

ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD BY TOM STOPPARD AS AN ABSURD PLAY

Anum Khalfay
SNDT University,
Mumbai, India

Abstract

Tom Stoppard was born Tomas Straussler in Czechoslovakia on July, 1937. His name was changed when his mother remarried British Army major Kenneth Stoppard; after the death of boy's father. Stoppard was educated from the age of 5 in English , in India and from the age of 9 in England. He left school at 17 to become a journalist. In 1916 at the age of 23, he became a full time writer. Stoppard worked as a freelance writer and Drama critic in London, writing stage plays, television plays, radio plays, short stories and his only novel, "Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon". The turning point in his writing career came in 1963 when his agent, in a casual conversation wondered who the king of England might have been during the time of Shakespeare's ' Hamlet ' .The question prompted Stoppard to write a one Act verse entitled 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear'. Later since his phenomenal success with 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead'. Stoppard has produced large body of works that continue to find intelligent, witty and filled with verbal display. Original works include 'Enter a Freeman (1968), 'The Real Inspector Hound' (1968) 'Jumpers' (1972), 'Every Goodboy Deserves a favour' (1977) , 'Night and Day' (1978), 'The Real Thing'(1982), 'The Real thing' (1982) , 'The Invention of Love' (1997).

Keywords: *journalist, British, Drama..*

ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD BY TOM STOPPARD AS AN ABSURD PLAY

- **Anum Khalfay**

Tom Stoppard was born Tomas Straussler in Czechoslovakia on July, 1937. His name was changed when his mother remarried British Army major Kenneth Stoppard; after the death of boy's father. Stoppard was educated from the age of 5 in English , in India and from the age of 9 in England. He left school at 17 to become a journalist. In 1916 at the age of 23, he became a full time writer. Stoppard worked as a freelance writer and Drama critic in London, writing stage plays, television plays, radio plays, short stories and his only novel, "Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon". The turning point in his writing career came in 1963 when his agent, in a casual conversation wondered who the king of England might have been during the time of Shakespeare's ' Hamlet ' .The question prompted Stoppard to write a one Act verse entitled 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear'. Later since his phenomenal success with 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead'. Stoppard has produced large body of works that continue to find intelligent, witty and filled with verbal display. Original works include 'Enter a Freeman (1968), 'The Real Inspector Hound' (1968) 'Jumpers' (1972), 'Every Goodboy Deserves a favour' (1977) , 'Night and Day' (1978), 'The Real Thing'(1982), 'The Real thing' (1982) , 'The Invention of Love' (1997).

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is an absurdist, existentialist tragicomedy by Tom Stoppard first staged at Edinburgh Festival, Fringe in (1966).Director of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" characterizes the play as

"dark, hysterical, odd, well known, funny play",

His statement sums up the absurdist tragi-comedy written by Tom Stoppard.

The major characters in "Hamlet" are given an insignificant role here and the misadventures of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern dominate the plot; caught up in events, they could neither understand nor control.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is a play in the Theatre of the Absurd, a sharp contrast with traditional theatre: In traditional theatre, characters have clearly defined roles and clearly defined

motives and desires. The Theatre of the Absurd emphasizes the randomness and absurdity of human nature.

The title "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" is taken directly from the final scene of Shakespeare's Hamlet. In the earlier scenes, Prince Hamlet, exiled to England by the King of Denmark (his uncle, who murdered Hamlet's father to obtain the throne) discovers on route a letter from the king of Denmark (his uncle, who murdered Hamlet's father to obtain the throne) discovers on route a letter from the king carried by his old but now untrusted friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The letter commanded Hamlet's death upon his arrival in England. Hamlet rewrites the letter to command Rosencrantz and Guildenstern death and escapes back to Denmark. By the end of Shakespeare's play, an ambassador from England arrives to report "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead".

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the play 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern' are schoolmates and childhood friends of Hamlet. They forget who they are quite often, it has been speculated that this provides some comedy to the play and it doesn't really matter which is which because the two would have to lead the same destiny. Rosencrantz is very simple minded and is okay with taking things at face value and letting other people think into it. Guildenstern is more of a thinker and worries what the consequences of an action will have on him.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern live in a world totally beyond their comprehension. The two men often misunderstand each other and engage in long nonsensical dialogues. The two characters could be classified as clowns but they sometimes have philosophical arguments in their ramblings. Characters and the dialogues between the characters often become abnormal. The result is a hysterical and entertaining piece of theatre that still has parts that are very poignant and dramatic. Every bit has double meaning and is existentialist and philosophical. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern works to break down the "fourth wall" between the actors and the audience. Throughout the course of the play, sometimes the actors separate from the scene and recognise the audience's presence.

At the beginning of the play ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN seem almost like blank caricatures rather than real characters. The only description Stoppard gives of them is that they are Elizabethan gentlemen and that Rosencrantz is nice but sees nothing weird about the peculiar coin flipping. Guildenstern is aware that it is strange. They represent two attitudes – Rosencrantz is carefree and Guildenstern is anxious. As the play moves on ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN become realistic characters. Rosencrantz experiences doubt and fear,

Guildenstern displays anger and disappointment and both men have moments of sympathy and tenderness for each other.

Their reactions at the end of the play are very different from what one might predict from the first scene. Rosencrantz is terrified but resigns himself to death. Guildenstern is confused and regretful, yet he vanishes from the stage with a carefree joke. Over the course of the play, ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN confront the absurdity of living in a universe dominated by randomness, whose motives are not known and can be described in a language that is frustratingly not clear and ambiguous.

By showing their development from empty vessels to full individuals, Stoppard suggests that the existential crisis they experience is what determines whether one lives a complete life. Only realizing life's absurdity and overcoming it by developing the ability to imagine and act on a range of experiences can we become fully human.

Tragicomedy

The term tragicomedy is often used to describe a serious play with a happy ending. In the 20th century it was mostly used in Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*. It fits Stoppard's play. It does not have a happy ending. But it more or less announces itself as a tragedy in the title (we know the two main characters will die). But the entire play is full of comic elements. In other words, their fate is pre-determined but they have fun goofing around on their way to it. Moreover, since ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN disappear, it's slightly unclear whether or not they actually die or if this is just a stage death. The ending pulls together a couple of themes that run throughout the play. The impossibility of capturing death on the stage and the tension between looking at the world as ruled either by chance or by fate. The impossibility of capturing death on the stage – relates very closely to a problem that Stoppard faced as he was writing the end of his play. He reached the part in the action where ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN die, but the whole discussion that precedes it is about the inability of a play to portray death. It's important that ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN do not die on stage, but simply disappear as Guildenstern himself predicts earlier in the play.

'You can't act death. The fact of it is nothing to do with seeing it happened. Its not gasps and blood and falling about that is what makes it death. It's just a man failing to reappear, that's all-now you see him, now you don't.'

Existentialism is the philosophical movement that focuses on the plight of the individual to seek meaning and purpose in a vast universe. Ultimately the individual is responsible for his of her own actions despite the prevailing uncertainty about right or wrong.

The playwright typically uses language as a barrier to communication. Language becomes confusing logic becomes circular. Although the character ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN are talking to one another, nothing is being said. No communication is being achieved. Stoppard also builds on the motif of how incomprehensible the world is through the character of Guildenstern constantly seeks to understand the world around him. He wants to know what is in the letter they have been sent. And finally, when they discover that death is inevitable, Guildenstern is angry because they have been told so little throughout the process. To remove the illusions people have about existentialism and to show them the real purpose of their existence.

The goal is to remove the illusions or meaning in people's daily existence so that the audience gets a sense of their true existential condition. This theory is based on the way both characters struggle to define themselves and the world they are in during the course of the play and their final conclusions that their destiny was ultimately their own fault that it could have been better had they done things differently. Stoppard these characters from shakespeare's Hamlet to explain their death stating that it was actually their own fault. Stoppard makes the character fall victims to their own actions and then having them reflect not doing things differently. In the last scene Guildenstern says, "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said no. But somehow we missed it" (He looks around and sees he is alone)

Works Cited:-

Stoppard, Tom "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead"

Web.13th March 1982 <http://www.benchtheatre.org.uk/plays80s/rosencrantx.php>

Mrjkerr.Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead"

Web. November 3,2009 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tysvvkuoroc>