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# THEATRE

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## Mini-Hamlets in Limbo

By John Weightman

IN *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Mr. Tom Stoppard has had, or appears to have had, a brilliant idea. It has always been said, at least by the old-fashioned critics, that Shakespeare's characters "go on existing" after they have left the stage, whereas those of the classical French dramatists—Racine's or Molière's, for instance—do not. A Shakespeare play is not, primarily, *une pièce bien faite*, a dramatic machine with a sleek and visible mechanism, although the mechanism may be there all right. It is more like a hunk of material ripped out of life. You feel that if it were put back into place, it would at once link up again in all directions, so that we could know how many children Lady Macbeth had and how the poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came" actually goes on. Mr. Stoppard has walked off into the wings to imagine the extra-textual reality of two characters in *Hamlet*, whose Shakespearian appearances are tantalisingly incomplete. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern never come on to the stage, and are never referred to, except as a couple, as if their psychological charge were too slight to allow them to exist separately. Hamlet greets them warmly as old friends and then, a little later, sends them off without compunction to their deaths. They appear fitfully, do nothing very much, and then disappear. This being so, Mr. Stoppard has decided that they can be developed as modern anti-heroes. They are siblings in nonentity, sharing a ridiculous Tweedledum/Tweedledee part; they never fully get the hang of the situation and they are swatted like flies through being accidentally caught up in the tragedy.

Before setting to work, he has obviously read his illustrious predecessors in the contemporary theatre, since the text abounds in allusions. At times it seems as if he has put *Waiting for Godot* inside *Hamlet*, and one admires the courage of a young man who has the nerve to do this. His characters needle each other in a vacuum, like the imprisoned souls in *Huis Clos*. Their prose is occasionally disguised Eliotish

verse, with a note of ponderous, philosophical inquiry which may, or may not, be taking itself seriously:

There is an art to the building up of suspense,  
Though it can be done by luck alone,  
If that's the word I'm after.

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A weaker man might be moved  
To re-examine his faith,  
If in nothing else  
At least in the law of probability.

The stage business becomes reminiscent of the mirror-like complexities of Genet, when the Players put on for them a play within the play within the play. All these echoes reinforce the up-to-date nature of this comedy team—one skinny, the other rather plump, one intellectual, the other rather dim, one slightly hysterical, the other quite robust, etc. If Hamlet himself can be looked upon as the great pre-Existentialist hero in European drama—bastardised by his uncle's usurpation, puzzled by contingency, uncertain about how to exercise his freedom, distressed to the point of craziness by the absence of essences—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, when treated like this, become little Hamlets, whose uneasiness is a wry, apologetic modern echo of the Prince's splendid Renaissance melancholia.

THE IDEA IS BRILLIANT and produces a certain amount of fun, but I don't think it is worked out with complete success. The action is not a legitimate extension of the minimal identity that Shakespeare gives Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*, and so Mr. Stoppard's play operates at an uncomfortable tangent to Shakespeare's. To reduce, or elevate, his protagonists to the status of "outsiders" with whom we can sympathise, Mr. Stoppard has to curtail their biggest Shakespearean scene, because in it they appear as rather silly time-servers, at the opposite pole from Horatio, the friend of sterling quality. Also, he has to put them into a limbo which is largely gratuitous.

We first see them during a pause in their journey to court, and they are presented as having uncertain memories of their past identity. Of course, Existentialist anti-heroes are frequently amnesiac or semi-amnesiac, since their anguish comes partly from living in the ever-moving present, with the past constantly crumbling into nothingness behind them. But Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot come out of the void into the action of *Hamlet*; they would only obey the summons if they understood it, and it seems portentous to surround them with questionings as if they were the Magi en route for an unknown Bethlehem or Vladimir and Estragon really waiting for Godot. Similarly, once they get to court, they would know what was going on there since, as courtiers, they would be in the thick of the gossip. On this point, Mr. Stoppard wobbles; he both shows them as understanding the situation to a certain extent and as deliberately killing time in limbo when they are not taking part in the action. Every now and again, the plot of *Hamlet* swirls in and around them and they fall into their Shakespearean roles in Shakespearean English, whereas before they had been talking in 20th-century voices. But it is as if they were members of the audience seeing only those snatches of *Hamlet* in which they themselves are involved, the rest of the play remaining a closed book ("I don't pretend to have understood. . . . If they won't tell us, that's their affair"). If this is meant as a symbol, it can only signify that we see our lives as an intermittent, incomprehensible dream, of which we never grasp the plot. But even those people most subject to *Angst* are never as much in the dark as this, except perhaps about collective, public events beyond their range. It may be true of thorough-going schizophrenics, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not made as pathological as that.

IN ANY CASE, at one point Mr. Stoppard completely contradicts this general impression of ignorance by making Rosencrantz and Guildenstern impersonate Hamlet and envisage the situation very penetratingly from his point of view:

Ros: To sum up: your father, whom you love, dies, you are his heir, you come back to find that hardly was the corpse cold before his young brother popped on to his throne and into his sheets, thereby offending both legal and natural practice. Now why are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?

GUIL: I can't imagine!

This is a witty demolition of Shakespeare's plot. There would be no *Hamlet*, if the Prince, instead of feigning madness and complicating all the issues, took the obvious course and

denounced his uncle publicly from the start as an arrant usurper, which is what he would have done, had he been a character in one of the historical plays. The Ghost, the Players, the interview with Gertrude, the trip to England are all, strictly speaking, unnecessary, and Shakespeare does nothing to justify them, apart from making them the occasion of splendid poetry. All those marvellous words cover up much ado about nothing. The King should not need Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to tell him why Hamlet is uneasy; his problem is rather to know why, in the circumstances, Hamlet has not already begun to topple him from the throne. However, I don't think we worry about this as we watch *Hamlet*. We take it for granted that neither the Prince nor the King does the straightforward, rational thing, because, if they did, Shakespeare would not have been able to give us this extended lament on the puzzling nature of human existence. But we do worry, or at least I worry, about the fact that Mr. Stoppard's heroes are not properly connected up to *Hamlet*, because *Hamlet* is, after all, where they come from. The other alternative is to say that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* has nothing to do with *Hamlet*, but is a dialogue between two near-Existentialist heroes, occasionally decorated with quotations from Shakespeare in an inconsequential, Pop-art manner.

EVEN IF THIS interpretation is the correct one, it is still difficult to see at times on what level the author wishes us to understand his text. The play opens with a long scene in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are whiling away the time by spinning coins. The result has been heads in about a hundred throws in succession. This is, of course, a miracle, which is presumably intended to enhance the sense of awe surrounding the summons to the court. Yet these intimations of Someone pulling strings from the Beyond for an Ultimate Purpose are not backed up by any metaphysical beliefs. Shakespeare can use the Ghost in his first scene, because the supernatural was still part of his accepted stock-in-trade. Eliot and Claudel are on weaker ground when they introduce miracles into their plays, since stage thaumaturgy costs nothing and proves nothing, but one could argue that, being convinced Christians, they no doubt believed in miracles, and therefore were free, as between Christians, to use imagined miracles for poetic effect. But Mr. Stoppard's miracle is a sort of *hors d'oeuvre*, a mere incidental theatrical gimmick, which gives an excuse for some mildly entertaining back-chat and funny stage-business, but has no significance beyond itself.

Perhaps the whole play is just intellectual

fooling around, with occasional stabs at seriousness. Now and again, one suspects that Mr. Stoppard is trying to be genuinely poetic and is inviting us to commune with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in some emotion. Since the performers are attractive, we allow ourselves to be beguiled and then are suddenly let down, because the poetry is spurious. For instance, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are pleased to meet up with the Players, who offer an unexpected distraction during the initial period of waiting. But the troupe turns out to be a sorry band, scraping a living by doing obscene pantomimes and forcing their least unattractive member to function as male whore. On discovering this, Guildenstern, "shaking with rage and fright," exclaims passionately at the disillusionment of the chance encounter:

... 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. . . .

The bird out of season and the tongueless dwarf are surely *kitsch*, but are we meant to appreciate them as being symptomatic of Guildenstern's camp vibration, or to enjoy them as poetry? I guess that Mr. Stoppard is hoping for the latter reaction but would settle for the former, and so the former it inevitably is. When, at the end, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go wittingly to their deaths "to give their lives a meaning," the effect is equally thin and camp.

As THE PLAY progresses, we see that the only other characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

commune with in their limbo are the Players and, in fact, the leading player, Graham Crowden, almost steals the show. This is another Existentialist commonplace; if the average person is so befuddled by contingency that he can only give himself an identity by accepting this or that form of "bad faith," then the actor can become the modern hero, since he sits loose to all identities and plays with them at will. At the same time, he only becomes "subject" by deliberately making himself "object" for contemplation by others; if the others stop watching, his identity as subject/object sputters away like a collapsing balloon. This is beautifully expressed in one of the speeches by the leading Player when he complains about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern asking his troupe to put on a show and then not staying to see it through. These exchanges between the Player and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem to me to be the best bits in the work. The Player has a strong presence, because he accepts only two basic forces, greed and lust, and looks upon all the superstructures as provisional and interchangeable; this is a rudimentary philosophy which works up to a point. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have likable non-presences; they are comparable to actors who haven't yet been adequately briefed about their parts and who are playing word-games or indulging in random reflections until the playwright or the director makes up his mind. Curiously enough, the newspapers say Mr. Stoppard was a journalist until he became a dramatist. He strikes me as being a born man of the theatre, but whether the expression is to be taken in its very good, or its less good, sense, I would not yet like to bet.

### Poem

Tabula rasa—Ha, ha!  
Beyond the ha-ha lie the fields—  
Cattle and sheep lazily grazing;  
Woods with leaves alight and blazing;  
Fields with five-barred gates, all leading  
To more fields, hidden adventure,  
Donkeys, thistles, four-leaf clovers,  
Picnics, toad-stools, safe lovers.  
Through and over stiles and hedgerows  
'Til the world sweeps wide and hazy.  
Wide horizons gently touching the sky.

*Lindy Murray*