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# Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Died Today. Or, Maybe, Yesterday; I Can't Be Sure...

## **Abstract**

50 years on, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* continues to captivate and to entertain audiences with its darkly comic examination of existential themes of life, death, and indecision drawn from the pages, situations, and characters of *Hamlet*. First produced at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1966, the play opened at the Old Vic in London in 1967, and has been reprised there this season to rave reviews, with none other than Harry Potter in a leading role.

## **Keywords**

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead, *Hamlet*, theater, Edinburgh Festival Fringe, existentialism

## **Disciplines**

English Language and Literature | Literature in English, British Isles | Theatre and Performance Studies

## **Comments**

Presented as a pre-show talk prior to the screening of "*Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*" for the 2017 National Theatre Live Festival.

## PRE-SHOW TALK

# “Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead”

Saturday, September 9, 2017

7:15pm –7:40pm

featuring

## Christopher Fee

Professor of English at Gettysburg College



***Rosencrantz & Guildenstern died today. Or, maybe, yesterday;  
I can't be sure...."***

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**Biography:** Christopher Fee is Professor of English at Gettysburg College, a medievalist trained at the University of Glasgow who has studied the roots of Hamlet in medieval Norse, Latin, and English sources drawn from his own areas of specialization. A proponent of learning plays through performance, Fee teaches Medieval Drama courses which each end with the staging of a play, and Fee has twice taught a “Hamlet in Denmark” course in Copenhagen, each of which has culminated in a performance of the play at Kronborg Slot, aka “Hamlet's Castle” in modern-day Helsingør, known to Shakespeare fans as “Elsinore.”

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National Theatre Live Festival  
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Gettysburg, PA  
9 September 2017

*Rosencrantz & Guildenstern died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure....*<sup>1</sup>

50 years on, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* continues to captivate and to entertain audiences with its darkly comic examination of existential themes of life, death, and indecision drawn from the pages, situations, and characters of *Hamlet*. First produced at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1966, the play opened at the Old Vic in London in 1967, and has been reprised there this season to rave reviews, with none other than Harry Potter in a leading role.

In *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are old school friends that King Claudius and Queen Gertrude have enlisted to try to delve the deeps of the “antic disposition” of the melancholy Prince.<sup>2</sup> Hamlet quickly ascertains that his old chums indeed “were sent for,”<sup>3</sup> and knows therefore that their ultimate loyalty is to the Uncle-cum-Step-Father he suspects of the murder of old King Hamlet, and thus he does not trust them and does not take them into his counsel, as he does his best friend Horatio, his fellow student from the University of Wittenberg. When Hamlet kills Polonius—the king’s advisor who was hiding behind the arras in the Queen’s chamber listening in on Hamlet and his mother—King Claudius realizes how dangerous Hamlet has become, and packs him off to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as an escort, equipped with a sealed letter calling on the English king—a Danish vassal—to put Hamlet to death immediately. Equal to the challenge, however, Hamlet steals the letter while his old friends sleep, opens it, and changes it to condemn Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He then

releases it, but is captured by pirates who attack the vessel carrying him to England. The pirates use Hamlet gently and return him home unscathed, with the hope of reward from the Danish royal court. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, meanwhile, sail on to their doom in England, totally oblivious to the fate which awaits them.

Although Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are killed off stage on the extreme periphery of the action of the play, their deaths are announced with great expectation of gratitude by the English ambassador at the very end of the play, who—in the place of the warm welcome he thought to deserve with the tidings he brought—finds the total disruption and slaughter of the Danish court, with the Norwegian Prince Fortinbras poised to claim the Danish Crown.

But why this fascination with Denmark, and how do the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern help to root the play in its historical context, as well as to emphasize connections between the Danish Court of Claudius and Hamlet and the English Court of King James?

Scholars debate what Shakespeare actually knew about Denmark and what his exact sources for *Hamlet* might have been, but it is certain that the England of around 1600 which produced the play would soon have strong ties to the Danish realm, and after the Treaty of Berwick in 1586 declared England and Scotland allies, perhaps the writing was on the wall: James the I of England (who was James the VI of Scotland) soon would succeed Elizabeth on the British throne in March of 1603, and his Queen Anne was a Danish princess; some suggest that this Danish play was written with Anne in mind, while Shakespeare's more infamous "Scottish Play" was written for James. In any case, such a connection offers one reason that Shakespeare set *Hamlet* in Elsinore, the Danish Helsingør, site of Kronborg Slot, popularly known as "Hamlet's

Castle,” even though the original Danish source text was based in Jutland. On 20 August 1589, the marriage of Queen Anne and King James took place by proxy (the Earl of Leith stood in for James) at Kronborg. Storms prevented Anne from joining her husband in Scotland in September, 1589, and in October James joined Anne in Oslo, where they were married again on 24 November 1589. On 21 January 1590, the happy pair joined the Danish court at Kronborg, where the royal couple were wed again, and Anne’s sister Elisabeth was married to the Earl of Brunswick there on Easter of that same year. On 21 April 1590, James and Anne left Denmark, never to return.<sup>4</sup>

Another reason Shakespeare might have set his play at Elsinore was that Kronborg Castle was well-known to English sailors and merchants because of the infamous “Sound Dues” charged to ships which wished to pass into the Baltic Sea. There are even records of English actors of Shakespeare’s generation performing at Kronborg before the composition of *Hamlet*. Kronborg Castle was a massive, well-known, and instantly recognizable manifestation of Danish Royal power, prerogative, and prestige; from its initial construction as a means of collecting duties and dissuading piracy, Kronborg was an assertion of the authority and ambition of the Danish Crown, and hence offered a perfect setting for Shakespeare’s play about power and politics in Denmark.

In the context of Danish politics and symbols of power associated with the Danish Court, it is worth noting that “Rosencrantz” and “Guildenstern” were, indeed, significant names in Denmark at the end of the sixteenth century, and that numerous scions of these two houses played important roles in Danish government and diplomacy throughout Shakespeare’s

lifetime; indeed, according to some studies, something like 10% of the aristocrats involved in the coronation of Christian IV in 1596 bore one of these two surnames.<sup>5</sup> Another interesting point involves the earliest versions of the names of these characters in the play: In the first (aka “bad”) Quarto of *Hamlet* (1604) Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are actually called by the far more English “Rosencraft” and “Gilderstone.” In later versions, we see the more familiar—and more accurate—Danish names. In historical context, this correction (by Shakespeare? by the company? by the printer for accuracy?) to Danish names seems purposeful.

Shakespeare is not generally believed to have had first-hand knowledge of the earliest Scandinavian sources of the Hamlet tale, although he is often supposed to have come across the story in the French translation of Francois de Belleforest, who included a version of this tale in Volume V of his *Histoires Tragiques*, first published in 1576.<sup>6</sup> There also seems to have been a now-lost English play dubbed the *ur*-Hamlet by scholars, perhaps composed by Thomas Kyd, and performed in the 1580’s.<sup>7</sup> In any case, Belleforest’s source for his story was *Amleth*, an early version of the Hamlet story recorded by the Danish Saxo Grammaticus in his early thirteenth-century *Gesta Danorum*, “Acts of the Danes.” In this prototype of *Hamlet*, Amleth's uncle Fengo, jealous of his brother Horwendillus's success, kills him and marries his widow. Amleth only survives by feigning believable madness. Amleth kills one of Fengo's retainers who was hidden in straw trying to eavesdrop, and Fengo sends Amleth to England with two retainers and a letter to kill Amleth. Amleth exchanges this for one condemning the retainers and requesting the king's daughter's hand for Amleth. Ironically, Amleth claims *wergild*, or “man-money,” a traditional Germanic blood-money payment from the English king for the death of

the two retainers. The gold Amleth receives for these two men he melts down and hides in two sticks.

Although provided with a more compelling back-story by Shakespeare, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are ultimately mere pawns in *Hamlet*, utterly disposable and without any real value or merit; their lives prove inconsequential to the plot of the play, and their deaths change the course of events not one whit: They are not even redeemed into gold as were their counterparts in *Amleth*. Thus a literary allusion to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern references the small, unimportant characters on the peripheries of great events, grist for the mill of fate, a concept developed more fully in another early Scandinavian source: “Amleth” is the Latinate version of the Icelandic “Amloði,” which is referenced in a kenning in an early eleventh-century verse attributed to Snæbjorn, an explorer and poet. In his Prose Edda of ca. 1230, the Icelandic Snorri Sturluson cites and explains the verse: “Tis said, sang Snæbjorn, that far out, off yonder ness, the Nine Maids of the Island Mill stir amain the host-cruel skerry-quern; they who in ages past ground Hamlet’s meal. The good chieftain furrows the hull’s lair with his ship’s beaked prow. Here the sea is called Amlodhi’s Mill.” The Nine Maids are the daughters of Ægir, the Norse God of the Sea, while the surf crashing on the gravel and stones of the shallows, shattering ships, is the great “mill” of an ancient sea-god or storm-demon, and the sand is his “meal.” This reference is linked most closely to the scene where Fengo’s men walk along the strand with Amleth and they bid him to look at the “meal,” at his feet, by which they mean the sand.

Although I am certainly not suggesting that Shakespeare had direct knowledge of the oldest Scandinavian echoes of the Hamlet story, it seems likely that whatever sources he employed transmitted some elements of rather old and profound ruminations upon the workings of fate and the nature of individual destiny. Perhaps most notably, these ancient sources and analogues to *Hamlet* help us to understand the broader existential context of these two seemingly minor characters: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are cast into the grinding maw of fate without any knowledge of how or why they came to their sudden and ignominious ends, and their clueless demise is a stark reminder of how tangential we all are in the great scheme of things, bit players—even the best of us—caught on the very edges of the great stories of our times.

Whatever his knowledge of the Scandinavian sources of *Hamlet*, this is the major theme that Tom Stoppard took up in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*: Stoppard's work blends an absurdist examination of fate, existence, and the delusional fiction of self-determination with various scenes and aspects of Shakespeare's play, although—in an “through the looking-glass” way, the bit players have become central characters and the central characters are thrust from the limelight into the shadows at the edges of the stage. When Hamlet and the Court of Claudius do erupt onto center stage, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are forced back into the confines of the roles relegated to them in *Hamlet*. On their own, however, they often philosophize on the meaning—or meaninglessness—of life, and articulate a confusion which reflects an absurdist view of the human condition. Pontificating upon death, for example, Rosencrantz laments to Guildenstern, “Eternity is a terrible thought, I mean where's it going to end?” (II. I. 71). Rosencrantz also articulates a fundamental truth of the human condition when

he notes that the tiresome treadmill of life can seem as a mere prelude to death; as he puts it, "They'll have us hanging around till we're dead" (II. I. 93). Their ruminations on fate and the inevitability of death foreshadow the necessary ends towards which both plays inexorably move; their casual and callous understanding that death awaits us all is counter-balanced by a personal desire to remain alive that emphasizes a fundamental hypocrisy of human nature.

The play opens with the pair on the road, with only the vaguest notion of why, and only the dimmest memories of the past or interest in the future. The central action of the opening sequence is the flipping of a coin, which lands on heads time after time after time, prompting a philosophical commentary on fate. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's reality seems an abstraction and their philosophizing a distraction, although from what is not immediately clear. As in *Hamlet*, the arrival of a roving troupe of players emphasizes that "all the world's a stage,"<sup>8</sup> and acts as the catalyst which finally ends the coin-flipping streak, a moment which signals a turning point: Our two protagonists now will be catapulted from the fuzzy margins of their experience on the road into the bright lights of the center stage at the Danish court in Elsinore, and from there to certain death in England. Just as the play-within-a-play facilitates the plot movement in *Hamlet*, the Players in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* steadily shepherd the pair forward towards their doom.

As the Player notes to Guildenstern, the life's blood of theater is death: Nothing enlivens the stage like a dramatic death, and nothing kills a scene like a lackluster demise; in his words, "there's nothing more unconvincing than an unconvincing death" (II. I. 77). More to the point, the interaction between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the Players underscores the fact

that death is the natural outcome of our common experience, on stage as well as in life. To emphasize this point, the Player assures Guildenstern that the play can't end as long as anyone is breathing; as the Player puts it: "Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusions [ . . . ] It never varies - we aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies" (II. I. 79). This sums up the fatalistic and deterministic perspective of the play when he emphasizes that "there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means" (II. I. 80). Although his words seem to contradict those of the Player, Guildenstern aptly foreshadows his own impending off-stage demise when he tells the Player that death is "just a man failing to reappear [ . . . ], an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death" (II. I. 84).

The sympathy we might naturally feel for our confused protagonists, however, is mitigated by their own cynical acceptance of the death sentence for Hamlet they discover that they carry for Claudius, so that when Hamlet substitutes their own death warrant for that letter, their own words about the immutable nature of Destiny seem both prophetic and poetically just.

Guildenstern memorably rationalizes his passive role in Claudius's plot to kill Hamlet when he waxes philosophically that "he is mortal, death comes to us all, etcetera, and consequently he would have died anyway, sooner or later" (III. I. 110). So shall we all.

As *Variety* recently noted, Tom Stoppard was almost unheard of until *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* "caused a sensation at the Edinburgh Festival before opening in a National Theatre production in April 1967."<sup>9</sup> The history of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are*

*Dead* begins in 1963, when his agent gave the young Tom Stoppard the idea for a farce about Hamlet's two hapless school chums.<sup>10</sup> While the original version developed the next year combined elements of *Hamlet* with some from *King Lear*, Stoppard revised the play in 1965 into a two-act version more anchored at Elsinore. On the strength of this work, the Royal Shakespeare Company commissioned a re-tooled three-act version of the play. When—due to financial difficulties—the RSC's option on the play expired before the show had opened, an Oxford student group secured the rights to perform the work at the Fringe of the Edinburgh Festival in August of 1966. The theater critic for *The Observer* declared the resulting production an “erudite comedy, punning, far-fetched, leaping from depth to dizziness....” Noting Stoppard's debt to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the critic called the play “as witty and vaulting as Beckett's original is despairing.”<sup>11</sup> The National Theatre was at that time housed at the Old Vic, and no less a luminary than Laurence Olivier, then the National Theatre's Director, determined to secure and produce the play. Stoppard was at that time the youngest dramatist in the history of the National Theatre, and he worked with its youngest director, Derek Goldby, who was at that time 26. The play opened at the Old Vic to rave reviews on Tuesday, 11 April 1967.

The production we are about to see has been lauded by a number of critics; one review in *The Guardian* declared it a “beautifully judged production,” and gushed that, “Daniel Radcliffe and Joshua McGuire's split-second timing ensures this well-judged production of Stoppard's classic fizzles with life....”<sup>12</sup> Calling this “50th anniversary production” “a revival of substance,” a recent *Variety* review also credited the director of this iteration with “near ideal control of pace,” showcased by “the dizzyingly competitive gamesmanship of the intellectual word-spinning

between the title characters,” and suggested that the lightning speed of the interchanges, in combination with blocking which foregrounds the leads front and center, helps “audiences connect to the characters and lap up Stoppard’s ideas of the role of random chance, the presence of death and the search for meaning in life.”<sup>13</sup>

Upon its opening, Stoppard’s play immediately invited comparison to the work of Samuel Beckett, whose post-war rejection of traditional conceptions of the theatrical had been seen as revolutionary just a decade or so before. In the intervening years, however, many productions of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* have been criticized for failing to live up to the verve and good-natured fatalism of the original production. The present production has been roundly praised in this regard, however, and a recent *Variety* review gushed that, “[i]ndeed, rarely has the tone of the show borne so much resemblance to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, a major influence on the play’s fundamental existentialism. Both feature a duo killing time as they wait for someone to arrive to give them purpose. There are also echoes of Beckett’s *Play*, his 1964 study of purgatory in which three characters struggling to find meaning to their lives are trapped in urns, similar to the three barrels on Fleischle’s set.”<sup>14</sup>

There will inevitably be those who will be highly critical of the former Harry Potter in any serious role, however, simply because Daniel Radcliffe was lucky enough to fall into the popular role of his generation as a child. In this case, however, this is not fair to Radcliffe, nor to Stoppard, nor to the play itself. *The Guardian* critic noted that “the casting is clever,” and had praise for Radcliffe in “the part of the blunker of the two clowns, the one who is probably Rosencrantz, though no one can be quite sure.” This reviewer noted that the show depends

upon the timing and chemistry of the two leads, declaring that in this case, “[t]hey feed each other, as they should, like a comedy duo....” The *Variety* reviewer calls Radcliffe's performance “unexpectedly moving,” noting that here Radcliffe plays his role with well-conceived, seemingly “effortless stillness,” granting his character “a winning haplessness.”

I would argue that *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* is a play explicitly and implicitly designed to play with our expectations, to call into question our sense of identity and importance, and to blur the lines between what some might term as “high art” and what we commonly refer to as “pop culture.” Moreover, as these bit players on the stage of *Hamlet* are called from the fringes of an iconic tragedy into the spotlight of their own existence, we are all challenged to see ourselves and our own lives—always at the center of our personal experience—as both profound and banal, at one and the same time as existentially central and excruciatingly marginal. Radcliffe’s performance suggests that he was cast at least in part because of his skill as an actor, and his box-office draw may well be a happy coincidence in this regard. Most strikingly, however, Harry Potter himself might be seen as something of the melancholy prince figure in the context of his own Young Adult Fantasy universe, and recasting such an iconic figure into one of the nearly interchangeable everyman title characters of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* seems to me a stroke of absolute genius.

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<sup>1</sup> With all due apologies to Albert Camus’s “L’Étranger”: “Aujourd’hui, maman est morte.”

<sup>2</sup> *Hamlet*, I v l. 179. All citations from Shakespeare, William, and Robert S. Miola. *Hamlet*. NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010.

<sup>3</sup> *Hamlet*, II ii l. 255.

<sup>4</sup> All dates from Dollerup, Cay. *Denmark, Hamlet, and Shakespeare: A Study of Englishmen’s Knowledge of Denmark Towards the End of the Sixteenth Century with Special Reference to Hamlet*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Dollerup, 211.

<sup>6</sup> Miola, xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Miola, xiii.

<sup>8</sup> *As You Like It*, II vii l. 139.

<sup>9</sup> All citations from *Variety* were taken from Benedict, David. “London Theater Review: Daniel Radcliffe in ‘Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead’” *Variety*, 8 March 2017.

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<sup>10</sup> All citations from *The Independent* were drawn from Rosenthal, Daniel, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: 50 years on, Tom Stoppard's Play Returns to the Theatre where it Made its Name." *The Independent*, 13 March 2017.

<sup>11</sup> All citations from *The Observer* were excised from Bryden, Ronald, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead." *The Observer*, 28 August 1966.

<sup>12</sup> All citations from *The Guardian* were culled from Clapp, Susannah. "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead review – a Great Double Act." *The Guardian*, 12 March 2017.

<sup>13</sup> All citations from *Variety* were taken from Benedict, David. "London Theater Review: Daniel Radcliffe in 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead'" *Variety*, 8 March 2017.

<sup>14</sup> All citations from *Variety* were taken from Benedict, David. "London Theater Review: Daniel Radcliffe in 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead'" *Variety*, 8 March 2017.