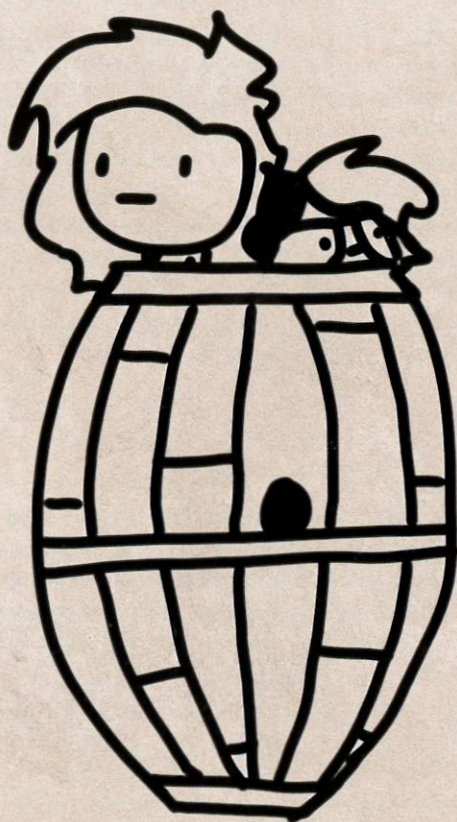


ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

A STUDY GUIDE



From your nihilistic,
existential dramaturgs,
Hannah Gunson-McComb
and **Greta Gebhard.**

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DRAMATURGS' NOTES

Rosencrantz asks Guildenstern, "Whatever became of the moment when one first knew about death? There must have been one, a moment, in childhood when it first occurred to you that you don't go on forever. It must have been shattering—stamped into one's memory. And yet I can't remember it." Of the whole play, this line has impacted me the most. Despite the knowledge that we all will die, there remains in human beings a hope for the future. As Rosencrantz suggests, we should be terrified of what will become of us, yet there remains in each of us the strength to keep going, to work for a brighter future, and to not give up on our existence. I find this hope in my own life as I often feel overwhelmed by everything going on around me. Yet unlike the characters in this play, I remember that I have control over my own life and my own happiness. Life is absurd and unfair, but the existentialist in me says that I have the power to define myself and confront the world as only I can and you can, too.

GRETA



I had a thought once: If there was no God, would I still pursue excellence? Every day I make goals and try to execute them, all in the pursuit of... what, exactly? Is it all just to ensure I get into heaven? Because I keep failing—spectacularly and miserably. It would seem that perfection, as a goal, is the slipperiest substance in this world. I think of Sisyphus, the guy commanded by Zeus to push a boulder up a mountain, only for it to roll back down to the bottom. Again and again he pushes, yet the boulder still rolls. And when a new day starts and I somehow still haven't gotten my life together, my goals become my boulder. Thus I ask myself: If there's no cosmic reward for this, would I still do it? In these times Albert Camus comes to me, speaking words of wisdom: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." Happiness as a response to futility seems insane, but the inverse isn't better. I suppose the only way to confront the absurdity of a life filled with failure is to be happy. Sisyphus has to be happy, for that is the only way to conquer his boulder.

My answer is yes, by the way. I would absolutely keep doing my best. Even if my existence ends in nothing but a box.

HANNAH



HAMLET RE-CAP

- ① King Hamlet of Denmark dies unexpectedly. His son, Hamlet, returns from college only to discover that his mother (Gertrude) married his uncle (Claudius), and Claudius is now ruling as the king of Denmark.
- ② The ghost of Hamlet's father visits him and demands that Hamlet kill Claudius to avenge him.
- ③ Hamlet shirks making the decision to murder and falls into a melancholy state, avoiding even Ophelia, the woman he has been wooing. Gertrude and Claudius call on two of Hamlet's good friends from college, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to discover the cause of his demeanor.
- ④ Traveling players arrive at Elsinore and Hamlet employs them to perform a play, mimicking the murder of his father. Claudius is unable to sit through the play; Hamlet interprets Claudius's behavior as a sign of his guilt.
- ⑤ Hamlet confronts his mother in her bedroom and kills Polonius, who was hidden behind a curtain to eavesdrop. Hamlet is banished to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accompanying him. He returns to Denmark after the ship is attacked by pirates.
- ⑥ After finding out that his sister Ophelia goes mad after her father's death and has drowned herself, Laertes returns from abroad in a vengeful rage. Claudius convinces him that it's Hamlet's fault and arranges a duel between them.
- ⑦ As they duel, Gertrude drinks poisoned wine intended for Hamlet; both Hamlet and Laertes are stabbed by poison tipped swords; Hamlet stabs Claudius; and moments after accomplishing his revenge, Hamlet dies.
- ⑧ Horatio survives to tell the tale to Fortinbras (Prince of Norway), who arrives at the end. He is accompanied by an ambassador from England who declares that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.



This is where our play starts.

Spoiler alert: everyone dies.



PHILOSOPHY

Part of what makes *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* so impactful is its exploration of several philosophical thoughts. Themes are woven between clipping dialogue and abundant questions. It can be complicated to disentangle this philosophical ball of yarn. Here's the dramaturgical breakdown of a few themes:

Nihilism

For a philosophy about nothing, it sure is something. With many philosophers and theorists having their own take on it, nihilism has taken on many forms and applications. Essentially, **nihilism is the belief that life and its various aspects have no meaning.** Often when we think of nihilism, perhaps we think of the guy with an insane moustache and a name that'll trip anyone up at the spelling bee: Friedrich Nietzsche. He's most known for originating the phrase: "God is dead." For nihilists, the world is void of meaning, purpose, and a chance at comprehending any truth at all.



Friedrich Nietzsche

Before you get too depressed, remember that nihilism is used in many ways! To Buddhists, nihilism is better known as "nirvana." No, not the grunge band, rather the end of death and decay. In non-attachment, non-grasping, non-possession, and nothing, there is peace and the acceptance of circumstances. Funny thing is, this mindset is more common than you'd think. Today's peaceful nihilism is abundant in "Gen Z" kids— the generation of middle-schoolers creating inexplicable Dadaist memes about life, it's nothingness, and the resulting serenity.

I know. I don't understand them either. But perhaps it's not about understanding...



Existentialism

Placing the human at the center of existence and experience is the focus of existentialism. As philosopher Jean Paul Sartre says, "... man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards." The existence of humans determines their ability to think, feel, and shape the world around them. **The existential attitude derives from a sense of disorientation, confusion, or dread in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world,** which causes many people to believe that nihilism and existentialism are the same philosophy.

The main difference between the two ideas is the authenticity to oneself required by existentialism. Because existence precedes essence, we have the ability to "create oneself" and then continue to live in accordance with this self. This authenticity gives people the freedom to make choices in direct correlation to that self and, in turn, take responsibility for those choices.



Jean Paul Sartre

Absurdism

When the brain is confronted with a scene that just doesn't make any logical sense, it's thrown into a state of "disequilibrium," which can be very uncomfortable. Or it can be incredibly funny—we're much more familiar with absurdist humor than we think! In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, there's a little bit of both comedy and tragedy.



In direct contrast with nihilism, **absurdism is humanity's endless search for life's meaning and value while acknowledging that there's a few hitches in the process.** We know that the universe is, well, absurd, and it doesn't work with us on most days. Albert Camus, a French philosopher and author, believed that we should just embrace it! Just give that schism between us and the cosmos a big hug and keep searching. We often clump absurdism with nihilism and existentialism because absurdism grew out of them. It makes a lot of sense that it would be present in a show that explores existentialism and nihilism!



You know what they say! Pirates can happen to anyone!

MOTIFS

Hamlet— A Stage for Philosophy?



Of all stories in the universe, Stoppard chose *Hamlet* to be his backdrop for the exploration of these stories. But why? I've heard some people describe Hamlet as a guy trying desperately *not* to follow through with revenge, and then, ultimately, doing just that. And while Hamlet debates murdering his uncle, he sits and philosophizes, which is the exact pattern that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern follow in this play. **They cannot decide what they want to do—look for Hamlet or wait for Hamlet—so they end up doing nothing but philosophizing**, and they die at the end. Perhaps there was no better choice for Stoppard than to mirror the structure of *Hamlet* to show the absurdity of that play, this play, and reality in general.

Coin Toss— Establishing Absurdism

Almost 100 coins land on “heads” in a row. How is that even possible? **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern begin their journey into the absurdist world of Elsinore with a game of spinning coins, and although their results are not impossible, it is highly improbable for that many coins to continually land on heads.** From that beginning scene, the coins continue to land on heads until suddenly, one lands on tails, and the spell is broken. Or is it?

Are Guildenstern and Rosencrantz trapped on this path towards death in the same way that the coins were trapped in a world without the law of probability? They continue down this path established for them by the script; but we know, and they know, that the events that will occur will be unexpected and . . . absurd.

*I shouldn't
be surprised.*

And yet...



Tragedians— Art v. Reality

In the middle of nowhere, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern run into a troupe of thespians whose leader launches into a speech about theatre and what they can do. We all love a rousing pep talk about why we love the arts; but Stoppard—is it really necessary?



They represent the side of nihilism that says “truth is impossible to find.”

Think about it: actors *pretend*. That's their job!

Sure, they might present what we consider universal truths, but at their core, actors are not the roles they play, they are different persons. Not only that, but have you ever seen a magic trick?

Technical theatre is really good at fabricating effects. Technicians make Elphaba fly in *Wicked*,

they land a helicopter on stage in *Miss Saigon*, and they “kill” people. Well, not really. Elphaba is connected to a cable, it's not a *real* helicopter, and I sincerely hope theatres around the globe aren't killing people!

*Please let this
be fake.*



We say “art is life,” but does that make it reality?

Question Game— Absurdism in Action

Remember how Camus urged us to keep searching for the truth, even if the truth is wibbly-wobbly? Rosencrantz and Guildenstern practice a little game they call “questions.” They can only speak to each other in questions. But why can't they just say what they feel?

Because looking for truth involves asking questions, of course! In addition to the back-and-forth being rather comical, it's quite a lot like Camus's ideal search for knowledge in the face of opposition. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are exemplary as they search for something that makes sense. . . . but they are nonetheless thwarted by a cosmos that withholds answers.

Why ask questions when they might not get answered?



A BIOGRAPHY OF TOM STOPPARD

The playwright Tom Stoppard was born Tomás Straüssler on 3 July 1937 in Zlín, Czechoslovakia. His parents were non-observant Jews, and his father worked as a physician at a shoe factory. The family was transferred to Singapore right before the Nazi invasion. In 1942, as the Japanese army closed in, the family was sent to Australia. Stoppard's father stayed behind to help (sharing his medical knowledge) and was killed in action. Tom was four years old.

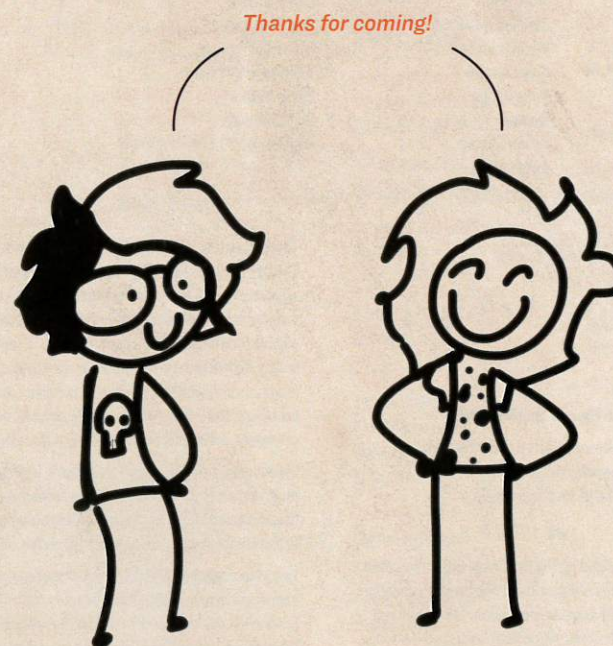
In 1945, Tom's mother married a British officer (Kenneth Stoppard) who moved the family to England. Tom Stoppard—having taken his stepfather's name—quit school in 1954 and began working as a journalist in Bristol. He wrote his first play, *A Walk on the Water*, in 1960. He continued writing plays, which were produced on a small scale in his beginning years. The performance of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1966 brought Stoppard acclaim that continued to rise, and the play was transferred to the Old Vic Theatre in London in 1967. He has continued to write since then, creating pieces such as *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974), *Arcadia* (1993), and the screenplay for the movie *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

Stoppard has won many awards for his playwriting including a Tony Award for Best Play in 1968 for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play in 1994 for *Arcadia*. In 2008, Stoppard was voted #76 on Time Magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in the world.



THE HISTORY OF ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead shot to infamy immediately following its 1966 premiere at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Comparable to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Stoppard's best-known play builds itself on existentialism and absurdism, meta-theatre and wit. Since its debut, the play has cemented itself in dramatic curriculums, but it is surrounded by a plethora of responses ranging from the favorable to the skeptical. While many have lauded Stoppard for his ingenuity, there are still many who criticize it in comparison to another absurdist play, *Waiting for Godot*. It's now more than fifty years later, and the play—while often produced—just can't escape its audience members' mixed feelings. Some say it is intelligent; some say it is too cerebral; some say its wit is clever; others say wit is its only redemption. What will you say about it?



Cartoons and sketches by Rockwell Gunson.

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