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Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead



Two men flipping coins can drive us all mad. Especially if one of them flips heads 90 times in a roll, when one asks the other what the first thing that the other remembers is after all the stuff that he has forgotten, when one asserts that the fingernails (but not the toenails) grow after death, when another asserts that only red, blue, and green are real, and yellow is "a mystical experience shared by everybody," and when one character imagines mistaking a unicorn for a horse with an arrow in its forehead. These and other absurdities introduce the audience to a new production of Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" by the Porters of Hellgate, a production that integrates itself with performances of "Hamlet" featuring comedic geniuses and predictably inexplicable moments made more absurd by an metatheatrical ensemble bent on questioning itself.

Rosencrantz (Thomas Bigley) and Guildenstern (Gus Krieger) are two former friends of Prince Hamlet (Charles Pasternak) in service of King Claudius (Jack Leahy), who obtained his throne by killing Hamlet's father and marrying the widow Queen Gertrude (Maja Miletich). Stoppard's play is a reenactment of the Shakespeare original from the perspectives of the two minor characters. The Player (Micah Cover) who manages the troop of actors in "Hamlet" arrives to perform for the Denmark royalty, but the group turns out to be specialists in licentious melodrama. Nevertheless, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are given the task of enlivening Hamlet, who, unbeknownst to them, has learned from the ghost of his father of his uncle's treachery. The protagonists watch as the troop performs "The Murder of Gonzago," reenacting Claudius's murder of the king, before Hamlet is forced to exile to England after killing Polonius (Jamey Hecht), the nosy lord chamberlain. Without explanation, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are put on a ship bound for England, bearing a letter that will lead to Hamlet's death. While being attacked by pirates, Hamlet exchanges the letter and makes for Denmark, and the protagonists are bound for obscurity in a play that ignores their motivations.

The reflective Guildenstern is played expertly by Krieger, whose contemplative look can be exemplified by one line uttered during the coin-flipping episode: "a weaker man might be moved to reexamine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability." He expands upon this by illustrating the law of averages hilariously with the example of six monkeys thrown up in the air and landing on either their tails or their other body parts. All this is said without the slightest hint of a smile, which is what makes this performance so charming. Guildenstern also explains the lucky occurrence as 1. he's willing it, 2. time stopped dead, 3. divine intervention, or 4. the principle of independence, prompting well-timed and appropriately absent-minded responses from his partner Rosencrantz, who quite frequently forgets the question.

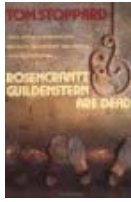


One of the highlights of this production are the players led by the Play Master, played by Cover. This group of

"transvestite melodramatists" ("we do onstage things that are supposed to be offstage") are best when doing "rape and rapiers," and their rhetoric is best seen in the generalizing, arrogant, philosophical Master ("we're actors, we're opposite of people"). Cover has his players do some illicit stuff involving the "Rape of the Sabine Women," where the victim is Alfred, who is brilliantly covered by Kevin Kelley, claiming they used to be purists. Cover has a knack for making the mundane sound important, and the important sound mundane. He gives the impression that he can play anything (as he claims, "I start on"), and unlike Hamlet (who knows a hawk from a handsaw only when the wind doesn't blow north-northwest), he is always consistent (he calls truth the currency of living), even if means he's consistently pretending. Suggesting that "language makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style," he quaintly fits one of the criteria Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are asking for, to have some consistency from whoever is inventing this play.

The anger expressed at the presumed author of "Hamlet" is made especially evident in this production. Rosencrantz, in yelling "fire" to prove that free speech exists, has a completely cynical look about him that mixes well with his British accent. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have trouble figuring out who is named whom between them, and can't make up which way to go, so decide not to go anywhere. They blame this inability to make a decision on the being that created them. As Guildenstern tells the sponge-like Rosencrantz, anybody could have done what they've done in this play, so why choose them? Perhaps most dramatically, after the pirates came and Hamlet disappears, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are left to wonder "who'd have thought that we were so important?" Bigley and Krieger fit like a pair, and it's hard to distinguish them. But they conclude perhaps somewhat unsatisfyingly, that "it is not enough" that they are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "to be told so little to such an end and still, finally to be denied an explanation."

The most dramatic moment in the play is delivered to an incredulous audience. Guildenstern gets fed up, and stabs the Player because his portrayal of death is not death itself. We believe that the Player has indeed died, only to have the company clap in unison announcing what a beautiful act it was. This is the atmosphere surrounding the production, with make-belief mixed with unspeakable sadness and beauty. As if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern died for some righteous cause and didn't know it.

"Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" is performed in repertoire with "Hamlet" at the Complex (<http://www.complexhollywood.com/index.htm>) in the Flight Theatre, Hollywood, California, until 14 of February, 2010.

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