familiar with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's presence in *Hamlet*, an existence that precedes Stoppard's invention, the audience must question which reality is the inner play and which is the outer play. They cannot easily "divide the metafictional characters into the fictive and the real," (Schlueter 5) causing possible confusion for the audience. In addition, the world of Elsinore, which is presented as the "real world" in Stoppard's play, is also derived from Shakespeare's

Hamlet and does not actually exist in reality either. It is just one more fictional creation and, thus, a point of confusion for the audience (Johnson 10). As June Schlueter says in her book, *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama*, Stoppard first creates a “rigid structural line of demarcation and then violates that line through his protagonists’ entrance into the inner play.” Stoppard then uses the “play within the play not simply in the traditional way, for enhancing reality, but rather to suggest the nature of role-playing and the power of illusion over reality” (Schlueter 2).

Enhancing this illusory construct is Stoppard’s use of Shakespeare’s text. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter Elsinore Castle, they are given the words of *Hamlet* to speak as they blithely move into their roles of courtiers and spies. This blending of language and characters, intertextualization, within *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, would suggest that Stoppard’s use of role-play is not limited to characters that are conscious of performing. The playwright points to the possibility of performance and assumed roles as an unconscious phenomenon in the world of the play, as well.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s fixation with role-playing is best exemplified in Act 3 when Rosencrantz pretends to be the King of England and peppers Guildenstern with questions regarding their reasons for bringing Hamlet to England (108-09). Rosencrantz is so engrossed with his role-playing that he, for a moment, forgets that he is not the King and tears open the letter containing Hamlet’s death sentence (Harty 30).

Of course Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not Stoppard’s only characters that are preoccupied with role-playing. The Player, who admittedly never changes out of costume, is always in character just as Guildenstern surmises in Act 1 (34). For the Player, role-playing has become a reality as he constantly is playing a part in some play.

While the Player is fully aware of his status as performer, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern unconsciously slip in and out of their assumed roles. The duo continue in their role-play until Guildenstern's confrontation with the Player in Act 3, offers a moment of clarity on this point of reality verses illusion.

While on the boat to England, Guildenstern stabs the Player. The audience, along with Guildenstern, is tricked into believing that Guildenstern has actually killed the Player. Yet, when the "dead" actor arises, bowing to his fellow Tragedians, both Guildenstern and the audience are confounded by the shocking discovery that perhaps reality is not always as it seems (123). In fact, earlier in the play, the Player discusses his failure in the staging a real death. One of the Tragedians was condemned to die for stealing a lamb and the Player was given permission to "have him hanged in the middle of the play, but the actor just wasn't convincing" (84). Here the Player comments on the audience's view of death onstage, which is usually "merely an actor's casual exit." (Harty 31). Yet when a person really died onstage, it was more difficult for the audience to accept this death as truth rather than a staged performance of a death. The Player is correct in his assumption that audience members are often confused about the nature of truth, as illustrated by their belief as a fictive stage death as true reality.

Perhaps Stoppard's point through the use of the "play metaphor" is to not only reinforce the nature of reality as a misleading force, but also to express the idea of the role-playing self as a normative element of modern human life. Ordinary people just like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are often assigned roles in society to perform and they must successfully convince an observing audience that they have the ability to handle such roles. As June Schlueter asserts, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's situation is

“reminiscent of our own acquiescence to the demands of social convention, which constantly force us to assume a fictive identity” (Schlueter 3).

Yet no matter what statements are made through Stoppard’s use of metatheatre and the theme of role-playing versus reality, it suggests that nothing presented onstage is what it seems. Just like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s game of question and answer, the pursuit of answers only produces more questions. With Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the Player’s preoccupation with the idea of role-playing, Stoppard’s commentary on the nature of reality is, at best, ambiguous. The playwright never quite makes clear the answer to the question of what is real and what is fiction. Stoppard therefore makes no direct point through his use of metatheatre with *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* and though many questions are posed, none are definitively answered. However, Stoppard has opened his audience up to a world of infinite questions and therefore a world of infinite possible solutions.

Director Interpretation

Early in my reading of the script *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, three significant ideas within the play became apparent. First, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are, in fact, dead. Second, their journey through this world has purpose: it presents the duo with chances to learn, experiences to remember, and opportunities to take independent action. Third, because of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s failure to learn and their inaction, they are destined to repeat their journey. Stoppard’s use of environment, repeated words and actions, and key central characters within the play suggest the validity of a cyclical interpretation of the play.

Several clues contained within character dialogue supports this theory of a cyclic journey for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. For instance, the opening scene on the road with the two reveals the possibility of repetition:

GUIL: This is not the first time we have spun coins!
 ROS: Oh, no-we've been spinning coins for as long as I remember.
 GUIL: How long is that?
 ROS: I forget... (10).

The Player's first conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's in Act 1 also points to a continuing story: "We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else" (21).

In Act 2, The Player cryptically drops clues of past encounters to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at Elsinore Castle:

GUIL: You're evidently a man who knows his way around.
 PLAYER: I've been here before.
 GUIL: We're still finding our feet.
 PLAYER: I should concentrate on not losing your heads.
 GUIL: Do you speak from knowledge?
 PLAYER: Precedent.
 GUIL: You've been here before.
 PLAYER: And I know which way the wind is blowing (51).

Guildenstern's dialogue on the Boat to England in Act 3 continues this thread of repeated events: "But you don't believe anything till it happens. And it *has* all happened. Hasn't it?" (84) And Guildenstern's moment of clarity, before disappearing at the play's end, is that: "Well, we'll know better next time" (98).

Stoppard places his title characters in the middle of events without a substantial history, and yet, hints at a possible past for the duo. The playwright seems to suggest a possible continuum, a connected loop, within Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's journey.

Because the two lack the ability to grasp meaning or remember experience, each passage through this world is like the first time for the characters.

Stoppard's connecting dialogue informed my decision to use the continuum idea as a foundation in my analysis of the script. Also, the discovery of an alternate ending written by Stoppard for the 1967 London production, in which the playwright toyed with the idea of restarting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's journey, influenced my interpretation as well. This concept of a cyclical story for the two characters is what motivated the choice to add a final scene to Baylor's production.

Given Circumstances

The first note from the playwright concerning the setting for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is this: "Two Elizabethans passing the time in a place without much visible character" (7). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's beginning in the play is the simple activity of flipping coins as amusement. Information about the duo's place and purpose in this world is only revealed after five pages of dialogue between the two. They are on a road, traveling by royal summons on official business. By specifically beginning the play in this ethereal setting, with no immediate explanation of where and why, Stoppard immediately establishes a mood of mystery and ambiguity. The playwright gives the audience a series of visual clues about the nature of this world. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are outsiders. The duo have no idea where they are or what possible direction to take to reach their destination.

This setting is not bound by laws of physics and logic, a fact proven by the flip of a coin. The mysterious quality of a world beyond the realm of logic is reinforced in the play through its shifting environment. Transitions between physical locations in the play

all happen with no explanation given: the road quickly becomes Elsinore Castle in Denmark, which then changes to a boat en route to England, which in turn becomes an empty void for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's final moments. Finally, the play returns to Elsinore for an ending tableau. Through his use of setting, Stoppard employs a postmodern approach to the play. At first glance it seems that the—“place without much visible character” (7) reflects the influence of *Waiting for Godot*; however, there is a distinct difference. Unlike the characters in a Beckett play, adrift in a timeless place and devoid of meaning, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist in a valid world created by Shakespeare in his play *Hamlet*. However slight, there is a tangible connection to a structured society in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Stoppard's suggestion of an absurdist environment shows his postmodernist tendencies. He is picking and choosing from traditional and avant-garde approaches to theatre. The playwright's eclectic approach to setting keeps the expectations of his characters and audience off kilter (Cahn 45). The transitory element of setting within the structure of the play prevents the two characters from ever finding their footing, physically or mentally.

The first action the audience sees at the beginning of the play is a coin being flipped. Through this simple device—a plain, circular piece of metal—a host of signs are put in motion. Because of the unbroken run of 92 consecutive heads in Guildenstern's flip of the coin, the laws of probability, time, human will, divine intervention, and influence of supernatural forces are called into question. Because Guildenstern cannot explain these phenomena, two points emerge—one for the character, the other for the audience. First, Guildenstern takes the coin flip as a “sign,” an indication of some higher meaning beyond a game; but he is unable to decipher its message (11-18). The second

point introduced at the play's beginning by the coin, is the actual nature of this world. With the law of odds not working in the coin flip, the audience clearly understands that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern occupy another plane of existence. It is a world drawn from the familiar structure of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but one with its own set of rules as well.

While there is no exact date or year expressed in the script ("Elizabethan" is only mentioned once in the stage directions, so one might assume the year is between 1558 and 1603), there is a very telling detail at the end of Act 2:

ROS: We'll be cold. The summer won't last.

GUIL: It's autumnal.

ROS: (Examining the ground) No leaves.

GUIL: Autumnal- nothing to do with leaves. It is to do with a certain brownness at the edges of the day...Brown is creeping up on us, take my word for it...Russets and tangerine shades of old gold flushing the very outside edge of the senses...deep shining ochres, burnt umber and parchments of baked earth-reflecting on itself and through itself, filtering the light...Yesterday was blue, like smoke (74).

The play occurs within the months of September and October, and this reference provides a moment of dramatic irony for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The duo is standing outside the castle waiting on Hamlet and the boat to take the three to England. Using poetic language to describe death in nature, Guildenstern is also foreshadowing his and Rosencrantz's own imminent fate. This allusion to the changing of the seasons also reinforces the interpretation that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's journey is cyclical in nature. Just as life in the natural world dies in the winter, there is rebirth in spring. The perspective is, that through their deaths, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would only be completing one part of a larger continuum—a cycle that would reset itself and position the characters to start their journey again.

While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deal with money from the play's beginning, coins are only valued as game pieces. Coins are won or lost by a flip, and the loss of the money is secondary to the concern generated by the one-sided game. Stoppard offers in his stage directions, character insight at the beginning of Act 1:

Guil takes a coin out of his bag, spins it, Ros catches it, studies it, announces it as heads and puts it in his own bag...They have apparently been doing this for some time. The run of heads is impossible, yet Ros betrays no surprise at all-he feels none. However, he is nice enough to feel a little embarrassed at taking so much money off his friend. Let that be his character note. Guil is well alive at the oddity of it. He is not worried about the money, but he is worried by the implications; aware but not going to panic about it-his character note (7).

Thus, Stoppard's theme of ambiguity within the world of the play is established with the flip of a coin. It would also indicate that money for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern has more than monetary value. For the duo, the coin becomes one of the few tangible objects to connect with as they drift through an unpredictable world. Both characters— particularly Rosencrantz— return to the coin throughout the play in an effort to find security.

Once at the castle, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are enticed to spy on Hamlet by the “Reward as fits a King's remembrance” (31). This thought of possible financial gain is shortly abandoned by the two in favor of another diversion, a game of question and answer. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bring the subject of money up a final time on the boat to England in Act 3. Rosencrantz plays a game of “guess the hand” and then cheats to insure Guildenstern's winning (103). The game is disrupted by an argument over how much money Claudius gave each of them. This squabble is soon derailed by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's worries of what to do in England.

Stoppard's use of money in the play, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's preoccupation with the coin as game-piece, suggests the postmodern device of questioning societal values. In this world, as the two characters exhibit little comprehension of the past or their futures, the value of money for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is based on tangible amusements of the moment. Money and its worth is based on a societal system that is disconnected from the two. Security, for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in their environment, purpose and direction is the greatest value held by the duo.

On the other hand, the Tragedians' theatrical performances are motivated by financial gain, but through losing money by "betting on certainties" (90), the actors are perpetually destitute. For the Player, this lack of monetary funds prompts him to barter with the young Tragedian, Alfred, as a means of settling a debt with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. While on the boat to England in Act 3, the Player also comments on the fact that their performance angered King Claudius, and the Tragedians' hasty departure from the castle prevented them from getting paid (115). This character detail of the Tragedians' - as penniless vagabonds, living hand-to-mouth - uses the stereotype of theatre folk living outside the boundaries of normal society.

From a semiotic perspective, Stoppard's use of the coin can also be interpreted as a connecting image to *Hamlet* as a source for the play. The sign of the coin, of two sides connected by a common element, is a metaphor for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Stoppard has connected to the world of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The two plays share characters, plot lines, and resolutions, but Stoppard's story is told from an entirely

different point of view. It is as if the playwright has flipped the coin of *Hamlet* over and shown this world from the other side.

Dialogue

The play's mixing of speech, contemporary and Shakespearean, is used by Stoppard to link his play to the pre-existing world of *Hamlet*. Intertextuality— a new play based upon, or using a pre-existing text— is a technique that follows the postmodern approach to borrowing from the old to create something new. The contrast of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's speech patterns, which contain one-liners and non-sequiturs, and the blank verse of Shakespeare further enhance their roles as outsiders in this world (Gabbard 27).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's ability to speak the language of Shakespeare also brings attention to the nature of role-playing. The duo interacts with the royal family of Elsinore, and assumes the roles of courtiers with no hesitation or recognition that there is a difference in their language or persona. This character trait would suggest that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's concepts of self and identity are flexible and unconscious. They have the ability to adapt to the given circumstances of Elsinore. The emotional conflict that follows the duo's encounter with the royal court is not a result of a difference in language; rather, the new setting generates new questions for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to answer.

Words are the only perceived power Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have in this world. As Guildenstern says in Elsinore: "Words, words. They're all we have to go on" (41). This control, however, is limited because of the character's inability to grasp the

deeper meanings offered. For all of their verbal dexterity, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's debates provide little advancement or lasting security for the two.

As Stoppard's agent of the world of make-believe within the play, the Player uses language as a metaphor for theatre. He gives voice to the nature of plot structure within tragedy and its predictable outcome, "Decides? It is written!" (63) and pre-existing expectations and perception, "Audiences know what to expect, and that is all they are prepared to believe in," (66) to drive home the illusory nature of the world he inhabits. The Player's lines, "Don't you see?! We're actors—we're the opposite of people!" (49) are the perfect summation of his job as one who lies for a living. False characters and scenes are used by the Player and Tragedians as a method of expressing deeper meanings. Stoppard's use of the Tragedians' dumbshow within the play also brings into focus the limitations of verbal communication. For all of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's desire to gain insight through words, the greatest moment of clarity offered to the two is presented in pantomime. The Player's explanation of the dumbshow as a useful device is, "it makes the action that follows more or less comprehensible; you understand, we are tied down to a language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style" (61). Then, in near silence, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are shown the story of *Hamlet*, including their own deaths in England. This moment in Act 2 shows the playwright's postmodern use of metatheatres to deliver dramatic irony.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's dependency upon language, coupled with their incomprehension of the deeper meaning behind the Tragedians' performance, leaves the duo oblivious to the truth. They are shown their own deaths in the dumbshow, but because the truth is presented as "theatre," Rosencrantz and Guildenstern devalue the

message. When the Player asks what the two thought of the dumbshow, Guildenstern immediately responds, “What were we supposed to think?” (63). Along with Stoppard’s focus on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s failure to understand a deeper truth, he is also commenting on the passive mental state of the audience. A dependent individual always looks to an outside authority to explain meaning. This is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s flawed approach to understanding through communication.

Stoppard also uses dialogue in the play as a means of contrasting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s theatrical world with the natural world. Throughout the play, both characters speak of nature—the seasons, the sun (both rising and setting), leaves changing colors, animals, smoke, baked earth, night, the ocean’s current, and the wind. The playwright is using nature as a model of order amid chaos. Within the structure of the human world, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern use intellect, logic, and questions and answers as means of comprehending purpose and direction. The two never find comfort or substance through logical methods, however. The natural world, a world of harmony and balance, is a separate entity from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s existence. Stoppard ironically uses nature as a way to comment on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s limitations in using scientific methods. The duo acknowledges nature but do not fully comprehend its meanings contained within.

Stoppard also uses the absurdist-influenced, postmodern technique of broken narrative to highlight the chaotic content of the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s mental states are revealed through disjointed dialogue. In the aftermath of meeting the King and Queen in Act 1, Rosencrantz blurts out, “over my step over my head body! I tell you it’s all stopping to a death” (29). Guildenstern experiences this verbal breakdown

after the pirate attack in Act 3, “the pirates left us home and high-dry and home-drome” (93). Language is destabilized to the point of collapse in these moments and quickly shows how the security of communication between the two characters can be shattered.

Dramatic Structure

Stoppard begins the play in a place without form or character—a sort of theatrical limbo. After twenty-six pages of dialogue, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are magically transported into Hamlet’s world of Elsinore. The playwright uses this structural device of jolting the title characters from one setting to another, as a means of revealing deeper truths. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern desire, not only mental security, but also physical security. The duo is transported from one setting to another, without warning, and as a result, internal and external equilibrium is never found by the two. This convoluted action, within the scenes and transitions between settings, is used by the playwright as to emphasize Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s continual state of uncertainty.

In the Act 1 transition between settings, Stoppard uses the coin as a symbol, a harbinger of change for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Prior to their inexplicable transport from the Road to Elsinore castle in Act 1, Rosencrantz picks up a flipped coin from the stage and discovers that it has come up tails (34). The expectation held by the duo of the coin turning up heads is now shattered. Their movement to a new environment in a matter of seconds adds even more uncertainty to the two’s list of concerns. This transitional moment indicates that change in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s world can occur with the flip of a coin, but the imbalanced nature of heads or tails destroys any hope for consistency (Fleming 55). The sign of the coin has been altered and with the change, brings a new level of meaning to this simple object.

In terms of action, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's lives are in a continual state of flux. Their stasis on the Road in Act 1 is shattered by their sudden appearance at Elsinore castle. Any hope of security within the castle is lost once the two leave with Hamlet for England. And once they are on the boat, both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern call into question the actual certainty of England's existence: "Just a conspiracy of cartographers" (84). Stoppard establishes this cycle of insecurity within the duo and uses outside circumstances of change to draw attention to their reactive postures.

Stoppard also uses the absurdist device of characters waiting to accentuate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's divided mental states. The two characters desire answers throughout the play, and yet take no substantial action to find any. There is no philosophical advancement for the two, as Guildenstern comments, "What a fine persecution—to be kept intrigued without ever being enlightened" (32). Much like Beckett's characters in *Godot*, the two characters wait passively on the road, in the castle, and on the boat for someone or something to appear and direct them in the next step of their journey.

Each major shift in dramatic action for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is preceded by a revelation of truth. The certainty of the coin flip turning up heads is destroyed by Rosencrantz's discovery of tails. In Elsinore Castle, Claudius's understanding of the deeper message contained within the Tragedians' dumbshow during Act 2, motivates the King to send Hamlet, along with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to England. The duo's discovery of the two letters on the boat and the Player's staged death near the end of Act 3 expose Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's perceptions of reality as only illusions.

Nothing in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's world is what it seems and the breaking of those perceptions propels the two characters forward into greater uncertainty.

The two letters in Act 3 reinforce this illusory state of being for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and motivate their attempt to find outside direction for their lives. Charged by Claudius to escort Hamlet to England, the duo is given a letter of introduction by the King. As Guildenstern states with certainty, "Everything is explained in the letter. We count on that" (81). When the letter is opened and read by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the true nature of their voyage is revealed; once in England, Hamlet is to be executed. Despite the initial misgivings, Guildenstern reasons away Hamlet's impending death: "We are little men, we don't know the ins and outs of the matter...it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate or even of kings" (86). This letter and the crucial moral decision it presents suggest Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's dependency on others for their knowledge of the world (Fleming 58). This inaction, which is fueled by dependency, occurs again when Hamlet replaces the original letter with a forged copy; this time the letter calls for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

After Hamlet disappears from the boat, following the pirate attack, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are in a state of panic. Trying to decide what their next move should be, they again look to the letter for guidance. The reading of their own death warrant shatters any hope of deeper purpose for the two:

ROS: They had it in for us, didn't they? Right from the very beginning. Who'd have thought that we were so important?

GUIL: But why? Was it all for this? Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths? (*In anguish to the Player*) Who are we? (95).

As innocent victims of forces beyond their control (Hunter 199), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spend their final minutes onstage desperately trying to comprehend their fates. In his last lines of dialogue, Guildenstern experiences a moment of clarity: “There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said–no. But somehow we missed it” (98). The duo’s habit of depending on an outside authority for direction proves to be crippling at the beginning of their journey and fatal at the end.

The well-worn melodramatic theatre device of the letter, of revelatory information that characters use as empowerment, is also used by Stoppard as a postmodern tool of dramatic irony. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s hopes of a positive direction are shattered by their reading of the first letter. Once they resign themselves to accepting Hamlet’s impending death, some semblance of structure is re-established for the two. This structure for the duo is broken as a result of the second Hamlet-forged letter. After the disappearance of Hamlet, the duo re-reads the letter, in hopes of re-connecting with some semblance of purpose. The simple piece of paper turns from perceived security to an actual death sentence for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This double reversal of the letter by Stoppard, the perversion of this sign for his characters, drives home the playwright’s intent of creating a world in which nothing is as it seems.

This continual search by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for meaning in their world raises the question—what is their purpose? Providing a definitive answer to this question is what motivated my decision to place an additional scene at the play’s end.

Character Analysis

Guildenstern

Of the two title characters, Guildenstern takes the position of an active seeker of truth. While Rosencrantz is content to accept circumstances, it is Guildenstern who aggressively questions. Starting with the coin flip, the indefinable nature of the coin turning up heads begins a litany of approaches from Guildenstern to explain this phenomenon; probability, natural forces, un, sub, or supernatural forces and even faith are called into question. Stoppard gives Guildenstern a variety of intellectual tools, such as the Socratic method, along with syllogistic and scientific approaches to discerning truth. Guildenstern's scattershot method of inquiry along with the shared trait of little substantial experience keeps him in the same state of uncertainty as Rosencrantz. With Stoppard's emphasis on the variety of methodology Guildenstern uses to explain the world around him, it is possible to detect an underlying commentary through dramatic irony from the playwright. Guildenstern clearly is learned (we know he attended university with Hamlet), but the character's failings suggest that book knowledge is not enough to live life. Stoppard's characterization of Guildenstern fits the old axiom, "book smart, but worldly dumb."

Through his postmodern approach to the play, Stoppard has created character types devoid of dimension, rather than fully realized figures. For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the shallowness of their existence is typified by their limited knowledge of a past. In an effort to find a reference point for their current state, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pause for a moment in Act 1 to reflect on their beginning:

GUIL: Do you remember the first thing that happened today?

ROS: I woke up, I suppose. Oh– I’ve got it now– that man, a foreigner, he woke us up–

GUIL: A messenger.

ROS: That’s it –pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters– shouts– What’s all this row about?! Clear off! – But then he called our names. You remember that– this man woke us up.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: We were sent for.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: That’s why we’re here. Traveling (13-14).

This is the extent of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s past. Any connection to the character of Hamlet or their time as schoolmates in Germany is left up to the audience’s knowledge of Shakespeare’s play. Claudius, in his opening remarks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (addressing them incorrectly with the other’s name) mentions the duo’s shared history with his nephew/step-son “as being of so young days brought up with him” (27). That is all the history of these characters that Stoppard gives us. Hamlet greets his schoolmates with great affection, but then calls them by the wrong names. As John Bennett states, “They (Rosencrantz & Guildenstern) are in touch with no past, and so they can neither construe the present nor direct themselves purposefully towards the future” (Qtd. in Brassell 48). The past for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is fragmented at best, and at worst, it is a lie. Stoppard has intentionally excluded a back-story for the two characters to further enhance their isolation and constant state of uncertainty.

Dependent on outward direction as well, Guildenstern looks for a sign for guidance. Piecing together their journey’s beginning, he speaks to their state of uncertainty: “We have not been... picked out... simply to be abandoned... set loose to find our way. We are entitled to some direction” (14). But being picked out simply to be abandoned is precisely what has happened to the two characters. With no experience, no past history and almost no help in the present, they are set loose to find their own way.

The search for a sign becomes a focus for Guildenstern. A story of a mystical encounter with a unicorn in Act 1 illustrates Guildenstern's need for outer guidance, a character pattern that will continue throughout the play. With the arrival of the Tragedians, Guildenstern's hope for a clear sign from the newcomers is destroyed by the Player's offer to perform *The Rape of the Sabine Women*.

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...(20).

For Guildenstern, the thought of being lost, physically and philosophically, is his greatest source of anxiety. Yet, despite setbacks, the character remains vigilant in his pursuit of answers.

Unlike Rosencrantz's use of games as a distraction, the question game in Act 1 becomes a comforting method for Guildenstern to understand their situation. The flaw in the question game, as a means of creating security, is that it produces only questions and no answers for the duo. Time and again, Guildenstern realizes the shallowness of his and Rosencrantz's existence: "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 the presumption that once our eyes watered" (47). Guildenstern understands that he does not understand. This trait of self-awareness is one of the defining factors that separates him from Rosencrantz's passive approach to epistemology.

Guildenstern's last moment before disappearing offers insight into his self-awareness: "There must have been a moment at the beginning, where we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it" (98). As a character who subscribes to the notion

of fate, “there are wheels within wheels, etcetera—it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate” (86), Guildenstern breaks free of that idea to entertain the possibility of self-determination.

Stoppard’s return to the device of the characters confusing each other’s names during this last moment in Act 3 illustrates Guildenstern’s need for assurance. Guildenstern calls out to Rosencrantz and after getting no response, he calls his own name out and receives no reply (125). As a figure perpetually looking for certainty in life, this last moment for Guildenstern proves that even a connection to a name can be severed.

Stoppard’s postmodern mixing of theatre styles in Act 2 offers a comical illustration of how Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are perpetually off balance. Commanded by the King to find Hamlet and the body of Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern devise a trap for the prince. Seeing Hamlet approaching, the two join their belts in hopes of ensnaring the Dane. While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern stand at the ready on one side of the stage, Hamlet, dragging the dead Polonius, crosses the stage from the opposite side. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize their mistake, their trousers slowly slide down to their ankles (89). This is a moment of truth for the two. Hidden within the broad, lowbrow humor of characters standing in their underwear, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s deficiencies are clearly shown. They seek outside direction as their primary motivation. Any attempt by the duo to formulate a plan of independent action quickly disintegrates into an exercise in humiliation. Guildenstern’s line, “We’ve had no practice” (32) applies to this moment as the cause of this poorly thought-out plan of attack. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no lasting connection to

past experiences and with no tangible foundation in which to base decisions, any action taken by the two is doomed to fail from the start. Knowledge holds no essence for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Fleming 58). They are essentially children, exposed to the world and left to fend for themselves with no concrete experiences on which to draw.

Rosencrantz

Passive in behavior and content to sit by the side of the road flipping coins, Rosencrantz provides the counter-balance to Guildenstern's aggressive approach to their world. It is only through his partner's prodding that Rosencrantz reconnects to their only known past, an episode from that morning. The motivation that Rosencrantz generates by piecing together memories, the royal summons, and his and Guildenstern's journey, is quickly halted by the Tragedians' music. This trait of stop-and-start movements, both physical and mental, is consistently shown by Rosencrantz throughout the play. Rosencrantz abandons moments of contemplation for amusing distraction, as typified by the coin flip and the sleight-of-hand game in all three acts. For Rosencrantz, there is security in the familiar: "Consistency is all I ask!" (30), he says at one point, and the coin becomes a symbol of that safety. The coin is an outlet for Rosencrantz, an escape from dwelling too long on the uncertainty of the moment (Gabbard 30). Stoppard also uses the device of the coin to highlight the character's estrangement from past experiences. Once at Elsinore Castle, Rosencrantz takes out a coin, spins it, catches it, looks at it, and put the coin back in his pouch:

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 (47).

Another example of this character's difficulty with short and long-term memory is Rosencrantz's first attempt at the coin guessing game in Act 2. He puts a coin in his palm, puts both hands behind his back, makes a motion and then brings both closed fists around for Guildenstern's inspection. Guildenstern picks one. Rosencrantz opens his hand to reveal it is empty. Rosencrantz then opens his second hand to find that it is empty as well. He stares at the empty hand in astonishment (61). Here is a character whose grip on the past is so slight, that he cannot remember from a minute ago where he placed a coin.

While Rosencrantz confesses to having little original thought and being "only good in support" (81), he is capable of deep contemplation. While in Elsinore castle, Rosencrantz has a lengthy monologue examining the nature of death. True to form, the closer Rosencrantz gets to true insight, the more uncomfortable he becomes. The character then turns to the distraction of telling jokes. During this slight moment of clarity, Rosencrantz offers this revelation in the monologue: "We must be born with an intuition for mortality. Before we know the words for it, before we know there are words, out we come bloody and squalling with the knowledge that for all the compasses in the world, there is only one direction and time is its only measure" (56). Rosencrantz clearly comprehends mortality in passage of dialogue. Only during this moment in Act 2 and in his final lines on the boat, however, does the character choose to embrace the truth rather than ignore it.

A trait Rosencrantz shares with Guildenstern is a dependency on outside guidance. He is continually looking for obvious signs to give him substance and direction. His encounters with the Tragedians, the Player, and the Royal Family of Elsinore offer no help. Rosencrantz's childlike nature places him at the mercy of outside elements and authorities, the majority of which do not have his best interest at heart. He has no concrete tools for survival; he is ill equipped to face the moment-by-moment challenges that an independent agent needs to have. Guildenstern's line, "We've had no practice," (32) is the simplest explanation for this habitual dependency.

Rosencrantz's childlike innocence returns during his last moments before disappearing: "We've done nothing wrong. We didn't harm anyone did we?" (97). For Rosencrantz, the thought of wronging another person seems to be the concern. At the end, Rosencrantz is the innocent bystander, incapable of malice. Rosencrantz's realization that he is a victim of circumstance is what brings poignancy to his last moment before disappearing.

The Player

Through the character of the Player, Tom Stoppard has created a theatrical device to give voice to the natures of truth and illusion. By researching the script, it is clear that the Player understands the world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This performance has happened before and will happen again. This knowledge places the Player in a unique position of commentator and potential guide for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He offers advice to the two in dealing with the uncertainty of their situation: "Relax, respond, that's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn" (51). Always in character and always onstage, the Player's central purpose is to be there

in every significant moment of change. During the performance on the road, it is his coin flip that actually transports Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Elsinore. Once there, it is the Player's and Tragedians' performance of the "Murder of Gonzago" for the royal court that motivates the King to send Hamlet to England. On the boat, it is the Player's false death that sparks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's final understanding of their roles. The Player takes great delight in having the answers. His is a position of power and he feels obliged to give only cryptic clues to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern concerning their end, such as, "Over your dead body" (63).

Even the most blatant clue to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's fate, the dumbshow, is performed with great irony. "Are you familiar with this play?", the Player asks the duo (65). The Player tells truth through lies. He explains his purpose of the performance in this way: "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" (65-66). This is exactly what happens at the end of the play. His staged death at the hands of Guildenstern provides a moment of clarity within this world of false identities and make believe. Guildenstern's realization that the "murder" was staged illustrates the world of illusion in which he lives. Keeping with Stoppard's postmodern sense of ambiguity, the Player reveals nothing definitive in terms of predestination versus free will. The actor needs lines, but he is also free to improvise as he goes.

What is real and what is not, the Player suggests, "has to be taken on trust. Truth is only that which is taken to be true" (52). The Player seems to be little concerned with whether or not Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accept his advice. It is offered and the duo

has the freedom of choice to accept or reject it. There is a great deal of irony in the fact that the playwright uses the professional liar in the play to tell the greatest truth, which has been a device in theatre since the time of Aristotle.

The idea of truth and its subjective nature is another recurring idea in the play. While it is never directly spoken, the line that Hamlet has in Shakespeare's text of "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so," (78) is essentially echoed by the Player in Act 3: "truth is only that which is taken to be true. It's the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn't make any difference so long as it is honored" (52). Stoppard uses the postmodern technique of subverting the status quo as a means of questioning truth. Those in positions of power—Hamlet, Claudius, and Gertrude—all manipulate Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for their own gain with no regard for the two's personal interest or well being. That being said, it should be noted that the Player's ambiguity is without malice. He has no interest in manipulation, in misusing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. His interest in the two stems from observing how they develop as human beings in this world from the perspective of a teacher and a guide.

The Player takes up the symbol of the coin as a means of explaining his and the Tragedians' place in this world: "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 two coins" (17). If the semiotic standard of, "All that is on the stage is a sign" (Veltrusky 84) is correct, then the Player's comment has more significance than a clever turn of a phrase. The Player understands his place in the story (this world) and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's roles in the play as well. Through Stoppard's Player, the

voice of understanding and experience, much of the play's ironic subtext is voiced. But for all of the Player's dialogue offering advice and insight to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern throughout the play, it is the silent dumbshow that provides the greatest source of dramatic irony. The Player is nothing if not ambiguous and every bit of his dialogue is dripping with dramatic irony, which leads to the conclusion that he knows the story and each character's place within it.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's distrust of the devices of mask and costume influences their perceptions of the dumbshow in Act 2. Although the Player and Tragedians truthfully show Rosencrantz and Guildenstern their deaths, because the message is contained within the context of a "performance," the insight offered is lost. This mistrust of the Player and Tragedians and their world of illusion ultimately motivates Guildenstern to commit homicide in Act 3. Repulsed by the Player's simple explanation of death, Guildenstern grabs a knife from the Player and plunges it into the actor's throat. The Player falls to the floor gasping, and with a death rattle, he lies still. After a dramatic pause, the Player leaps to his feet. Taking the knife from a stunned Guildenstern, the Player demonstrates the trick blade sliding into its handle (124). For the Player and Tragedians, life (and death) is performance and the play is ongoing.

Tragedians

As the designated "actors" in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, the Tragedians along with the Player communicate several themes within the play: the concept of home, the nature of identity, the roles of spectator, and performer, and the conflict between illusion and truth.

The Tragedians are characters without roots in this world, a fact Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover in their meeting in Act 1:

GUIL: Where are you going?

PLAYER: Home, sir.

GUIL: Where from?

PLAYER: Home. We're traveling people. We take our chances where we find them. (18-19)

This attitude held by the Tragedians, that life is always in a state of flux, contrasts with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's preoccupation with the idea of home. For the two, home is a reference point, a connection to a past. To be without that reference is to live with insecurity. For the traveling performers, transition is a necessary part of their occupation. This is a point made by the Player: "We have no control. Tonight we play to the court. Or the night after. Or to the tavern. Or not" (19). The Tragedians adapt to their surroundings. As "actors," the characters only require a place to perform (be it roadside, castle, or boat) and an audience to appreciate their talents. All other concerns are superfluous.

Their talent for adaptation also benefits the Tragedians in their performances as multiple characters. With the donning of a new costume and mask, the actor is able to assume a new identity and play a role appropriate to the current story line onstage. This idea of the malleable nature of identity is embodied onstage through Alfred, a boy in the acting troupe who portrays women in the dumbshow. In Elsinore, Rosencrantz accosts the young Tragedian, who is costumed in a long dress, wig, and mask. Sexual attraction to the figure onstage quickly becomes embarrassment for Rosencrantz once Alfred lifts the mask and shows his true self (75). This encounter illustrates how quickly assumptions of identity can be formed from superficial items (a dress, mask and wig) and

how with equal speed, the identity can be removed. What was perceived as a truth by Rosencrantz is replaced with disillusionment once the facade is lifted. Stoppard's use of the "actor" exposes the fallacy of assumptions based upon superficial appearances.

Hamlet

Hamlet is without depth or dimension. Stoppard purposefully keeps the character flat, and uses the Theatre of the Absurd device of creating a type, rather than a fully rounded figure on stage. The playwright uses Shakespeare's language only to give Hamlet voice in his interactions with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The notion of whether his madness is real or not is left up to the audience to discern. Is it real or is it an act? Stoppard does not seem to be concerned and lets Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the audience decide. The playwright's decision to give Hamlet only Shakespeare's words renders the character mute when they leave Elsinore Castle and places him outside the bounds of Shakespeare's script. On the boat to England, Hamlet has nothing to say, and yet much to do.

In comparison, Hamlet is more active as far as doing things that affect his world than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He kills Polonius; he switches the letters; he leaves with the pirates; and he returns to Denmark. The irony here is that his fate is the same as his schoolmates. The playwright (as critic) may be continuing the theme of higher education as offering little help in the ability to cope with life.

Hamlet is placed on the periphery of the play, and is far from the central character. For instance, Stoppard's staging of the "To be or not to be" speech is overshadowed by Rosencrantz's concern over approaching the prince. Just as Rosencrantz and

Guildestern are marginal characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Stoppard keeps the prince on the sidelines of his play.

Elsinore's Royal Court— Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius and Ophelia

Stoppard presents all the members of the royal court as types as well. They speak Shakespeare's lines, make commandments and exit the stage, and leave a confused Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in their wake. They represent authority with their own agenda and have little concern for the duo other than how they can serve their own needs. In the dress rehearsal for the dumbshow at Elsinore castle, Stoppard uses the false nature of the dumbshow to give more depth and clarity to Hamlet's world (to both Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and the audience) than the actual characters provide. Once again, the playwright is using meta-theatre as a device to give insight to characters. And again, the ironic nature of the playwright keeps the insight gained by the characters to only producing greater anxiety, rather than a positive resolution.

Final Image of the Play

Prior to the 1967 London premier of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, Stoppard wrote several different endings to the play. One of the alternate endings, published in the first edition of the script in 1967, puts the world of the play and its possible meaning in a clearer context than its current conclusion. Contrasting this final scene with the more familiar Samuel French script, the difference is clear.

The stage is set for the concluding tableau at Elsinore castle:

FORTINBRAS: Let four captains
 bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage:
 for he was likely, had he put on,
 to be proved most royally: and for his passage,

the soldiers' music and rite of war
 speak loudly for him,
 Take up the bodies: such a sight as this
 becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
 Go, bid the soldiers shoot.
*(The Bodies are picked up: a peal of ordnance is shoot off. A
 dead march begins and continues until the stage is empty except
 for the two Ambassadors.)*
(Pause. They move downstage. They stop.)

AMBASSADOR: Hm...

2nd AMB: Yes?

1st AMB: What?

2nd AMB: I thought you-

1st AMB: No.

2nd AMB: Ah.

(Pause)

1st AMB: Tsk tsk...

2nd AMB: Quite.

1st AMB: Shocking business.

2nd AMB: Tragic...*(he looks in the direction of the departing corpses)*
 ...four-just like that.

1st AMB: Six in all.

2nd AMB: Seven.

1st AMB: No-six.

2nd AMB: The King, the Queen, Hamlet, Laertes, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern,
 and Polonius. Seven.

1st AMB: Ophelia. Eight.

2nd AMB: King, Queen, Hamlet, Laertes, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern,
 Polonius, Ophelia. Eight.

(They nod and shake their heads.)

(Looks about.) Well...One hardly knows what to...

*(From outside there is shouting and banging, a Man, say, banging his fist
 on a wooden door and shouting, obscurely, two names.)*

(The Ambassadors look at each other.)

1st AMB: Better go and see what it's all about...

(The other nods.)

*(They walk off together. The Tragedians' tune becomes
 audible-far away.)*

*(The house lights come up until they are as bright as the lights on the
 empty stage.)* (Brassell 270-71).

Through the specific sign of a man shouting the two names offstage and the banging of the door (alluding to the duo's Act 1 recollection of their journey's beginning) there is no doubt that Stoppard has begun Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's journey again. The

playwright's inclusion of the Tragedians' theme in the scene's last moments also confirms this cyclic pattern; the "performance" is about to begin and the "actors" are returning to their starting positions. Further research of the play's alternate endings revealed that Stoppard had another version for the National Theatre, where he actually intended the actors playing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be "recast" as the Ambassadors (Fleming 265). No definitive reason has been given as to why Stoppard cut this moment and the character of the second Ambassador.

There are a few possible theories that might explain the scene's replacement. First, the alternate endings were not ambiguous enough. Stoppard continually side-steps any definitive answers of purpose and meaning within the play. With Rosencrantz and Guildenstern returning to the castle after disappearing from the boat, the audience would surely recognize that these events have happened before and will happen again. Much like the trajectory of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), this would mean that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's story would remain locked into the single outcome of their deaths because Shakespeare had originally written it that way. As quoted in Chapter 1, Stoppard himself has refuted the notion that Shakespeare is placed as God within his play. While the playwright offers both sides of the predestination/free-will argument in the course of the story, he remains neutral in order for the audience to find its own meaning.

A second possibility behind the scene's deletion involves the technical issues of the offstage voice. Depending on its proximity to the audience, the exact meaning behind the obscurely shouted names could have been lost to the audience. This understanding by the audience would have also depended upon their specific recollection of the event, the

early-morning awakening of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by the King's messenger. Compounding the possible confusion for the audience would have been the choice to cast different actors as the Ambassadors from England, rather than the actors playing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The audience could have interpreted this choice as somehow signifying the Ambassadors would now assume the roles of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for the next performance. Stoppard renders all this potential confusion moot by ending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's time onstage with a brief moment between the two alone on the boat. They disappear from the stage, and Elsinore Castle becomes the setting for the lone Ambassador's news from England. Horatio's speech taken from *Hamlet*, "of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts, [...] all this can I truly deliver" (99) becomes the play's summation.

While I do desire the active involvement of audience members in finding their own personal meaning within the theatre experience, I wanted an emotionally satisfying, final image for the play. If Stoppard had solely adhered to the rules of the Theatre of the Absurd, a bleak ending for the play would have been appropriate. However, nothing would have been learned by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. A cold, impersonal universe would have swallowed up these two little men and the emptiness of their experience would have been transferred to the audience. But the playwright does not place his work neatly into that single, absurdist theatrical box. By remaining a philosophical free agent, Stoppard leaves open the play's possibilities of hope and redemption for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

The final image of the play, based on my analysis of the script and Stoppard's own original ending, led me to alter the play's structure and to provide a much more

positive conclusion: Horatio exits the stage with the Ambassador. The stage has returned to the original picture that began Act 1. Just as before, the sound of the wind returns, as does the glow from the cracked earth, while the swirling overhead light pattern recreates the play's opening. From the downstage right vomitory (vom), Guildenstern appears and is joined onstage by Rosencrantz, who enters from the downstage left vom. They recognize each other and take their starting positions once again to begin the coin flip. Guildenstern flips the first coin. Rosencrantz calls heads and catches the coin. He looks at it and smiles at Guildenstern. The stage goes dark.

For our audience at Baylor University in November of 2006, a time of fear and uncertainty for the future on both a national and global scale, this glimmer of hope in the last moments of the play seemed appropriate. With respect to the lasting influence a play's final image has on audience's perceptions of the overall experience, this last moment was vital. Despite the fact that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead and the royal family of Elsinore has become victims of deceit, this uplifting moment at the end keeps the play's spirit of comedy and hope alive.

Conclusion

The journey of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is a search for purpose and meaning in life. Self-professed "little men," (86) the two figures are lost in a sea of conflicting philosophies. Inaction, powered by a dependency on outside authority, proves to be their greatest character flaw. Stoppard's qualified use of absurdist, metatheatre, and postmodern techniques—intertextuality, the mixing of language, signs offered through physical and verbal cues, and multiple theories concerning existence, all channeled through the perspective of humor—offers moving and challenging theatre. The following

chapters will explore how these challenges were met during the collaborative processes of design, rehearsal, and performance of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*.

CHAPTER THREE

The Director/Designer Collaboration

Introduction

This chapter will explore the collaborative process between director and designers for the production of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Sections of this chapter describe work undertaken in the development of scenery, costumes, hair and make-up, lighting, sound, choreography and properties for the production. Each design element within the play is analyzed in detail, with focus given as to how the element began as an idea and how the idea evolved through the director/designer collaborative process. The influences of postmodernism and semiotics within the designs will also be addressed. Lastly, each section concludes with attention towards the design's realization and how the idea was put in action onstage during performance. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was a unique production in the sense that it shared both scenery and costume designs with Baylor University Theatre's production of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* during the 2006-2007 season. With *Hamlet*'s set and costumes already constructed as the fall semester's first production, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* became a production with inherited design parameters.

Scenery

With two plays sharing the same set, one of the first questions to emerge during the design process was, "What is the most simple and effective way to present the worlds of *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*?" In the first design meeting for

Hamlet in April of 2006, the *Hamlet's* director chose very traditional images as a starting place to communicate his ideas with the designer. Castles, stone walls, vaulted ceilings and columns were all touched upon as devices to convey the environment. From there, the designer looked at the actual Elsinore Castle in Denmark for inspiration and began to toy with the idea of combining natural materials, such as stone, with manmade metal. He intended to show an underlying conflict (man carving out a place in the natural world) within the environment of the play. Arches were considered by the designer in order to represent the epic scale of a castle. During the next design meeting, several alternatives to the look of a traditional castle were presented by the designer. A sculptural piece from Sweden, a huge figure of a crouching man holding a blade, was introduced as an image that combined the motif of natural and manmade elements—metal erupting from stone. The sculpture of stone and metal conveyed a mood of the violent clash between nature and man, but its massive size and placement on the stage proved to be limiting in production. The other design alternative, and what became the set for *Hamlet*, was from another sculpture, located in Norway, which featured three giant broadswords. Placed at the edge of a lake, the three swords represented a monument to Norway's warring history. The three swords, the tallest standing at forty feet on a four-foot wide base, were placed in the rock as if a giant had thrust them into the stone. Once the director for *Hamlet* saw the images, he quickly decided that this would be his set. My scenic requirements for Stoppard's play were simplicity and flexibility of space to accommodate five different locations. Consequently, this open and epic design of the three swords offered a powerful solution to the needs of the play. This decision for the

look of *Hamlet's* world then led to the question of how *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* could be scenically different within the boundaries of a single set.

Because the productions of *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* were designed as a single scenic and costume project, I attended all of the design meetings for *Hamlet* from April to the opening of each show. My adviser believed my participation in the meetings would keep the scenery and costume designers actively involved in the collaborative process and keep the designs for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* at the forefront of their decisions. During the first meeting in April, I made two comments to the designers about my play. In *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, Stoppard establishes the familiar world and characters of *Hamlet* but he clearly does not root the play in reality. To illustrate my point that Stoppard manipulates perceptions, I presented the work of postmodern graphic artist MC Escher (1898-1972). Escher had the uncanny ability to draw the simplest, everyday objects (stairs, waterfalls, tabletops) and then turn these things in the most logic defying and gravity bending ways. Stairs would loop back on themselves, waterfalls flowed uphill and tabletops would extend outward to support an entire street. This is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's* world—an environment based upon the “real world” of *Hamlet* but skewed to the point of becoming another reality.

The second comment I made was in reference to the fact that Stoppard's play is a comedy. This was the flip side of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—a world seen through the eyes of two outsiders whose main goal is to make sense of an absurd situation. The scenery designer took the flip side idea quite literally and designed the three swords so their hilts could be removed and replaced with the tips. This created a connecting, physical force

between the two plays: swords that were shoved into the ground for *Hamlet* had broken through the other side and were now piercing the world of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. For my production, the theme of small men overshadowed, manipulated, and eventually killed by epic, outside forces, was quite literally embodied on stage.

Although the designer never verbalized any particular theme, I was amazed to see multiple meanings emerge from these three huge blades onstage as the play's story progressed. At various times the swords represented the remnants of a race of giants, the columns of Elsinor Castle, tombstones during Rosencrantz's Act 2 debate over the pros and cons of being dead in a box, and a ship's masts for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's voyage to England. Finally, during the duo's last moments onstage, the swords symbolized a violent, connecting force to another world beyond their own. The message contained within this final image is that life in this world for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is experienced on the edge of a blade.

As part of the original *Hamlet* design, the stage floor was painted in a Viking rune-stone pattern, which symbolized a snake eating its own tail. The interconnected design (painted red) created a twisted circle that covered the playing area and could be interpreted as another metaphor for Stoppard's play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on a journey, a connected cycle that once ended leads the two characters back to the story's beginning. For *Hamlet*, the scenic designer had also incorporated the use of what he called "cracked earth," surrounding the three swords upstage. A trapdoor was added as well in the downstage left area to be used for "Ophelia's grave." Since these scenic features could not be changed or struck for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, I had to incorporate the two elements into the production.

The “cracked earth” element in the design was achieved with iron grid work placed into the floor of the upstage area surrounding the swords. Cut pieces of masonite fiberboard were placed on top of the grid work, which allowed lighting elements to be positioned in the basement under the stage. The lights directed upwards created unique patterns that helped to create an otherworldly quality of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s environment.

I was able to find two different uses in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* for the trapdoor known as “Ophelia’s grave.” First, it became an entrance for the Tragedians’ barrels in Act 3. And since the final act of the play is set in part on a boat to England, I needed a simple and quick way to bring the eight member acting troupe onstage (according to Stoppard’s stage directions) through three large, man-sized barrels. With access to the basement already available, a customized platform with three attached wooden whisky barrels, open on both ends, was rolled in place over the trap. The platform, once locked into place and with ladders attached to span the distance between basement and stage, became the perfect way to implement a funny sight gag within the play.

It was purely by accident that I found a second use for the trap. After the final dumbshow by the Tragedians in Act 3, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern contemplate the meaning of their journey one final time and then disappear from the stage. I had originally thought that the actors playing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would be isolated in pools of light and in a timed blackout exit stage right and into the vomitories. But, after seeing the barrel platform removed to expose the size and shape of a grave in the stage, the best exit for the two became apparent. Believing that Rosencrantz and

Guildestern are already dead and stuck in a repetition of missed opportunities and forgotten lessons when the play begins, I thought that having them vanish into the grave at the play's end was the ideal metaphor. After the two actors dramatically leapt into the light of the grave, the trap was closed to accommodate the final scene at Elsinore Castle, where the Ambassador from England and Horatio offer the play's final dialogue. I was very pleased that "Ophelia's grave" could be recycled in such a powerful and successful way.

The advantages and limitations of sharing a set with another play were, in my opinion, much more positive than negative. However, there was one exception. During the initial spring meetings with the scenic designer, once the set had been agreed upon, a scenic detail for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was offered. Along with the three swords becoming pointed in this world, the "cracked earth" element was to extend out and be built up around the blades to further emphasize the violent thrust of giant metal up through the soil. This unique design feature was never implemented. A week before the play opened, my adviser pointed out the absence of the extended "cracked earth" to me, and I quickly brought the discrepancy to the attention of the designer during a brief meeting. He told me that it was too late to add this detail due to the inability to match paint colors to the existing pieces of "cracked earth." To their credit, the scenic build crew for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was able to finish out the bases of the blades so that the division between the sword and stage was not as obvious. However, despite this improvised touch up, the blades had an incomplete look about them. It was unfortunate that the unique and powerful picture the designer had created onstage was crippled by one missing detail. While I appreciated the set, I can not help

but remember the one I was shown in the design meeting. The lesson I learned from this experience is that consistent participation and communication from all members of the collaborative team can determine whether a design is merely good or great.

Costumes

Along with the scenic design, the costumes for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* were recycled from the *Hamlet* production. I was satisfied with the costuming plot agreed upon for Shakespeare's tragedy but I did express my hope to the designer that there could be flexibility in sizing to accommodate different actors for Stoppard's play. I had desired freedom in casting and did not want the costumes to be a limiting factor in my casting choices. I also mentioned in the initial meeting that the obvious difference between the two plays was humor. I, quite naively, touched upon the thought of bright colors being added to the *Hamlet* costumes to "lighten" the tone for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. However, because of time or money, this idea fell by the wayside. The finished costumes for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* were almost unchanged outwardly from *Hamlet*, but fortunately this was not a detriment to the production. I found that the actors in my production were able to change the dynamic of the costumes. Along with a different hair and makeup design that certainly influenced the look of each character, the attitude of the actors somehow made the costumes humorous. This mental adjustment by the actors, along with a physical shift towards a humorous posture onstage, made the costumes look unique and appropriate without any outward change to the structure of the clothing. I thought it was very fortunate that the costume design for *Hamlet* used colors to define characters and connect relationships. Stoppard offers no time or dialogue to introduce characters; therefore, to have color,

silhouette, and even the type of cloth itself to represent character and connection with others was a useful means of communication to the audience.

I had made the decision before rehearsals began for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* to use the masks of *Hamlet* for the dumbshow scene Stoppard includes in the play. The overt theatricality of the masks appealed to me; through this simple device, an actor could become someone else. I thought the mask personified *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead's* themes of identity and the elusive nature of perception and truth. Because the masks in *Hamlet* were designed and constructed by the costume department, rather than a prop designer, the responsibility of building the new masks for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* became a costuming concern. The original three masks, fashioned of leather and held in front of the face with a stick, were altered slightly by adding an elastic band to secure it to the actor's head, allowing the actors' hands to be free. Six new masks were needed for the production. For Stoppard's play, the masks would be used during the Tragedian's dumbshow staged in three increments: "The Murder of Gonzago," Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's journey to England and their deaths, and the concluding duel at Elsinore. The addition of the masks proved to be the only major difficulty in my collaboration with the costume designer. One person was assigned to construct the masks and unfortunately they were not completed until one day before the play opened. It is to the actor's credit, however, that the late additions did not cause a ripple in their performance. The Tragedians adapted to the new props and used them to great effect.

Hair and Make-Up

I addressed a couple of issues about hair and make-up going into my initial meeting with the make-up designer, but it was gratifying to see that my designer had already anticipated the basic points I had planned to make. First, because this was a world that would be familiar to the audience but seen through the eyes of two outsiders, a certain amount of artistic license could be taken with the characters' looks. Everything seen on stage is essentially being filtered through the perspective of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Since this was an absurdist-influenced, postmodern comedy, the make-up did not have to follow a realistic approach. Secondly, Stoppard purposefully uses the element of theatricality consistently throughout the play. Consequently, the hair and make-up designs could embrace that theme. So, with my designer in agreement, it became very easy to discuss the individual look (hair and make up) for each of the characters. We decided during our first meeting that each group would have a selective look to define their positions in the world of the play. There would be three groups: the members of the royal court, the Tragedians, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The designer suggested that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have facial hair similar to Hamlet. They are college friends of Hamlet and the addition of a similar facial hair feature could connect these three characters. Perhaps a popular facial hair choice at school would be an interesting, very simple approach. I also agreed with the designer's idea that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's make-up would be the most natural of all the characters. They are the two most "real" figures in an illusory universe.

As the designer and I worked together over the next few weeks, we developed a kind of verbal shorthand. She would point to a single image or a single reference and be able

to explain succinctly the deeper meaning behind the design. An example of this effective communication is our discussion of the world of Elsinore. The icon that the designer proposed for Ophelia was Barbie, and in essence, Stoppard's Ophelia truly is a stereotypical Barbie doll. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern see her for a few short moments when they first arrive at the castle. Chased by Hamlet, she swoons, giggles, and postures until he (literally) drops her to pursue deeper thoughts. Any of the subsequent encounters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have with Ophelia are from a distance. From the duo's perspective she comes across as a silly, temperamental, over-dramatic girl. In light of this, the image of a longhaired, pretty doll was one that I felt worked for the character. Ophelia's appearance combined a long flowing gown with overdone make-up that emphasized her lips and eyes and long flowing blonde hair. In addition, the three female attendants of the royal court shared this look. With similar gowns already in place from costuming, make-up and hair further connected the young women of Elsinore. Wigs that extended almost to the actor's waist along with exaggerated facial features were the perfect combination of pretense and ridiculousness within this world.

For Queen Gertrude, the designer used images from the Walt Disney animated movie, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. The whole look of the character was striking and unique, with severe eyebrows, ivory skin, dramatic eyes and blood-red lips. I had never seen this particular look for Hamlet's mother and the bold design appealed to my desire to take departures from tradition.

From the beginning of rehearsals, I had intended to have several of the members of the royal court return as other characters at play's end. I wanted the three female attendants to come back in the third act as the Norwegian soldiers behind Prince

Fortinbras. I also wanted one of the male attendants to become Fortinbras and another male attendant to become the Ambassador from England. To accommodate these transformations, I expressed the need to have hair and makeup designs that could be changed quickly. The designer came up with admirable solutions to the challenge. For the attendants, wigs were removed and their own natural hair was braided to give them a warrior quality. As a reference point image whenever I spoke to the designer about Fortinbras's army being all women, I mentioned the Norse mythic characters of the Valkyrie as my inspiration. The designer took that iconic image and incorporated it into the hair. Norwegian blue colored ribbon, the same shade as the soldier's heraldry, was braided into each actor's hair. This one detail, coupled with costuming, successfully changed the persona of the performers. Slight changes in makeup along with a crown and puffy pink hats for Fortinbras and the Ambassador from England, respectively, appropriately changed the actor's looks.

Part of the shorthand the designer and I used in our first meeting were the words "show people", "rogues", "travelers", "gypsies", and a "rock music" and "pirate influence." These images immediately inspired our visual concept for the Tragedians and the Player. Their lives as eternal actors could be reflected with a heavy emphasis on theatrics in make-up and hairstyles. All members of the troupe, both male and female, wore heavy rouge on their cheekbones and had exaggerated eyes and lipstick. All the males, with the exception of the youth, Alfred, had facial hair. On that point, the designer singled out the look for the four Tragedian musicians. A picture of The Beatles from 1967, around the time of the release of their *Sgt. Pepper...* album, was used as a possible model for the Tragedians' hair and make-up. Each Beatle had long hair,

sideburns and well-groomed facial hair. I loved the idea. Always manifesting a sense of playfulness, The Beatles were postmodern in their experimentation and creation of music. By taking existing forms of music and combining them with different approaches and instruments, the British band was able to make something new and interesting. This combination of influences is not unlike what Stoppard did in the theatre when he wrote and premiered *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* in London in 1967. And so, the “Fab Four” found a place in the play.

I only had two opportunities to see the effect of the hair and make-up on the play before the production opened. The majority of the hair and make-up designs were appropriate and worked for me. The only glaring exceptions were the long wigs worn by the four actresses, the three attendants, and Ophelia. The length of the hair, combined with the material that the wigs were made of, gave the pieces an artificial quality that became a distraction during the rehearsal. After discussing the problem with the hair and makeup designer, she assured me that the wigs could be powdered to take away the shine. The next night, during the final dress rehearsal, the wigs had a much more natural quality about them. The solution was simple and effective.

Lighting

My first priority in collaborating with the lighting designer was to make sure we agreed on the need to clarify the environment of the play. I wanted the audience to know immediately when the lights came up what kind of world Rosencrantz and Guildenstern inhabited. While my analysis of the script led me to believe that they were dead, I did not subscribe to the thought that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had been damned to Hell. Rather, they were in a holding pattern, a fixed space, in Purgatory. During our first

meeting, the lighting designer used two words, “ethereal,” and “otherworldly,” to describe the look and feel of this space. Through our brief exchange, I knew the designer’s vision of the play would be in tandem with mine. This starting point fueled our conversations over the basic needs for each of the scenes.

There are five environments for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*: The Road, Elsinore Castle, The Beach, The Boat to England, and the Doorway to the Beginning. Because of the flexible nature of reality in this world, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are instantaneously transported from one scene to the next with no explanation. Consequently, lighting transitions needed to be handled quickly and smoothly and each setting had to be established convincingly while maintaining the overall ethereal quality of the production. The designer chose colors in the blue, green, and purple palette in order to establish the fantastical nature of the play. This choice of colors also supported the light, comic tone the play needed to keep it away from the somber mood of a tragedy.

During my first meeting with the designer, I touched upon the wind metaphor as a possible reoccurring element in the design. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern begin the play, move from scene to scene, and eventually return to the beginning, the wind would be there to push them along. I will give my analysis of the wind element in greater depth in the sound design section of this chapter. For his part, the lighting designer was able to create a lighting effect that emphasized the sound of the wind. Overhead lights of blue and green flashed in patterns from one side of the stage to the other, visually creating a whirlwind sensation. It was a powerful, yet simple visual cue for the audience. The use of this visual pattern each time the wind swept Rosencrantz and Guildenstern along

enabled the audience to understand the time continuum concept I had established in the play.

Lighting for the Road scene consisted of leaf gobos, diffused pools of green and shafts of sunlight all filtered through a haze. This design gave the stage a mysterious quality and set the tone for the entire production. For Elsinore, the lighting designer used a cool blue wash across the stage to suggest the marble interior of a Danish castle. Slightly warped window gobos projected on the two downstage swords conveyed the off-kilter nature of the royal court. The overall effect of the stage picture was part grand and part disharmony.

After Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's final meeting with Claudius and Gertrude, the two find themselves outside the castle. I envisioned this brief moment at the end of Act 2 taking place on a beach. Waiting for the boat to England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern debate the question of what's next for them. Guildenstern speaks to the change of the season from summer to autumn, a turning of colors at the edges of the day (93-94). The designer was able to utilize brown, russet, and gold tones to light the actors' confined spaces. These colors not only reflected a change in seasons and showed Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's isolation, but also provided an interesting semiotic foreshadowing of their fast approaching demise.

Once on the Boat to England, a purple wash was used to create an impression of night at the start of Act 3. Dry ice, directed from the stage left and right vomms, was used at the beginning of the act to create a new dynamic within the moat area. Special instruments that created a rippling water effect with light were also incorporated in the extreme downstage areas. The total effect created in the moat area of the Mabee Theatre

was one of a foggy, moonlight voyage. The lighting designer was creative in building a series of complex cues to run in tandem with the sounds of the pirate ship and its attack. A cannon shot would be seen as a strobe effect high above the audience in the theatre's grid system. A lighting instrument, containing a red special to suggest fire from gunpowder as the cannonball left the barrel, would then quickly follow the strobe. The final element added to the attack was the return of the dry ice. Once the designs of light and sound were combined during the technical rehearsals and run with the actors, the overall effect was one of appropriate chaos. The dangerous energy of the scene in turn fueled what was to be the final twenty minutes of the play.

The point made during the first meeting with my designer about the world of the play came to bear in the scene I call "Doorway to the Beginning." After the pirate attack and the final dumbshow performance by the Tragedians, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves alone in the dark. Each contemplates the meaning of their journey and in a brief moment of clarity, the two understand the role they have played. At the end of the scene, they disappear. The lighting of this moment was a combination of overhead pools of white light to isolate the two friends and lights from the basement from both the "cracked earth" and the open grave. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were positioned on opposite sides of the downstage area, each in their own island of light. Beginning with Rosencrantz and then Guildenstern, a pathway of light began to extend across the stage from their island to the grave. The effect was intended to suggest that there was only one road now for them to take. Dark pink lights began to glow from the basement in the grave and iron mesh between the swords. The designer chose pink for its lighter, magical tone, rather than the dangerous and damning sign of red. There was also a decision by

the designer not to use any fog or haze in the two stage openings, thus avoiding the misinterpretation that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were in Hell. The realization of this design in production was incredibly dramatic. To have the actor standing at the grave's edge, acknowledge his end, and step off into the light was exactly what was needed for this dramatic moment in the play.

The convention of the glow from the "cracked earth" was established at the play's beginning. Starting in the blackout, as the wind whispered through the theatre, the glow between the swords emerged. This brief moment led into the overhead light program that personified the wind. As previously stated, the use of the light filtering up from the "cracked earth" returned with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's exit into the grave. To provide the audience with another unifying clue to the play's time continuum, the exact light and sound sequence from the beginning was repeated for the final scene of the play. As the royal court of Elsinore leaves the stage, overhead lights dim as the glow underneath grows with the sound of the wind. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern enter the stage, find their seats, and begin the coin flip again.

Sound Design

Very early in my analysis of the script, I started to look at the text with the primary intent of identifying the necessary sound elements. I noticed that the original 1967 New York production had used a live four-piece band. The more I considered it, the more I liked the idea of having live music performed by the Tragedians during the show. Music is such a vital and underestimated element in the theatre experience: it sets tone, place, mood, and tempo. If used carefully, much can be achieved through music before any dialogue is spoken. With the playwright very obviously emphasizing theatrics

in the play, I was determined to have music performed live each night by the actors. So I began to look at what moments of music or sound could be performed live and what needed to be prerecorded. Essentially the show was divided in half: prerecorded sound designs and live music elements.

For the prerecorded sound, I spoke with the designer about the audio cues needed to give the audience an idea of environment. The two moments that were required in the script happened during the third act when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Hamlet are on the boat to England. There needed to be some kind of sound cue for the audience to understand where they were. The designer and I talked about ocean waves, of having the sound of seagulls, of possibly buoy bells. These were easily recognizable references that could be established very quickly and then slowly faded out to create an effective underpinning for the scene.

The second moment that was designated as having pre-recorded sound was the pirate attack. The designer and I spoke about the most basic needs—cannon fire, the sound of cannon balls hitting the water and the ship and the sounds of general chaos. There were a couple of choices made early in the design stage; first, the cannon balls would not hit the ship. Technically, it would beg the question of how do we stage that in the theatre if the cannon ball actually hits somewhere in our line of sight. And then too, it becomes a question as to how badly the ship would be damaged. I did not want the audience to be concerned with the possibility of the ship sinking and be distracted from what was really happening onstage. I believed the majority of the pirate attack could be accomplished through sound, through the perceived danger of action, but without any real

physical violence at all. The actors' reactions to the sounds would make the moment believable to the audience.

After the basic needs of the pirate attack had been agreed upon, I also expressed my desire to use wind as an occurring metaphor throughout the play. The phenomenon of wind is mentioned multiple times by the play's characters, not only by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but also by Hamlet and the Player. I felt very strongly about the idea of the wind as being an unseen, yet noticeable force that would come into this world and propel Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into new environments. I wanted the sound of wind in the darkness to begin the show and to occur whenever the travelers moved from one scene to another, as in Act 1 when they move from their spot on the road to inside Elsinore Castle. When the two characters are outside the castle at the end of Act 2 and waiting on the boat, I wanted the wind motif to return and then come back again at the very end of the Act 3 dumbshow. The wind sweeps the stage of the Tragedians and the Player after their performance of the final confrontation in Elsinore's royal court, leaving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern isolated, to realize their fates and then disappear. For the last moment of the play, I wanted the wind to return again, to push Rosencrantz and Guildenstern back to the beginning, flipping coins beside the road, and essentially restarting the story. My intention was that through this simple audio cue, this sign, the audience would be able to understand the cyclic journey that the two characters were on.

After that initial meeting, the play's sound designer went to work. Over the period of three weeks, he created the sounds for the boat voyage in Act 3, using ocean waves and mixing in gull cries that would come in and out of the audio picture for variety. The designer also made the choice to increase the intensity of the waves just

before the pirate attack. He saw that increase as an effective foreshadowing of a dangerous moment and I agreed. After the questions of the duration of the attack and number of cannon shots had been answered, the challenge then became how to use the cues in conjunction with lights and actors. Once the sounds of the pirate attack were introduced during the technical rehearsals, it became the issue of timing between the stage manager, the sound and light-board operators, and the actors. The sound designer was able to develop a sound cue of a single cannon shot that allowed the sound-board operator to control the exact timing and volume of the cue. The light designer then connected that sound to a specific light cue that could be instantaneously called by the stage manager during performance. Also, the sound of the cannon ball hitting the water was recorded on a separate compact disk, thus giving the stage manager the freedom to speed up the timing of the attack as the unseen pirate ship approached Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's boat. As involved as that moment was in uniting sound, lighting and actors, it took only a few run-throughs during rehearsal for all of the elements to work together successfully.

The only other pre-recorded element that was a little bit late in the sound design was a foghorn. Beginning in Act 3, on a darkened stage after two minutes of dialogue, Rosencrantz discovers where he is. Despite the sound of gulls, waves and actors as sailors bringing in the set piece of the platform and barrels, it is only through the most obvious nautical audio cue that Rosencrantz catches on. At first, the designer and I thought about having a boatswain's whistle, the high pitched, three toned sound used by sailors, as the big cue for Rosencrantz. It was only after the recorded whistle cue was used during the technical rehearsals that I discovered a problem. The majority of the cast

could not identify the obvious sound icon. What should have been a simple sound element was in danger of confusing the audience; an alternative was quickly sought. The solution came in the blast of a foghorn. Suggested by the stage manager, a fog horn was an easy and unambiguous sound substitution. In defense of using a rather contemporary sound within a play that is set in Elizabethan England, I must turn to the playwright. Stoppard begins the third act with a contemporary reference in the stage directions: a giant, striped beach umbrella prominently positioned on the boat (99). Clearly the playwright, in his postmodern theatrical approach, has no qualms about mixing modern signs with older styles. Therefore, I had no problem in using a rather contemporary sound for that one moment. The foghorn and Rosencrantz's reaction to it elicited a laugh from the audience every performance and so, I believe it was an appropriate choice for the play.

I found this one episode to be an excellent example of how a design choice can either work with or against a moment in a play. The simple fact is that while a choice may make perfect sense to the director, there is no guarantee that an audience will understand the decision and the sign would fail to communicate the appropriate message. Any idea, no matter how brilliant in the mind of the director, should be open to change, particularly if it does not work in the context of the performance.

I mentioned earlier that I had decided early in my pre-production process to include live music in the show. The traveling entertainer element was already at the core of the Tragedian persona onstage and so, musicians could easily pass as part of the acting troupe. It became my job to look at the very specific areas that had to have music. Early in Act 1, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern react to the sounds of flute and drums. This

signals the moment just before the Player and Tragedians arrive with their show wagon and help move Rosencrantz and Guildenstern out of their stasis. For want of a better term, a Tragedian motif was needed to precede the performers and then to reoccur each time they return to the stage. I also saw the necessity to have a specific musical theme for the Tragedian's scenes from "The Murder of Gonzago." With the dumbshow beginning in Act 2 and then returning near the end of Act 3, a common musical connection would help the audience stay connected to the continuing play within the play. The theme would also provide an emotional through-line for the dumbshow. Next, I looked to Elsinore. I knew that I wanted to introduce the royal court of Elsinore in the middle part of Act 1 with some sort of musical event. In the script, the King and Queen of Denmark (Claudius and Gertrude) along with their attendants, soldiers, and courtiers arrive onstage essentially saying, "Welcome to Elsinore, here's why we've sent for you." After three minutes of dialogue, the royal court leaves and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are left wondering what is happening. There were three things that I wanted to achieve during this moment: First, I wanted it to be very grand scene. This is a castle, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (along with the audience) see the royal court for the very first time. A powerful impression was required. Second, as strangers in a strange land, these two outsiders are swept up into a world in which they have no idea what is going on and continually fall behind. Consequently, the encounter needed to be full of movement and confusion. Third, I wanted the moment to be funny, the audience needed to understand that this is a comedy and that they are being invited to laugh. Even though the audience is presented with the familiar icons of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, tragedy is not

the appropriate tone for this moment. So with those basic needs in mind, my thought was, “Why not a dance?”

To create a vocabulary in which to communicate my ideas to the four actors I had cast as Tragedian Musicians, I put together a compact disk of music for each of them to have at our first meeting. I selected music that was very close to the mood, lightness, and emotional energy of the Tragedian and dumbshow themes and the dance. For the entrance of the Tragedians, I looked at traditional Medieval and Renaissance pieces of music with simple arrangements of mostly drum and flute. The two examples I chose were “Maypole Dance” and “Children’s Games,” both of which conveyed the lightness and fun of the approaching performers. For the dumbshow I chose something rather somber and dramatic from the Elizabethan period, a tune called “Anne Boleyn.” For the dance at Elsinore, I selected David Hirschfelder’s sound track for the motion picture “Elizabeth”. There were several moments in the film that featured dances and I found the music to be a perfect reference point in speaking about structure, energy, and pace with my musicians. Other pieces of music I included on the musicians’ CDs came from a recording called “Santiago” by the Irish band The Chieftains. This music combined traditional folk music and instruments from the Spanish region of Galicia and Celtic tin whistles, harp, and drums. Through this mixing of influences, something new and yet familiar was created. The music contained elements of traditional Celtic reels and jigs but with a strong gypsy influence throughout. My intention for using this music as a model for the Tragedians’ work was to help the performers understand the eclectic, postmodern approach I was taking towards the live music element.

By the end of my first meeting with the band, with the basic musical moments established (Tragedian and dumbshow themes and the dance) and attitudes for each piece understood, I let the musicians go to work with the knowledge that they had *carte blanche* in creating original melodies for the play. My intention was that if the dance, dumbshow, and Tragedian music could be created and made show-worthy in two weeks, then I would ask the four musicians to provide the pre-show, intermission, and curtain call music. The musicians proved more than capable and their music was a tremendous addition to the performance.

The rehearsal period for the musicians was an unusual one. Because of my directorial responsibilities, the four actors/musicians were on their own for most of the rehearsal period. I had given them a deadline to create and learn the three musical pieces and I would periodically touch base with them during our evening rehearsals. The band would practice in a room down the hall from the theatre and during rehearsal breaks my stage manager and I would listen in on their progress. After only three meetings, the musicians had come up with original compositions for both the Tragedian theme and the dumbshow that were exactly what I had intended. The next night, the band played me their choice for the dance at Elsinore.

In keeping with the postmodern sensibility of mixing cultures and styles, the band chose a contemporary pop song called “Crazy” from a music group by the name of Gnarl Barkley. The musicians were able to change the meter, and by using simple instruments—a drum, guitar, a violin, and a penny whistle—they were able to reinterpret the arrangement of a contemporary pop song so that it sounded Elizabethan in structure. I thought it was an inspired choice, in that once again there was a contemporary mixing

and clashing and rearranging of all sorts of influences to create a new form. I appreciated the notion of a song named “Crazy,” being connected with Hamlet’s mental state and it being played in the context of a bizarre moment onstage. I also thought it was a nice in-joke for those in the audience that did recognize the song. So, after a week and a half was spent by the musicians putting the finishing touches on the three pieces, we moved on to other places in the show that could benefit from live music. One important piece of music was a royal fanfare.

It was my good fortune that two of the tragedian musicians were brass players—one played a trumpet, the other a tuba. I had the two create a short fanfare for the main entrance of the royal court in Act 1 that would also be played several times in the play as an introduction to Claudius and Gertrude’s entrance onstage.

The second element to the live score, the pre-show and intermission music, was added later in the rehearsal process. I believed that a unity in the sound design would be achieved if the musicians could perform throughout the production, rather than employing a combination of prerecorded and live music. Two very traditional songs from the Elizabethan period, “Scarborough Faire” and “Greensleeves,” were chosen for the pre-show music. I liked the idea of beginning the play with familiar and stereotypical Elizabethan fare and then speeding up the music or changing the instruments so that the known could in fact be turned to something different. Yet, the sound would still be connected with its source – much like the play itself. So the musicians very quickly came up with their own arrangements for “Scarborough Faire” and “Greensleeves,” and they became the two songs that opened the show. Through improvisation, the band also came up with four different music pieces for the intermission. One was blues based with a

twelve-bar structure, next came a reggae piece, then a Latin-flavored samba piece, and lastly a 1950's rockabilly instrumental. I thought the mixing of styles worked, because by the time the play moves to intermission, it is very clear to the audience that this is not the traditional world of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. I liked the idea of incorporating contemporary and eclectic sounds to continue the energy, mood, and even humor of this unpredictable world and I thought all of the intermission music was effective in accomplishing this quality.

One issue did affect the sound design and the production. During the final dress rehearsal, I made the decision to have the musicians begin the pre-show music out in the lobby. I thought that live music being performed as the audience entered the theatre building would lend itself to a festive atmosphere. The plans were for the musicians to begin playing the music five minutes before the show actually began. The musicians would travel from the lobby into the theater, walk onto the stage, perform a few moments, and then exit. This was established as the cue to begin the play, and this moment of blocking was, in fact, repeated during the intermission for continuity. My regret is that because of the unpredictable nature of a live audience and the time spent in the lobby, the band's mainstage performance was often very limited. The musicians brought a unique quality to the play but it would have been nice to hear more of the Tragedians' music on stage. Perhaps having a clearer idea of timing for the stage manager during the intermission and establishing a more effective signal for the musicians to enter the stage could have solved that particular problem.

Choreography

Whenever I looked at the script for musical moments, I always envisioned the entrance of the royal court of Elsinore as a dance. There is this inexplicable moment in Act 1 where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on the road and about to witness a performance from the Tragedians. All of a sudden the duo is dropped right in the middle of Elsinore Castle. There is a quick encounter with Ophelia and Hamlet as they run around onstage and quickly leave. Then the royal court with all the attendants comes in the room. The King and Queen greet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and then after three minutes of dialogue, they are off again. After the royal court leaves, Rosencrantz makes mention several times of being “out of step” (38). I thought it would be interesting to literally have that happen to him and Guildenstern. I envisioned the moment as being one of spectacle, humor, and energy, which would emphasize the underlying strangeness of the scene from the perspective of the two overwhelmed outsiders. I thought a dance would fit that moment.

I gave the choreographer a basic idea of the energy I believed inherent within the scene. To establish a common vocabulary with her, I once again prepared a CD with two pieces of music from the “Elizabeth” soundtrack. From the use of rhythms and timing, the music lent itself to a structured, formal, even royal tone that could easily translate to movement for the actors. I also explained to the choreographer the emotional tone I wanted for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. I suggested that there should be a progression in mood for the duo during the scene, which needed to begin as an odd, funny event. The mood for the dance would then move beyond the bizarre to a menacing quality as a means of foreshadowing the journey’s end for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. By the

next meeting with the choreographer I had the actual music for the dance, the recording of “Crazy,” played by the Tragedians. Judging from the response I received from the choreographer, I was confident that her vision of the dance and mine were the same. We then set a date for her to begin dance rehearsals and to start working with the twenty actors on the movement.

During the actual rehearsal of the dance, I received a lesson in structured blocking versus the organic growth of a scene. While the choreographer had a clear idea of the basic needs of the moment (dialogue, focus, and mood), she also offered great flexibility in the process. She was able to adapt quickly to the playing space, to available resources, and even to character relationships. For example, the musicians had come up with a basic drumbeat to start the song. The choreographer was able to use that drumbeat, extending it so that it became a royal march to bring the court into the space. There was a brass fanfare to announce the arrival of the King and Queen; everyone marched in on the beat; and then at a designated time all twenty members of the royal court would skip in unison. As this prim, proper, and structured form was established and then broken, the humor of the scene was established before a single word was spoken. Once the dance began, the choreographer was able to select areas of the stage where Claudius and Gertrude could converse with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern while the rest of the royal court was dancing. The choreographer did all of this entirely on the spot during that first rehearsal.

Another example of this organic approach to blocking from the choreographer occurred at the end of the dance. As part of the Elsinore entourage, I had two soldiers carry in large halberds or axes. The choreographer got the idea of ending the dance with

a game. One of the soldiers holding onto the halberd would step into the center of the dance and spin around while the rest of the men in the royal court would leap over the weapon. After a couple of passes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were then pushed into the game and forced to outrun the axe. It was an effective conclusion to the scene on two different levels: first, it emphasized the ridiculousness of the game itself, and second, it heightened the fear and confusion within the two outsiders. The dance stopped with the appearance of Polonius and in a matter of seconds the royals and entourage cleared the stage to leave Rosencrantz and Guildenstern alone and off balance. The only downside of having so much movement and music going on within the scene was that the dance often overshadowed the dialogue. I experimented with repositioning the musicians on the stage and having them lower the volume of the song to decrease their dominance. I also worked with the actors to increase their projection and adjust body positions to maximize their focus onstage. While these changes did compensate somewhat for the imbalance, there were moments during the actual performance that the dialogue got lost. In retrospect, the only way that I could insure that the audience could hear every word spoken would have been to do away entirely with the dance. It became an issue of necessity; what was the priority of that moment? Was it the language or the spectacle? Because this experience is seen through the eyes of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and their confusion in the moment is shared by the audience, a certain amount of loss of comprehension could be allowed. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive at Elsinore clueless as to why they have been summoned. The royal family swirls in and out, shouting Shakespearean blank verse, and the two outsiders try to keep up. It is only after the royal court exits, leaving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to speak their own

vernacular, that Claudius and Gertrude's instructions are translated and understood. Through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's repeating of the royal command in the scene that followed the dance, the audience was able to catch up to the plot as well. So while this confusing moment did have an effect on the audience, the quick clarification by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern avoided the danger of completely losing its attention.

Properties

My top priorities for props in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* were simplicity and ease of movement by the actor. Because of the multiple settings of the play and the necessity for efficient transitions, I wanted a sparse and uncluttered stage. Each prop in the play, such as the coins, needed to have a purpose.

The play starts and ends with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern flipping coins. I was not interested in using money from the U.S. mint. I did not want to clutter the audience's attention with insignificant detail. It was by happy accident that I discovered a box of one inch and a half fender washers in the theatre's scene shop. Because of the washers' large size the actors could easily handle and flip them; it was the ideal coin. Also, the washers were identical on both sides, so it did not matter how the coin landed after being flipped. It would forever be "heads." That is until the lone tails discovery by Rosencrantz and the environment change during the first act.

For the Tragedians, I wanted a wagon in which they could transport all their acting paraphernalia. My designer found a rustic two-wheel cart, which he reinforced and painted in colors that matched the actor's costumes. This proved to be an appropriate vehicle for the troupe. To hold the costume pieces and masks for the dumbshow, the props crew also located a large wooden trunk. Somehow the wardrobe trunk found a

place on the cart and as the Tragedians moved from the road to Elsinore it became a major prop.

One of the ideas I had for properties proved to be a valuable lesson in semiotics and director flexibility. For the “dumbshow deaths” of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the second act, I had wanted a staged beheading. Stoppard’s original stage directions indicate that the Player stabs the two masked characters. Ironically, in the third act, Guildenstern tries to kill the Player with a knife. While the stabbing in the dumbshow had dramatic potential, I wanted something even bigger and more theatrical. I wanted the Player to behead his actors; but before the necessary props—an axe, chopping block, false heads, and blood—were agreed upon, the costume designer offered another point of view. She mentioned that the audience might be offended by a beheading onstage, even a comic one. Since beheading was the current method of execution by Middle Eastern Islamic extremists, she believed the audience might find the staged facsimile disgusting and inappropriate. A suitable substitution was found by hanging the two Tragedian actors. My prop designer quickly fashioned two oversized nooses for the scene. Performed efficiently, effectively, and theatrically, the moment of death for the false Rosencrantz and Guildenstern was achieved by the two Tragedians themselves. The actors held onto the ropes and were essentially their own hangmen. The action parallels in an ironic way the final moment of the play when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hold their own fates in their hands and step through the trapdoor (suggesting the gallows) to disappear. Hanging was a simple, semiotic, solution to a potentially complex and negative issue for the audience.

I took pride in the amount of props the designer and his crew were able to recycle from the *Hamlet* production. Weapons, lanterns, a chair, a book, and skull all found a second life in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's world. This certainly helped with budget concerns, but also continued the theatre tradition of adapting what is available rather than building or buying something new.

Conclusion

Throughout this collaborative process with the designers, I tried to provide a clear directorial vision for the play. I made a conscious effort to have a standard of respect for the designer, for his or her talents and contributions to the production and built strong relationships with honest communication. I approached each of the designs with an enthusiasm and openness, knowing that my attitude would either nurture or kill the creative process for my collaborators. The value of being flexible in my initial ideas, to have a starting point but also to maintain a willingness to change if circumstances dictated or if a better idea was presented, was another lesson learned. I was pleased at the level of dedication and talent the student designers exhibited in the collaboration. In reference to the costuming and scenic elements that were delayed or unfinished due to scheduling, this was an opportunity as a director to learn. Stronger, more consistent communication with the designers could have reduced, if not completely resolved, the difficulties encountered.

CHAPTER FOUR

Production Process: The Director/Actor Collaboration

Introduction

My main goals as director in collaboration with the actor for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* were two-fold. First, I wanted to provide an environment of play with purpose. And second, this being an educational as well as an artistic experience for the actors; I wanted to provide the students opportunities for learning and growth. From my own experiences as an actor, I have found that creativity can exist only in an atmosphere of trust—trust in the project, the director, and ultimately one’s self. I took the responsibility of developing and maintaining that creative environment with the utmost care. This chapter will explore the director’s collaboration with actors, the audition and casting process, first read-through, blocking and refining rehearsals, and technical and dress rehearsals. Attention will also be given to highlighting the influence and importance the stage manager had on the play’s development. Finally, the chapter will provide an overview of the challenges and problems encountered during rehearsals.

Preparing for the Actor

My first order of business in getting ready for auditions and rehearsals was to examine Stoppard’s script for necessary edits, either for content or length. I also had to decide on cast size. Concerning both of these issues, the playwright has an interesting script note at the beginning of the Samuel French acting edition:

This play-text is perhaps unusual in that it incorporates a good many speeches and passages enclosed in square brackets, and the material thus bracketed consists of

optional cuts. There is no definitive text of “Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead”: the New York production differed in many small textual ways from the London production, and the text performed for the American tour differs from both. I doubt that the same text has been performed in two different places in the world. This seems to me only sensible. A joke that is funny in London might be meaningless in Milan (or New Orleans), and there is no virtue in preserving it just because it was in the original script. Again, an expensive and visually exciting production using thirty-six actors might hold up well over three hours, while a very simple and small production might work better in a version lasting two. So, on the one hand, I would like each director to control the length and complication of each production (as is usual), and, on the other hand, I would like to define the area in which he has a free hand with the text (Stoppard 3).

Taking the playwright’s advice to heart, I set about exercising my “free hand” with the script. With the ideal running time for Baylor University’s three-act production at two and a half hours; consequently, I looked at Stoppard’s edits as a means of streamlining the length of the show. Cutting proved to be relatively easy. The majority of the edit brackets in the script occurred within dialogue between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. With the duo’s propensity for verbal repetition, Stoppard’s edits proved to take nothing from the story’s core or its characters. The only sizable cut I made, with the playwright’s guidance, was near the end of Act 2. After the offstage dumbshow is interrupted by Claudius’ cries of guilt and horror, the king enters the stage to charge Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet, who has just killed Polonius. Claudius exits the stage and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are left to debate, at great length, their next move. They eventually decide to stay put and let Hamlet come to them. When the Prince appears, dragging the body of Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern take off their belts and tie them together in hopes of trapping Hamlet. Their scheme fails as Hamlet and corpse enter and exit the stage behind the belt trap while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s trousers slowly slide down to their feet (89). As comical as the moment might have been, I decided that the scene could be cut. It was only after the play had

been cast and we were in our second week of rehearsals that I rethought my decision to edit the scene. The more I considered the comedy inherent in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's debate over what to do in that moment, the more I appreciated the deeper meaning. With their decision to capture Hamlet, a choice that leaves the duo standing with their pants around their ankles, it became evident that this scene was the perfect summation of their ridiculous journey. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are slow to "act," always waiting for outside stimulus and when at last they move beyond their static situation; the duo always do so in the wrong direction and with poor results. Also, with the dropping the duo's pants, I appreciated Stoppard's postmodernist connection to the vaudeville and circus influences that run through Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. After a conversation with my advisor outlining the pros and cons of the scene, he agreed with my choices and the scene was returned to the play. The end result of the scene's inclusion of the dead body onstage, actors in their underwear, and Hamlet speaking Shakespeare's lines, "The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing—of nothing," (71) proved to be an interesting mix of humor and pathos.

Ultimately, the only substantial dialogue I cut from the play was a shared rhyme between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which Stoppard drops in the middle of their conversations:

Ros. Consistency is all I ask!
 Guil. Give us this day our daily mask (Stoppard 30).

The playwright uses this device five times during the course of the play. The possible reasons for these non-sequiturs could be to emphasize the dependent relationship between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (one supplies the beginning line and the other finishes the couplet) or it could be a means of punctuating the oddity of the moment. It could also be

a simple nod to Shakespeare's use of rhymed couplets at the end of his soliloquies. Whatever the playwright's reason, after researching and finding no major motivation behind the couplets, the ten lines were jettisoned. The only single word cut from the script was Rosencrantz's use of the term "niggard," in reference to Hamlet (Stoppard 57). Concern over the word being misconstrued by the audience prompted its replacement with the contemporary and comparable "stingy." This was a simple and successful substitution.

In terms of cast size for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, I knew going into auditions that I would have a wealth of acting talent from which to choose. My only parameter in casting was a consideration of the pre-existing costumes from *Hamlet*. With a cast size of twenty-five, *Hamlet* had been successful in using actors cast in the smaller roles to play multiple characters. I appreciated the choice and wanted to incorporate that economy into my cast as well. I knew from the beginning that the actors playing Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, the Player, Alfred, Hamlet, Ophelia, Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, and Horatio would play only one role in the play. I needed to determine the number of Tragedians, Soldiers, and Attendants who could perform double duty. Looking at the needs of the dumbshow performances, I decided that along with the Player and Alfred, two Tragedian "actors" would be needed. I also wanted at least three additional Tragedian musicians to provide live music during the play and so this left me with a cast of sixteen. After consulting with the costume designer for *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* about what costumes were available for the royal court of Elsinore, I chose to have three women and one man as attendants and four men to serve as soldiers. This gave *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* a cast of twenty-

four. I then looked at filling the roles of Fortinbras, his army, and the Ambassador from England who are present for the play's final moment at Elsinore. I decided to double cast the lone male attendant from Elsinore as Fortinbras and one of the soldiers in the royal court as the English Ambassador. This decision left me with three men and three women to choose from for Fortinbras' Norwegian army. I decided to hold off on my decision until the auditions in order to compare the body types and physical appearance of the actors and to work out the blocking logistics for the clearing of the four dead bodies in Elsinore.

Auditions & Casting

I have learned to never underestimate the potential of anybody and to not be a judge or a critic, but to share an experience of discovering with all those whom I meet. From my students I have learned that there is genius in all of us and that that genius must be discovered and exercised and given a chance to express itself.

Paul Baker (ix)

I have been fortunate as a theatre student at Baylor to be introduced to several directorial concepts that have served me well in the collaborative process. This passage from Paul Baker struck me as an appropriate way to define my approach to casting for my thesis production. The best directors that I have worked with all share this idea of valuing individual potential and giving actors the freedom to express their creative spirit. My intent as a director, during auditions and beyond, was to maintain an openness to what creative spark each actor might bring to the stage.

My auditioning process for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* actually began with the auditions for *Hamlet*. I attended the April auditions and call-back for *Hamlet* in order to get an early look at the talent pool and to entertain the possibility of cross-over casting for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. I thought the idea of an actor

continuing his or her role from the tragedy to the comedy would be a rare artistic and educational opportunity. So, with the director's permission, I observed the casting process of *Hamlet*. Prior to the auditions for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, I also had the luxury of speaking with *Hamlet's* director concerning his actor's work ethics and attitudes. Undeniably, the positive or negative attitude of actors has a major impact on shaping the ensemble and overall production of a play. This influence is also important to the success of a production that a director should take proactive steps in identifying both positive and negative individuals. Mounting a play is challenging enough without adding unnecessary burdens, such as lazy actors or those who have bad attitudes.

Because of my attendance at the auditions for *Hamlet* in the spring, the rumor mill began among the undergraduate students that I had already cast my play. Consequently, before the spring semester ended, I placed a notice on the theatre department's "call board" to dispel any false information. I stated that *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* had not been cast and that while crossover casting between the two plays was a consideration, it was by no means a sure thing. I wanted everyone who auditioned for me in September to understand that they each had a legitimate opportunity at being cast and to bring nothing but their best to the auditions.

I was fortunate to have had a talented stage manager assigned to me and she took care of the basic scheduling for auditions and rehearsals before the spring semester ended. During the summer break, the stage manager and I remained in contact via e-mail and telephone to set basic goals for the play that would be implemented upon our return to school in the fall. It was during this seven-month period (April to November) that my

appreciation and respect for the role of stage manager increased tenfold. The stage manager for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* proved to be invaluable in terms of keeping me focused on the aspects of scheduling and priorities pertaining to the design and performance aspects of the production. Furthermore, she became a trusted confidant during rehearsals. The stage manager's positive attitude and enthusiasm for the project was immensely influential in maintaining the tone I set as director. Her consistent dedication to the play, respect for the cast and crew, and her grace under pressure gave the stage manager a position of authority in the production. The respect she received from the director and actors made the necessary transition from second in command during rehearsals to the person responsible for running the play during performances an easy progression. The level of professionalism and character she brought to the project established a standard that will no doubt be used to measure all who have that responsibility in the future.

Auditions for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* took place Thursday, September 14, 2006 in the Jones Theatre. Callbacks followed the next night, Friday, September 15. Through the graciousness of *Hamlet's* director, who canceled his rehearsals in the Mabee Theatre, callbacks were held in the actual performance space for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. The requirement for the general auditions was a two-minute comedy monologue from an Elizabethan or Shakespearean play. I wanted to look at each actor's grasp of the language, thought process, energy, and humor. I am convinced that one of the defining qualities between acting in a tragedy and comedy is the performer's attitude. The reason for requiring a monologue was my belief that if the

difficult language of Shakespeare could be delivered with humor, then the actor could meet the challenge of Stoppard's verbal gymnastics.

To maximize auditioning time for students, a sign-up sheet was placed on the theatre's "callboard" one week prior to auditions. Through the stage manager's preparation and handling of the audition, I was able to see ninety-three actors in a four-hour period. Along with attitude and vocal ability, I also was interested in body types. Body size, shape, and posture were all considered (along with the ever-present pre-existing costume restrictions) in my casting choices. As with any play, an audience's first impressions of character sets the tone for all that follows. I needed actors that looked the part and who could connect with each other in a believable, however brief, onstage relationship. For the Tragedians, I also kept in mind the actors' musical abilities as a deciding factor in casting. Another issue at work in casting was my belief that the world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern was warped and needed to be seen with a humorous perspective. So, certain liberties could be taken in terms of the tweaking of preexisting characters brought over from *Hamlet*. With these casting factors at the forefront, during and after the general auditions, the stage manager and I formulated our approach to callbacks for the next night.

In the interest of time management, callbacks were designated for Tragedian musicians and speaking roles only. Actors would fill roles, such as Attendants, Soldiers, and Ophelia from the general auditions. Musical auditions for the Tragedian band started at five in the afternoon. At the end of the hour, four actors were cast from a list of fourteen. During this time with the musicians, the thirty-five actors who were auditioning for speaking roles, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, the Player, Alfred, Claudius,

Gertrude, Hamlet, and Polonius were given sides from the script to prepare as cold readings. Within two hours, the cast was near completion, with the Player, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern being the final three actors cast. The actual auditioning and callback process, while time consuming, proved to be a relatively easy process. However, the casting of the final three actors was an exception. As director, I had a clear understanding of these characters, their connection to each other, and their emotional lives; however, my initial choices in casting were greatly affected by my lack of experience. The combination of running out of time at the end of callbacks and my fear-induced insecurity over making a casting decision built up an incredible amount of pressure during auditions. I had certain casting ideas for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but my mental state was too scattered to stay focused. At the suggestion of my advisor, I took a one-hour break to regroup my thoughts. I had compiled a final list of six actors who I was considering for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and two actors for the Player. At the urging of my production and thesis advisor, I added one more actor to the last round. I had already penciled in this actor for the role of Hamlet; he had the look, humor, and intelligence to play the Dane. But the possibility of the actor being better suited for Rosencrantz proved to be an unexpected and exciting thought. I took the hour break to compile the cast list with my stage manager and gather my thoughts for the final three roles. When I returned, I first thanked the actors for their hard work and patience and then paired up the potential Rosencrantz and Guildensterns for a last duet. Because of challenges in timing, verbal sparring, and humorous tone, I chose the “question game” scene from the first act as the deciding audition. After the two pairs of actors had their moments, I asked the actor who was the front-runner for Guildenstern to read with the

new actor. In less than ten seconds, I knew that it was the right combination of actors. The play hinges on the connection between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, their friendship, and their complementary energies. Seeing the two actors go through the question and answer game, reacting to and playing off each other, both completely comfortable in the moment, became the turning point in my perspective. It was exactly what I needed to see and the roles were cast.

For the Player, I chose the “Don’t you see?! We’re actors—we’re the opposite of people!” monologue from Act 2 (49). Simply put, the Player is a performer. The play demands someone who can take command of the stage and embrace the theatrical nature of the character’s humor and drama. I asked the two actors who returned for the final reading to overact, to exaggerate, and to play the character much bigger than life. It took only a few moments to make my decision. The actor I chose for the Player was the exact mixture of the dynamic vocal, physical stage presence, humor, and attitude the character needed. My only reservation in casting him was his performance in *Hamlet*. I had attended several rehearsals for *Hamlet* and I had also spoken to the director concerning the actor’s work ethic. The actor had been slow in learning lines and had given the impression that he was not fully committed to the role or to the play. Having been impressed with his past work, I knew the actor was capable of much more. Before I dismissed the actor at the end of the callback, I took him aside and expressed my concerns. I wanted him to know that I intended to cast him and that I expected his complete commitment to the project. The actor admitted to falling short in *Hamlet* and he promised to do his best work in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. I believed him and he was cast.

Ultimately, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* had a cast of twenty-five. An additional musician for the Tragedians added one to my original goal of twenty-four. In terms of using actors from the *Hamlet* production, I cast eight actors from the tragedy, with only one crossover character, Guildenstern. The remaining sixteen roles were filled by undergraduate performance students; this was the first main-stage experience for six of the students. With a talented and committed cast, the play was ready for the rehearsal process.

First Read-Through

I am one who believes that a good beginning is needed to set a positive tone for all that follows. Consequently, the first read-through for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was an important event. A meeting with my stage manager the week before the initial read-through helped clarify goals for the rehearsal. The stage manager needed time with the cast for contact numbers, the posting of available times for costume fittings, rehearsal etiquette, and scheduling, including the all-important “Off Book” date. Before I spoke to the cast about my expectations for the play, I gave each of them this perspective on attitude:

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than success, than what other people think, or say, or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company...a church...a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for the day. We cannot change our past...we cannot change the fact that people will act a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play the one string we have and that is our attitude...I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you...we are in charge of our Attitudes. Charles Swindoll (Geocities Website).

Knowing the challenges ahead for the production—a dialogue and thematically dense script, a large cast and crew with a variety of temperaments, and a concentrated rehearsal period—it was vital that all members of the project understand their responsibility to maintain a positive and professional frame of mind. I knew the attitude I projected would be the greatest influence in my relationship with the actors. My challenge was to remain positive even in the most stressful situations.

After reading the handout, I assigned the remaining roles of Fortinbras' Army. It proved to be a lucky break that the three women I cast as Court Attendants were exceptionally tall. The image of the slightly built actor I cast as Fortinbras flanked by three tall warrior women was quite humorous and in keeping with the play's unexpected approach to the familiar. Also, with my decision to remove the bodies of Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet from the stage near the end of Act 3, the four actors proved to be a practical solution in clearing the stage. Fortinbras and his three guards served as Hamlet's pallbearers. The image of the Danish prince being lifted by the women provided a striking image and direct connection to the Norse myth of the Valkyrie. With their swords placed across the body, the warrior women became Hamlet's guides, leading the fallen hero to the afterlife.

During the first rehearsal, I spoke briefly about the world of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. While I did not want to over-explain my concept of the play, I thought it necessary to express my idea of the play being a journey. This is a loop in the afterlife for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the lessons learned or ignored by the duo determined the continuation of their trip. I mentioned Stoppard's insistence in highlighting the comedy of this absurd world and my decision to use a dance to introduce

the royal house of Elsinore. My ideas were received with enthusiasm and we subsequently began our first read through of the play.

It was gratifying to see that even in the casual setting of the table reading, actors were focused and already attacking their roles with energy and thought. At the end of the read through, the stage manager reminded the cast of that week's agenda and I followed up with a reiteration of the deadline to be off book. It is a fact that characters live or die by the actor's grasp of the script. To know the words, to have them engrained in the actor's consciousness, provides the performer freedom to listen and react naturally in the moment. Without a thorough knowledge of the script, an actor cannot believably express the character's motivations, mental, emotional, or spiritual life. Relationships onstage are weak and the play as a whole suffers from the actor's deficiency in learning lines. For the actor, with Stoppard's postmodern propensity for language, learning the lines and the rhythms of the play would be a challenge.

Rehearsal Process

One of the most consistent challenges during the six-week rehearsal process for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was the scheduling of actors' time. Because of the play's structure, the stage manager and I divided each evening's rehearsal into specific scenes: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by themselves, the duo encountering the Tragedians, the pair in Elsinore with Hamlet, or with members of the Royal Court. This schedule was created to maximize the actors' time; the actors were called to rehearsal only during the scene in which they appeared. The goal was to avoid keeping an actor waiting for three hours to rehearse a five-minute scene. This was a particularly important point during the two weeks spent blocking. Because of the stage manager's diligence in

continually updating the rehearsal schedule and communicating with the cast through announcements the scheduling approach worked beautifully.

I began each evening's rehearsal by spending time alone in the space. For at least forty-five minutes, before the actors were scheduled to arrive, I sat in the theatre and mapped out goals for that night. Often I would use creative visualization to construct blocking, imagine ways to move actors in and out of the space, and determine what types of stage pictures I wanted to create. The performance space of the Mabee Theatre is a unique configuration; an asymmetrical thrust stage, surrounded by a moat, with entrances upstage right and left, as well as vomitories downstage right and left. By spending time in the actual theatre, this mental imagining of the environment allowed me to play out a variety of staging options. The time spent alone gave me clarity of thought and a calm demeanor when the actual rehearsal began. I also discovered the value of maintaining a flexible stance with my pre-visual approach to staging the play. Many times during rehearsals, an actor would try something new in blocking, improving the moment ten-fold, or invent a piece of stage business that I had not imagined. If I had considered my ideas too precious or demanded that the moment remain unchanged, the actor's creative spirit would have been stifled and our true collaboration would have suffered.

When the actors arrived for rehearsal, fifteen minutes were devoted to physical and vocal warm ups. This not only prepared the actor's body, but helped them to focus their minds as well. I would join the actors onstage during warm ups and select a leader for the physical portion of the exercises. For the vocal exercises, I would regularly choose the actor cast as the Player. My reasoning for this was two fold; first, the actor had excellent diction and knew a variety of vocal calisthenics with which to challenge the

ensemble; and second, as the Player, I wanted the actor to become comfortable with a position of authority on stage. Because of the staggered nature of the rehearsals, with actors arriving at different times during the evening, I insisted on warm ups for each group. Actors who had started the rehearsal were given a break and the newly arriving performers took time to energize. Despite the time involved, warm ups would often occur three times a night; this was a valuable investment. This ritual provided every actor with an opportunity to prepare physically and mentally for the play and it gave the ensemble a sense of unity. I was pleased to see that the pre-show habit of warming up continued for the cast, without any prompting on my part, through the play's performances.

Following the warm ups, time was given to the stage manager to make announcements. This served a dual purpose: one, it helped to keep all twenty-five cast members together on the subject of scheduling and expectations for the play; and two, it placed the stage manager into a position of authority within the ensemble. The play would eventually rest on her shoulders and both she and the cast needed to be comfortable with that relationship.

My approach to working with actors during the rehearsal process was influenced by Robert Edmond Jones' essay *Art in the Theatre*. According to Jones, respect, guidance, and enthusiasm for the artist are necessary standards for a director to maintain.

He wrote:

The director must never make the mistake of imposing his own ideas upon the actors. Acting is not an imitation of what a director thinks about a character; it is a gradual, half conscious unfolding and flowering of the self into a new personality. This process of growth should be sacred to the director. He must be humble before it. He must nourish it, stimulate it, foster it in a thousand ways. Once the actors have been engaged, he should address himself to their highest

powers. There is nothing they cannot accomplish—The director energizes; he animates (37).

I was fortunate in casting actors who were self-motivated and actively engaged with their roles from the beginning. This proved to be true not only for the actors playing Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the Player but for the play's supporting cast as well. For my part, I strove to be the enthusiastic guide for the play and empowering advocate for the actor. If the actor had a question concerning motivation or dialogue, I would make a concerted effort to help the actor find the answers themselves. I would make myself available as a sounding board for the actor, questioning him or her or pointing to moments in the script as possible clues for the actor to follow. However, I would stop short of simply stating the answer. This method furthered the actor's investment in the character and empowered the artist to trust his or her own inner creative voice. In terms of my approach to staging the play, I would give an outline to the actors before blocking a scene. The basic construct of the outline was entrances, the playing space, and what the action of the moment required. As the scene was rehearsed, the bare structure would begin to evolve and take shape. Ideas would generate new staging options and often the end result would be significantly different from my original concept. This shared experience between the actors and myself acknowledges the postmodern theatre tradition of a project representing the whole—the collaborative ensemble—rather than the director's single vision. As the rehearsal period progressed, I noticed the actors' confidence in making independent movement choices onstage grow significantly. If anything, my duties as director became those of selection and refinement. Actors would try new things each night during rehearsal and it would be my responsibility to pick the moments that worked and discard the ones that did not.

My collaboration with the two actors playing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continued this standard of trust. During the blocking process, I would often make suggestions about where the two characters were on their journey and then set Rosencrantz and Guildenstern free to explore the space. This gave the actors a natural, self-motivated quality in their movements that would have been disrupted by any interference from me. The major challenges for the two title characters were their memorization of dialogue and their comic timing. It was only after the actors had the script committed to memory that their own natural comic timing and humor fully developed. To sidestep the tendency to overplay or force the humor, or worse yet, fall into the trap of an indulgent performance, I found myself becoming the off-stage voice asking the actors to maintain focus. Fortunately, the actors strayed from their concentration only on rare occasions. For the most part, they brought a combination of creativity and self-control to the stage, requiring only the lightest directorial guidance.

For my work with the Player, I again chose to ask questions and trust the actor to find the answers. How much of the story does the character already know? How does that knowledge empower the Player and influence his relationship with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What is the Player's role in this world? Is he merely a performer or perhaps the voice of truth and guide for the duo? These questions became a starting point for the actor in his creation of the character. Concerning the Player's physical characterization, I suggested that the actor work with a staff. The actor connected with that idea and took it upon himself to find one that "fit" the Tragedian leader. The prop gave the already physically imposing actor an air of authority. Through the actor's inventiveness, the staff was used to punctuate dramatic points in the play or emphasize

comic moments. The prop also gave the actor new levels to explore as the Player and provided a much desired character detail. By making the choice himself, the actor's investment in the role grew and the commitment made its way to the stage during performance.

Early in the rehearsal period I developed the habit of watching the play from various points in the house. This practice afforded me an opportunity to identify any problems with actor positioning, issues of repetitive movements, posture, vocal projection, and the actor's use of the space. Viewing the stage from multiple positions kept me actively involved in the play's evolution and away from the limitations of a fixed perspective.

The two best examples of the collaborative process with the actors proved to be the staging of the Royal Court's dance in Elsinore and the "fun-through" rehearsal that was scheduled the week before opening. As I mentioned in the choreographer section of chapter three, the concept of a dance as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's introduction to Elsinore occurred early in my analysis of the play. The cast embraced the idea enthusiastically during the first read-through; and so, time was set aside during the second week of rehearsals for the staging of the dance. This gave the Tragedian musicians ample time to arrange and rehearse the song to be used for the scene. It also provided me an opportunity to think through the staging moments leading up to and leaving the dance. For the actual dance rehearsal, the choreographer proved to be efficient in time and actor management. The choreographer began by demonstrating a portion of steps within the dance and then had the actors repeat them. Despite the tedium of repetition, the twenty actors involved remained focused and positive. One by one,

each dance segment was added and the dance soon began to take shape. The designer freely incorporated an actor's attitude, body position, and a musician's bit of improvisation into the dance throughout the rehearsal period. While there was no mistaking who was directing the scene, this attitude of creative cooperation gave the actors a personal stake in the dance. When the choreographer returned to watch a rehearsal a week later, she marveled at the ensemble's control within the dance. To the actor's credit, the focus and positive energy that was present in the dance the second week of rehearsals continued to develop. In fact, the energy of the dance affected the entire play. The lightness of spirit and the attitude of enjoyment shared by the cast was the key to unlocking the play's humor and ultimately the gateway for the audience into the play.

It has been my experience that once lines have been learned and blocking finalized, there is a tendency for actors to stop exploring. As a result, a play's energy may become stagnant, or worse, non-existent. To fight this malaise, I set aside one rehearsal before the play opened to let the cast have a "fun through." The rules were simple: the actors could bring any and all ideas to the stage for that one night, with the understanding that they must remain in character and stay within the play's basic structure. What happened that night was nothing short of amazing. Actors traded dialogue, blocking, and even roles. New props, costumes, and accents were rolled out onto the Mabee stage with hilarious results. Relationships were deconstructed and Hamlet's family dynamic became the picture of Freudian absurdity. All of Stoppard's sexual innuendo was amplified to the extreme and even the most innocuous moments were reinterpreted as comic carnality. What was equally astonishing were how many of

these improvised moments became a group effort. An actor would enter the stage with a particular behavior, thought, or prop, and almost instantly, others would join in. This sharing and developing of ideas in the moment could have only taken place through mutual trust. The actors were secure enough in themselves and each other to step out of the safety of the known and become engaged in the moment. The actors listened and reacted to each other in a truthful and humorous manner and it was gratifying to see that connection existing between performers. The new energy generated by the rehearsal proved to be essential in the ensemble's development and strengthened the play as a whole. This positive dynamic also moved the production forward to face the challenges of technical and dress rehearsals.

Technical Rehearsals

At the end of the fifth week of rehearsals, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* moved into its final week of preparation, the technical and dress rehearsals. The elements of lighting, sound, and costuming were brought into the production and time was designated for their refinement. The designers were given an opportunity to work in combination with the actors on stage and the technical running crew was integrated into the ensemble. With these new elements in the play, it was also important to give the actors time to adapt to these additions.

Leading into the three technical and two dress rehearsals, the stage manager and I formulated a plan of attack. Because of the nature of the rehearsals the stage manager began to essentially run the play. My position was one of minimal involvement. Any design problem that occurred during these rehearsals became my responsibility; I worked with the designers and stage manager to overcome any difficulties encountered. But the

control of the play, its timing and implementation of actors, crew, and stage elements were now the stage manager's duty. The stage manager and I were in agreement that the best course of action I could take during this period would be to stay out of the way. I remained involved in styling and polishing the production through note taking and I addressed acting and blocking refinements during the two dress rehearsals. Because of her level of preparation and professionalism throughout the production process, I had no qualms in turning the play over to the stage manager.

Despite the complexity of the lighting, particularly in combination with sound elements during the pirate attack, the design aspects folded into the production with only minor adjustments. Through the stage manager's calm direction the play quickly became a unified production ready for performance.

Dress Rehearsals

It was during the final two rehearsals of the play, designated for costuming and an invited audience, that the remaining necessary elements were added. The only problems that surfaced with costuming were the missing masks for the Tragedian dumbshow and the quick release fasteners for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's trouser drop. These elements were missing from the first dress rehearsal, but were finished the following evening, just in time for the final grand dress rehearsal. It is to the actor's credit that these late additions were incorporated into the production with ease. During the first dress rehearsal, the actor playing the Player suggested the addition of a cloak to his costume. For the production of *Hamlet*, two cloaks had been constructed; the prince wore one and the ghost wore the other. The Player asked permission to wear the long black cloak of Hamlet's father. The costume piece added to the Player's theatrical

personality and with his portrayal of Hamlet during the “dumbshow,” the cloak offered the audience a connection between the two characters. At this point, with two days remaining before the play’s premiere, two specific moments in the staging had to be refined.

While watching a run-through of the play the previous week, my advisor pointed to a weakness in the scene transition in Act one. The moment just before Rosencrantz and Guildenstern magically move from the road to Elsinore is prefaced with a coin flip that lands “Tails.” The significance of this event, with 92 coin flips before that moment landing on “Heads,” needed to be emphasized by the actors playing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. After a brief conversation with the two actors, the emotional content of Rosencrantz’s lines, “I say– that was lucky...It was tails” (25), was heightened by the performer to become a statement of wonder and amazement. Through this slight shift by the actor, the transition established the appropriate energy and mysterious humor. The second staging refinement took place in the play’s final scene, the resetting of the game and journey for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Once again, at my mentor’s suggestion, the moment was given greater importance. Instead of having the two actors rush in the dark to take their positions to begin the coin toss, they each paused at their entrances in the downstage voms. As the wind and lighting cues played, both actors took a moment to size up their surroundings, as if this were their first time on the road. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern moved from the moat area onto the main playing space and then recognized each other with a slight wave. The duo walked together to their upstage left position, sat down, and mirrored the play’s beginning. Guildenstern flipped the coin and Rosencrantz, calling “Heads,” caught it. By taking only a few extra seconds to establish the

character's reconnection and continuation of their never-ending journey for the audience, the moment created a dynamic and satisfying final image for the play.

The addition of an audience for both dress rehearsals proved to be the final element needed in the collaboration for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. The important issues of timing within the play, holding for laughter, and adjusting to the energy boost a live audience offers, became the primary focus of the final two of rehearsals. I knew the play had the potential to be good theatre, to have depth and to be funny, but there was no guarantee that an audience would share my opinion. It was gratifying, after six weeks of work and worry, to hear audience laughter from the Mabee's house. With a receptive audience in place, the cast and crew were ready for the production's next step, the sharing of this creative collaboration.

Conclusion

The casting and rehearsal period of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* brought into focus the challenges and rewards of theatrical collaboration. Through well-defined goals, an openness of the creative spirit, communication, and a positive attitude, I was able to guide a cast of twenty-five and a technical running crew of thirteen towards a unified production. Despite the large cast and crew, the students remained focused during the six weeks of rehearsals and kept the spirit of the ensemble through the play's six performances. I made a concerted effort to treat my fellow collaborators with respect and valued their unique contributions. Through this relationship of trust and personal investment in the play, the actors felt free to bring ideas to the stage. As a result of this creative exchange, the play grew and developed beyond my own expectations. The greatest complement I received from my collaboration with the performer came from the

Player. In talking about his onstage experiences at Baylor University, thirteen plays in four years, the actor told me that his role in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* had been the best time spent in the theatre. My intentions for this aspect of the play, the relationship with the actor, had been to provide an outlet for creative expression and artistic growth for the student. I appreciated the actor's acknowledgement and took satisfaction in a successful collaboration.

CHAPTER FIVE

Production Evaluation

Introduction

Directing for the theatre is a balancing act. The director must bring together a multitude of artistic elements and guide the production toward a unified and satisfying experience for an audience. He must look at all designs, staging choices for scenery, blocking of the performer, and actor characterizations with these questions in mind: “How does this design serve the story? Is the potential of the play being fully expressed? How will our audience interpret these choices?” Not unlike the journey of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, this process of questions and answers became my single greatest directorial challenge. During this collaborative project, some questions were answered successfully and as a result, the production benefited greatly. There were also issues that, either through ignorance or a lack of experience, I failed to address appropriately, which resulted in deficiencies in the production. Taking my cue from Robert Edmond Jones, who said, “The theatre is a school. We shall never be done with studying and learning,” (23) this chapter offers an assessment of my work as the director of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Evaluation of Final Production Design

Scenic

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead was a unique production in that it inherited its set from *Hamlet*. To maximize budgets for the 2006 fall theatre season at

Baylor University, the two productions were chosen because of their connected characters and settings. As director, I found myself in collaboration with designers who had to consider the needs of two complete productions. The scenic needs for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* were simple. The set needed to be flexible enough to accommodate the five different locations used within the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's world reflects the flip side of *Hamlet*, an ethereal environment that had some connections to reality, but not held entirely to its rules. Along with my reference to the art of postmodernist MC Escher as a possible touchstone for the design, I told the designer a personal story during our first meeting that proved to be of value. I mentioned seeing an art installation at the Dallas Museum of Art in which there was an enormous tent spike, over twenty-feet tall, which had been planted in the floor of the main gallery. Directly below the main gallery, in a lower level of the museum that was essentially a loading dock, the tip of the spike had come through the ceiling. I appreciate the artist's creativity and humor in showing "the other side," and mentioned the unexpected addition to the designer. From this brief moment, a story that took less than a minute to tell, the scenic designer created the world of the play. For Stoppard's play, giant swords placed in the world of *Hamlet*, were pushed through to the other side of the world. This created an epic, chaotic, and unexpected stage picture for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* that the audience could relate to on both an intellectual and emotional level. The two scenic elements that remained unchanged from *Hamlet*— the trapdoor and the "cracked earth"— ultimately offered both positive and problematic experiences. As means of bringing the Tragedians onstage through the barrels in Act 3, "Ophelia's" trapdoor proved to be the ideal method of transport for the actors. Once the barrels had been struck from the stage, the open grave also provided a dramatic means of

exiting the stage for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at the end of the final dumbshow. The “cracked earth” scenic element, while fixed in the stage floor, was also re-imagined through the lighting design. The light designer for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was able to change instrument location and the colors projected from the Mabee Theatre’s basement to redefine the visual impact of the “cracked earth.” For *Hamlet*, the “cracked earth” suggested decay and a steam-belching doorway to Hell in Elsinore Castle. For *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, the fragmented ground became a bridge to another world. As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern flip coins by the road during the opening scene, and the duo disappear and then reappear at the end of the play, the “cracked earth” helped reinforced the cyclic journey of the two characters. The failure to continue the “cracked earth” element around the swords, as originally designed, became my greatest disappointment with the set. The designer’s description of the blades pushing up through the floor with the “cracked earth” clinging to the metal struck me as a potentially dynamic stage picture. Whether this missing scenic element made a difference to the audience in terms of their understanding or appreciation of the play, I do not know. But knowing that the original idea was to have the giant swords violently coming up through the stage and not simply resting flat on the floor, leads me to believe that the potential energy and meaning was missing in the set.

With regards to what could have been done differently in addressing the missing design element for the swords, I think staying proactive during the scenic construction could have helped. To trust the designers and the technicians to do their jobs is important, but to stay actively involved in that aspect of the production myself is also crucial. If a discrepancy is found between the design and product, I should be more assertive in my role as director in making sure that the issue is successfully resolved.

Costuming

For costuming, the designs from the production of *Hamlet* translated over to *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* very easily. I was pleased with how silhouette and color of the costumes were used to communicate character and relationships onstage. With the majority of the costuming needs in the play already addressed in *Hamlet* (designs and construction for a cast of twenty-five), I was mistaken in assuming that the costuming additions and changes for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* would be done in a timely manner. The new masks built for the dumbshow were one of my assumptions. Despite my continual insistence of their importance in the production and time needed to rehearse with them, the masks were not available till the Grand Dress rehearsal. Thankfully, the actors using the masks were able to work with the new elements and the play did not suffer as a result. Also, the delay of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's quick-drop trousers caused unnecessary tension during the Grand Dress as well. Because the scene with the pants dropping involved props and blocking issues, a moment during which the two actors needed to feel comfortable, the sequence required more time to rehearse. Once again, it was through the actors' talent to adapt to new circumstances that the issue found a quick resolution. The actors, with only one night to rehearse, were able to perform the action of releasing the snaps in the trousers, move into position, and drop their pants seamlessly with hilarious results. I would have appreciated more time for the actors to increase their comfort level with their costumes, but again, what could have potentially been a problem in performance was not, because of the actors.

Reflecting on the collaboration with the costuming designer, there was a missing detail from her final product as well. One of the first conversations I had with the

costume designer concerned the difference between the costumes for *Hamlet* and the costumes for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. The designer mentioned she planned to age the Tragedian costumes to make them more rustic, an idea that I found appealing. One of the costuming choices I found to be distracting in the designs for *Hamlet* was the Tragedians' clothing. It looked too new. This traveling band of actors looked new, simply because the costumes had been constructed for the production. The idea of aging the fabric, making the costume (and characters) more rustic struck me as an ideal way to change the design between the two productions. The plan of aging the costumes, though agreed upon by the designer and myself, was not adopted, however. Through my passivity and assumption that the aging of the costumes would take place and with no communication from the costume designer stating otherwise, a potentially great idea was lost.

A new shirt built for the play also became an important lesson in detail and communication as well. Because the actor playing Rosencrantz in Stoppard's play was a different body type than his Shakespearean counterpart, the character shirt from *Hamlet* could not be reused. During the costume parade for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, four days before the play opened, I saw the new shirt worn by Rosencrantz. The designer had constructed it using a red fabric that I found distracting. Simply put, the color did not fit the character. The color red signals danger and aggression - the polar opposite of Rosencrantz's character motivation or attitude. Also, with Guildenstern wearing a long shirt made of off-white fabric, the red color interfered in the connection between the two characters. While Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's shirts shared the same silhouette and similar details on the sleeves and collars, the dark red fabric communicated a different message to the audience. Also, the color of Rosencrantz's shirt

was very similar to the red used in some of the Tragedian costumes. Once again, this seemed a misstep in semiotic communication to the audience. But, with no word from the designer regarding the new shirt before its construction and with the scheduling of the dress parade late in the process, there was no time available for alternatives. I was at fault for assuming how color, along with the other design considerations, would speak to the character, but unfortunately the designer had different ideas. After the play finished its week of performances, I spoke with the designer concerning Rosencrantz's shirt. When asked why she chose red fabric, she answered that it was material already available in the costume shop. While I do not think it detracted too much from the overall character in performance, I would have preferred a more complementary color for Rosencrantz to connect him with his partner. Had the detail of fabric color been communicated to me in advance and had I the time to speak with the designer, I am convinced that a more suitable solution could have been found for the new element.

Lighting & Sound

My collaboration with the lighting and the sound designers was a success in terms of my communicating the core concepts of the play. Also, through the designers' creative interpretations of those concepts and the continued give and take between us during the play's rehearsal process, the realization of their designs was a success as well. I trusted the designers to bring their best to the production and took steps to foster an environment of creativity and experimentation. Many of the lighting details brought to *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* by the designer were above and beyond any thoughts that I might have expressed during our initial meetings. The light sequence that was used to open the play as well as during the moments Rosencrantz and Guildenstern moved to a new environment, exemplifies the designer's insight and intuition. I

mentioned the metaphor of the wind being a continuing element in the play and the lighting designer was able to capture that sound visually onstage. Strange and ephemeral, the swirling force of colors and light produced the exact emotional tone I wanted for the transitional power of the wind. Through our brief conversations, based more on feeling and tone than intellectual analysis, the designer created a detailed visual and emotional environment for the play. This means of communicating a feeling, rather than cerebral message, applied to the sound design as well. In outlining the attitude of the scene with the designer, I found the recorded result to be exact or better than I had anticipated. Once again, the motif of the wind is a good example of this emotional tone in action. With only the briefest of explanations concerning its influence on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's world, the designer mixed multiple recordings of the wind and produced the ideal sound to match the moments. Because both lighting and recorded sound designs were rooted in a common emotional environment, the synergy between the two during performance provided a direct connection to the audience. It may have been difficult for an audience member to verbalize some of the ideas at work in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, but there would be no mistaking the emotional response.

My collaboration with the Tragedian band was a combination of simply explaining the tone of each song needed in the play and then letting the four actor/musicians discover how that feeling could be expressed musically. The six original songs, written by the actors for the play and the new arrangements they produced for the Elsinore dance and pre-show moments, fit exactly into the production's postmodern aesthetic and overall emotional tone. Energetic, fun, and unexpected, the live music enhanced the "in-the-moment" feeling I wanted the audience to experience during *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. The issue of volume during the Elsinore dance

was the only negative element in this collaboration. In retrospect, I should have experimented even more than I did with the band's placement onstage and their volume during the dance. The combination of running out of rehearsal time before the play opened and having to first address other concerns in the play, caused me to neglect the issue. I think perhaps a combination of working with the band, actor projection, and placement on stage for the delivery of dialogue could have helped the situation.

Choreography

For the Elsinore dance in Act 1, my initial goal of the moment being a grand, chaotic spectacle was fulfilled. The idea of combining humor and danger, of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern being out of sync with the royal court, was successfully addressed by the choreographer. Once again, the collaboration began with a brief meeting with the designer. I spoke in broad terms about the emotional quality of the scene, where it began and where it needed to be at the end, and then let the designer freely bring her own talents to bear. As I mentioned in the sound design section, the issue of sound balance during the performance was not adequately addressed. The live music element and actor movement onstage overwhelmed the play's dialogue and all possible solutions were not pursued. Had there been the opportunity of more rehearsal time, or perhaps a second week of performances, I am confident the issues of volume would have been resolved.

Acting

I take great satisfaction in my collaboration with the actors, not just the play's leads, but the entire cast of twenty-five. By setting a tone of respect for the project, of valuing the creativity of the individual and approaching each rehearsal with an enthusiastic attitude, my goal of "play with purpose" was met. I supported the actors'

choices and empowered them to take chances in creating a character. By stressing the basic expectations I held for the actors at the beginning of the rehearsal process, of learning the lines, showing up for rehearsals on time and ready to work, and having a good attitude, that standard lasted throughout the entire collaboration. Each actor was valued and their personal investment in the play was essential in creating a unified ensemble.

In terms of coaching the actors, my approach was based in their physical performance onstage. I would suggest a particular posture for an actor, hand positions for the Elsinore attendants, for example, and that small detail would give the performer focus. Actors need a purpose onstage. This becomes a challenge, particularly when the actor has no dialogue or direct action within a scene. By simply suggesting a body position, I could direct the actor efficiently without the need to spend any time verbalizing character motivation. My work with the cast in playing the comedy was a combination of the physical approach, attitude, and intuition. All of the actors in the cast displayed a natural sense of humor and often my role would be refining an actor's choice onstage. My hands-off approach in allowing the actors to discover the character and humor on their own was a double-edged sword at times. This freedom the actor had onstage in movement and line delivery gave the performances a fresh, spontaneous energy. If I had interfered too much in the actor's creative process, it would have hurt the collaboration, their performance, and the play. However, I did stress the importance of focus and self-control in the theatre. Without personal responsibility, the actor is in danger of self-indulgent behavior onstage. This is particularly true for a comedy, where the actor's desire for audience laughter can lead to overplaying the humor. Several of the cast members had experience in improvisational comedy. While this talent from the

actors was ultimately a benefit to the production, there were drawbacks during rehearsals. I appreciated the energy and humor the actors generated from their moments of improvisation, but there were occasions when Stoppard's script was overshadowed by it. I would gently remind the actors to remember there was a script to follow and focus was returned to the rehearsal.

Production as a Collaborative Act

My role in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* was simply to direct all the necessary aspects toward a unified production. My abilities of communication, respect and trust in the members of the collaboration, and to value their unique qualities, came into play during the process. This was a dance of sorts, a give and take, between my fellow collaborators and me. To begin with an idea and then include the designers, actors, and crew in the development of that basic structure was a rewarding experience. I came to value my willingness to go with a better idea if one transpired. My collaborators taught me to avoid the pitfalls created by pride and ego and to not let the fear of losing control of the production cloud my judgment. This openness to ideas and difference increased the strength of the collaboration process in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Through my investment in them, the collaboration deepened their commitment to the production and they challenged themselves to bring even more to the table.

Director Self Evaluation

For all of the intellect required in directing a play, my personal philosophy is that it first needs to connect with the artist's heart. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* appealed to me on both the intellectual and emotional level. Through that connection of head and heart, I was able to communicate the story to my designers, to the actors, and

ultimately, to the audience. In terms of directing challenges met in the process, I worked extremely well with a cast of twenty-five. I was able to adapt to a pre-existing set and costume design inherited from *Hamlet* and work with designers to create a unique spectacle, rather than a potentially second-hand production. My work with design students and a technical crew with varying degrees of experience was a success as well. I also had an excellent rapport with the stage manager. This positive relationship was essential in continuing the play's level of quality during performance. I was pleased that backstage drama and conflicts were nonexistent, a rarity for a cast and crew this size. I used the stage space of the Mabee theatre creatively and was able to call upon my imagination to solve some of the challenges within the script. The staging of the play's transitions— from the road to the castle, the castle to the boat, from the boat to limbo to the castle and then to the road again, was a challenge that I found satisfactory solutions for. By keeping the stage free of superfluous scenery and props and using the actors' movements to enhance the theatrical quality of the play, the transitions were timely and effective.

One of the more gratifying responses I received by an audience member came after the play closed. I had contacted the campus library to locate a few theatre reviews of the play's 1967 Broadway production. The librarian helping me at the reference desk was a woman who had been in New York in 1967 and had seen the original production of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. She spoke at great length about that Broadway experience and then mentioned she had seen Baylor's production of the play. Without knowing that I was the director, the librarian was most complimentary about the show and spoke directly to some of the choices I had made in the production. I appreciated the fact that she enjoyed our efforts and that the play had made a positive impression.

As for challenges I fell short of meeting in directing *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, the timing of the play proved to be the largest flaw in the production. While I had very purposefully chosen moments to slow down action and dialogue in the play –to highlight Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s waiting– those moments could have benefited from stronger direction. A clearer focus on timing from me during rehearsals should have happened and that attention would have continued into performance. A comedy needs the audience dynamic, the influence that laughter has in the timing of a performance and the production as a whole. Because of the unique nature of live theatre, the audience and its energy is different for each performance. While *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* did have consistent humorous moments for each of its six performances, individual audience reactions could not be predicted. Having seen all of the play’s performances during its run, I took pride in how the show continued to improve. Unfortunately, the play was limited to a single week of performances. The timing of dialogue, actors reacting to the audience, transitions and energy, would all have improved exponentially with a second week in front of an audience.

Despite my strength in communication, I need to continue to improve in that aspect. I need to be assertive in communicating the priorities of the play to my fellow collaborators; to be clear and assume nothing. To trust the members of the company is an important standard for a director to maintain, but stay on target with regards to scheduling and meeting expectations.

Conclusion

This play has been a journey and an education for me. My connection with *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* has given me an opportunity to examine my own views of theatre, and of life. I have enjoyed sharing this experience with others. To be

able to collaborate with others in creating art and to bring a purpose and meaning to a moment is one of the key reasons for theatre's existence. To tell a good story, make people laugh, and invite them to think, are also noble standards for the theatre. I made mistakes during this process, but my challenge now will be to learn and grow from these flaws. In this regard, my first theatre teacher, Douglas Hoppock, said it best: "Making a mistake is really not the important thing to focus on. It's what you do afterwards. Do you forget the experience and repeat the mistake? Or do you correct it, make it right and move forward in your life as an artist?"

The characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have taught me several things: to remember my history and yet be aware of the now, to laugh at the absurdity of life, and to make my connection with others count. There is still much I need to learn as a director, and I embrace that fact and look forward to continuing my journey in theatre and in life.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
Production Photos



Guildenstern and Rosencrantz flipping coins at the play's beginning and end.

© 2007, Baylor Photography-Robert Rogers



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at Elsinore Castle
© 2007-Sam Hough



Rosencrantz and Guildenstern waiting in the castle.
© 2007-Sam Hough



Tragedians' Dumbshow
© 2007, Baylor Photography-Robert Rogers



Guilденstern and Rosencrantz try and trap Hamlet.
© 2007, Baylor Photography-Robert Rogers



The Player appears on the boat to England.
© 2007, Baylor Photography- Robert Rogers



Death of the Player.
© 2007, Baylor Photography-Robert Rogers



Act 3 at Elsinore Castle.

© 2007, Baylor Photography-Robert Rogers



Cast and Crew for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*- Baylor University:
November 2006

© 2007, Baylor Photography-Robert Rogers

APPENDIX B

Photo Permission Letters

7 June 2007

To Whom It May Concern:

I, Sam Hough, Baylor University Theatre student, give permission to print the photos I took of the Baylor Theatre production of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (November 2006) to Martin Holden, Baylor Theatre graduate student, in his written thesis *A Director's Approach to Directing Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Samuel Hough". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the right of the word "Sincerely,".

Sam Hough

5 July 2007

To Whom It May Concern:

I, Robert Rogers, Director of Photography at Baylor University, give permission to use photos of the Baylor Theatre production *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (November 2006) to Martin Holden, Baylor Theatre graduate student, for use in his written thesis *A Director's Approach to Directing Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Sincerely,

Robert Rogers

Robert Rogers
Director of Photography
Baylor University
(254) 710-3841

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