

# Metadrama and Themes in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

## LE THEATRE DES YUAN ET LES THEMES DANS *ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN SONT MORTS DE TOM STOPPARD*

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**Abstract:** English playwright Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is one of the most successful adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, transformed from a revenge tragedy into an Absurd drama. The two minor characters in Shakespeare's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are taken into limelight on Stoppard's stage and are apparently at a loss in their new world, thrown into a predicament far beyond their understanding. Like other plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* presents in philosophical ways man's lack of absolute values, the problem of freedom and the uncertainty of knowledge and perception. The themes of the play have been familiar in contemporary literature — confusion, helplessness and the absence of identity. This paper is to try a closer look at the application of metadrama in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* to see how the metadramatic is used to reinforce the themes of man's confusion, helplessness and the absence of identity in the play.

**Key words:** Stoppard, metadrama, theme

**Résumé:** La pièce du dramaturge anglais Tom Stoppard intitulée *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sont morts* est l'une des adaptations les plus réussies de *Hamlet* de Shakespeare. La tragédie de vengeance est transformée en une pièce absurde. Deux figurants *Rosencrantz et Guildenstern* dans la pièce de Shakespeare sont portés sur le devant de la scène par Stoppard. Désorientés sur la scène, ils tombent dans la détresse. Comme d'autres pièces absurdes, cette pièce pleine de philosophie démontre le manque de conception de la valeur parfaite, la détresse de la liberté et l'incertitude de la cognition de l'homme. Ses thèmes sont familiers à la littérature contemporaine- perplexité, solitude et manque de sentiment d'identité. Et l'expression de ces thèmes doit beaucoup à l'utilisation des techniques propres au théâtre des Yuan dans la pièce de Stoppard. L'article présent vise à étudier comment Stoppard emploie les techniques du théâtre Yuan pour faire ressortir ces thèmes.

**Mots-Clés:** Stoppard, théâtre des Yuan, thème

### 1. METADRAMA IN *ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD*

The themes of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* have been familiar in contemporary literature --- anxiety and confusion of life, the helplessness under forces impervious to reason, the absence of identity and faith, which are common concerns of the Theatre of the Absurd. Stoppard presents in philosophical ways the lack of absolute values, the problem of freedom, the uncertainty of all knowledge and perception (Brasell, 1985). As far as I could see, the title *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are*

*Dead* (hereafter '*R and G*') itself has indicated the major themes of the play. Like the implication of the modern colloquialism "You are dead", Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (hereafter '*Ros*' and '*Guil*') are in trouble. The two attendant lords from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are thrown by Stoppard into a predicament far beyond their understanding, striving to make sense of their existence yet still left identityless and helpless. Too trivial and insignificant lives the pair live, with inability for any decisive action, Ros and Guil have long been living dead, as the title has proclaimed even before they make their entrance in the story. The revealing of these themes owes greatly to Stoppard's employment of metadrama, which could be the most characteristic of the play. This paper is to try a closer look at Stoppard's metadramatic

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devices in *R* and *G* to see how they contribute to reinforcing those themes.

## 2. METADRAMA

The term “metadrama” or “metatheatre”, coined by Lionel Abel in his *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* in 1963, has become a familiar notion in the world of theatre. Metadrama generally refers to “the play within the play”. Richard Hornby (1986) briefly defined metadrama as “drama about drama” (p31). There are some other definitions of metadrama: “The meta-theatrical play that uses the stage-as-stage to present life as theatricality has as one of its goals an examination of the distinctions between art and life....This is the type of play about playing, about theatricality, about the human impulse to create fictions and revise reality” (Understanding Plays, Millie Barranger); It is “a form of antitheatre, where the dividing between play and real life is erased.” (Dictionary of Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis, Patrice Pavis)<sup>2</sup>. In other words, a metatheatrical play does not present life as it exactly is, on the contrary, it may present actions that are alien, stylized or absurd to distant audience from the theatrical illusion on the stage. It deliberately marks the boundaries the conventional theatre tries to hide and constantly reminds the audience of the relationship between performance and reality. Metadrama is self-conscious as a medium between art and life and is capable of exploiting its own conventions and devices.

The prefix meta- comes from Greek that means “beside, after; about; beyond, transcending”. Thus Metadrama means to implement elements other than the story itself into stage. These elements often help to develop the story, provide an underlying way of thinking about life and the art of theatre itself. Metadrama is a means of discovering truth, and in some cases it produces extraordinary aesthetic insights, which have been spoken of as “estrangement” or “alienation” (p32). Hornby listed five possible varieties of conscious metadrama, which sometimes overlap with one another<sup>3</sup>:

The play within the play.

The ceremony within the play.

Role playing within the role.

Literary and real-life reference.

Self reference.

(p32)

The play within the play is generally divided into two categories: the inset type and the framed type. In the inset type, the inner play is secondary to the main action. It is like an interlude within the primary outer play, like *The Mousetrap* in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. While watching *The Mousetrap* performance, the characters fully acknowledge the existence of the performance and they comment on it. Another example of the inset type is Chekhov’s *The Sea Gull*, where the young playwright Treplev puts his play on stage, where there is a lot of discussion about art, literature and drama. Whereas in the framed type, the inner play is primary, the outer play a frame, like the *Induction* in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. The *Sly* episodes are very minor part of a whole, framing the primary inner play, which *Sly* and his fellow watchers are fully conscious that they are watching a performance.

The play within the play device is reflective and expressive of the playwright’s or audience’s outlooks about life. Modern drama uses the device as a metaphor for a illusory or false world we live in, which seems to be vivid and exciting, like the play we are watching (since we are constantly reminded that the inner play is just an illusion), is actually a sham.

The ceremony within the play is widespread in drama due to the fact that drama originates from religious rituals. Though the ceremony within the play is less inherently metadramatic than the play within the play, it is, as the latter, metadramatic in the sense of observing a cultural phenomenon via theatrical performance, and thus generates an interest in the nature of performing.

One can always find in a play some form of ceremony, like a wedding, a party, a funeral, or a game/match, etc. However, ceremonies turns to be quasi-ceremonies in contemporary theatre, especially in the Theatre of the Absurd where ritual and ceremony have lost their meaning in this absurd world, but the characters attempt to make meaning out of their trivial life by inventing their own “ritual” or “ceremonies”, something they do repeatedly (like those “guests” in Genet’s *The Balcony* who frequent the brothel to play roles they cannot be in real life). This kind of ceremony may impenetrate throughout the play, and unlike the real ceremonies, it increases the feeling that the world is meaningless.

There are two broad types of ceremony within the play: fulfilled and unfulfilled. Generally speaking, ceremonies fulfilled bring feelings of harmony and happiness while those unfulfilled create feelings of disorientation and sadness. Modern farce makes wide use of unfulfilled ceremony. Postmodern theatre of the absurd drama mixes farce and tragedy, in which the characters desperately repeat their private invented “ceremonies” but end up in vain.

**Role playing within the role**, like the ceremony within the play, is a widespread dramatic device. It occurs when a character takes on a role different from

<sup>2</sup> Sources without page number are from the Internet. <http://www.wooster.edu/programinwriting/mathapproach.html>

<sup>3</sup> All the rest of this part about metadrama theory is by Hornby.

his usual or true self ---- the doubleness of the portrayal, like Sly's made-believe status as a lord in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Nora's being a doll in *A Doll's House* and the brothel patrons in *The Balcony*.

Role playing within the role is particularly suited to the drama, because it adds a third metadramatic layer to the audience experience: apart from the role itself of a character, he is playing another role, but the character himself is being played by an actor. As an excellent device for delineating character, role playing within the role shows not only who the character is, but what he wants to be. It builds up ambiguity and complexity with regard to the character.

Therefore, the use of role playing within the role raises questions of human identity. It is a means for exploring the concerns of individual in relation to his society. The growingly complicated society has made identity an even more complex problem, as can be seen in a good deal of modern drama where the characters often have no true identity at all.

**Literary and real-life reference within the play** is the disruption into the main play brought by the direct or indirect (like allegorical) reference to another literary work or works and the allusion to real persons, real places and real events etc. However, the degree of metadramatic estrangement created by this kind of reference depends largely on the degree to which the audience recognizes such allusion. If the audience happens to be familiar with the reference, there could be the effect of "seeing double". Literary and real-life reference within the play turns the audience's attention to related persons, opinions, issues, situations that they have talked, thought or experienced, and thus may enrich their vision, understanding and insight of life and society. Eliza's situation in *Pygmalion* can be related to the myth of Pygmalion about the sculptor who falls in love with his statue. And the play also contains a modern allegory in that Eliza, like Nora in *A Doll's House*, is treated like an object of men, finally breaks free of male control, stepping out of the house.

Citation, allegory, parody and adaptation are forms of conscious literary or real-life references that are metadramatic.

**Self-reference within the play** directly calls attention to the play itself as an imaginative world and thus is strongly metadramatic. At the end of the last Act in *The Tempest*, Prospero steps out of the world of the play, and directly addresses the audience: "...pardon'd the deceiver, dwell / In this bare island by your spell; / But release me from my bands, / With the help of your good hands...". He is inviting applause from the audience who is actually made to reflect the play as an artificial construction. He is not Prospero, rather he is an actor or director of the play. The epilogue is a reference to art itself as drama.

Self-reference is the most intense form of metadrama. It has the effect of making the audience examine consciously what lies behind the play and

controlling their response to the world of drama. Since how they perceive the drama is also the means by which they see the world at large. When dialogues move toward the nature of art, they also move toward the play as self-reference. The audience will naturally turn their attention to the play they are watching, trying to see if the nature of art in question applies to the play. Thus the reference creates multiple reflections of both the play itself and the art of theatre in general.

### **Metadrama in *R and G***

As Hornby points out, serious metadrama usually moves beyond the metadramatic toward the theme of human perception. This is true with Tom Stoppard's *R and G*. To me, the themes of the play ---- confusion, uncertainty, identityless, and helpless ---- are best achieved through Stoppard's employment of metadrama. In *R and G*, we can observe all the above-mentioned metadramatic devices, which are often intersected. For convenience sake, I would like to discuss one category after another, as previously listed.

## **3. THE PLAY WITHIN THE PLAY**

In *R and G*, there are both the inset and the framed types and quite often the boundary between inner and outer play disappears completely, taking us away from the structure of metadrama, yet sustaining the metadramatic style.

The-play-within-the-play structure, both the inset and the framed type, is prevalent throughout *R and G*. The obvious inset type is the dress rehearsal the audience (both Stoppard's audience off stage and the audience of the outer play on stage) are consciously watching (p55-62). As the rehearsal goes act after act, conversations go among Ros, Guil and the Player. There are explanations of the plot of the mime, comments on the cast's performance, argument about art and death in relation to stage and life. Here we in fact find multiple layers of performing within performing. We see Ros and Guil watching the rehearsal for the play the tragedians are to perform for Hamlet. Then for a time Ros and Guil are watching themselves as characters in the rehearsal (the two spies), acted by two Tragedians. Ros and Guil find themselves identical with the two spies in the play they are watching, but unfortunately they are incapable of perceiving their fate from the death of the two spies. When those attending the play see that the King was upset, they call for the play to stop. Ros and Guil are left on stage, in the positions the spies fell when they died. They wake up slowly, and begin earnestly trying to determine which way is east based on where the sun is in the sky, as if they did not watch the rehearsal at all. Stoppard may intend to create the feeling of having a forgotten dream, another form of the play within the play here, unconscious to Ros and Guil but visible to the audience whose vision is doubled even tripled.

Ros and Guil's destiny has been revealed in the inner play. However, they simply do not remember what they dreamed after they wake up. We cannot help relating this to their lack of memories, something so important for one's identity and purpose in life to rely on. With their total incomprehension of what happens around them, they are condemned to be identityless and helpless.

The frame of Stoppard's play is of course Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. However, the play's scenic organization makes it sometimes hard to tell clearly the inset type from the framed type. The inner play and the outer play are so integrally connected that the inner play is both framed and inset, both primary and secondary. The characters from *Hamlet* from time to time come on to the stage and then are out of sight. Ros and Guil are attached with *Hamlet*'s characters for a while and later detached from all. This makes Stoppard's two protagonists' already incomprehensible situation even more impossible. Feeling at a loss, Ros gets peevish, "Never a moment's peace! In and out, on and off, they're coming at us from all sides." (p53).

#### 4. THE CEREMONY WITHIN THE PLAY

As is stated previously, ceremonies in the theatre of the absurd are quasi-ceremonies in which the characters desperately repeat their private "ceremonies" in an attempt to create meaning in his inner life. So it is with *R and G*.

The coin-tossing, the questioning and word games Ros and Guil repeatedly play are their particular ceremonies. These playful ceremonies draws our attention to the theatricality of what we are watching, simultaneously they mirror Ros and Guil's predicament. The fact that the coin falls on heads for eighty-five times in a row predicts a world that does not follow reason. Their answering questions with questions indicate a life without answers and explanations. And in their bantering, language loses its function for communication but becomes a means of counter-inaction. As title characters in Stoppard's play, they are sometimes free from the plot of *Hamlet* yet they hardly know what to do with the freedom. Playing games is never to change their situation positively, but to give them a sense of action in their inaction, to fill the time while they are waiting for "words" to follow, as Guil says, "Words, words. They're all we have to go on." (p30).

Likewise, other ceremonies they perform demonstrate their powerlessness to decide a life of their own. When they are not playing games, they try to seek memories (Loss of memories becomes a motif. They frequently ask about memory and say "I can't remember") and directions: "I'm trying to establish the direction of the wind.... Trace it to its source and it

might give us a rough idea of the way we came in ---- which might give us a rough idea of south, for further reference." (p42); They argue about which side is the east (p62). They even have lengthy philosophical talking about art, life and death. However, all the ceremonial effort and struggle for finding some meaning of their life is doomed to end in nothing. After all, their destiny has been written in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ---- they are only minor characters whose roles are simply following orders, carrying them out and being killed in the end.

In their constant attempts and failures in making sense of their life, Ros and Guil even make their repeated giving in a kind of ceremony that consoles themselves. They know somehow that they were not created with meaning of their own. Even they feel intrigued, they lack ability to act. They wait and let things happen. Guil knows that they are given "alternatives.... But not choice". (p28). They can do what they like "without restriction" but "within limits". (p84). They only have to wait "till events have played themselves out. There's a logic at work ---- it's all done for you, don't worry. Enjoy it. Relax. To be taken in hand and led, like being a child again..." (p28-29). At the end of their life, Guil seems to be aware of what they missed, "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said ---- no. But somehow we missed it." (p91). Finally when their time has come, they seem ready. "All right, then. I don't care. I've had enough. To tell you the truth, I'm relieved," says Ros. "Well, we'll know better next time," says Guil. Whatever ceremonies they invented, they fulfill their purpose in the story by disappearing ---- "the absence of presence", in Guil's words, and "no applause". (p89-90). Having lived in blank incomprehension of their identities, their pasts and their possible and probable actions, they die in equal unenlightenment, helpless and capable only of abandoning their failed struggle for understanding and returning to the non-being from which they came.

#### 5. ROLE PLAYING WITHIN THE PLAY

Role playing within the play in *R and G* mainly happens to the two title characters. Here the matadramatic of *R and G* lies in Rose and Guild's dualistic roles, both of which demonstrate the absence of their identity. Taken from *Hamlet*, Rose and Guild begin their life as protagonists in Stoppard's play where they are allowed to explore their existence yet their destiny is still controlled by *Hamlet*. They exist at the same time in both Shakespeare's and Stoppard's plays, coming on and off the two stages of the two playwrights. They appear to play major roles on Stoppard's stage, having some measure of free speech and thinking. But they do not take their new roles that comfortably, feeling lost without being instructed. They feel bored and "ridiculous" (p27-28). They turn intrigued when they

are sure that they have been placed, but think it “a fine persecution ---- to be kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened.” (p30), believing that their problem is that they are not directed enough. Guil even complains that “we have been left so much to our own devices” (p47). When any of the main characters from *Hamlet* enter, they are thrown onto Shakespeare’s stage, where they revert to their trivial minor place. They only exist for the pleasure of Claudius and Gertrude. Having difficulty figuring out what they should do, they seem to be bad actors in both plays.

The fact that the “reality” of their new world around them in Stoppard’s play does not operate as usual leaves them bewildered. Minor characters in *Hamlet*, Ros and Guil are so used to being instructed that when allowed to make their own decisions, they are solely at a loss. They do not remember their past, only recalling that they are summoned without knowing by whom and for what. What they can do is wait for further orders to go where they are led to. When engaged in the plot of *Hamlet*, the pair still does not seem to know how to act: “But we don’t know what’s going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don’t know how to *act*... We only know what we’re told, and that’s little enough...” (p48) Here *act* is a double entender. Stoppard forces Ros and Guil into doing things or acting on their own and at the same time lets them end up playing acts, merely responding to their parts. And Ros simply does not want to act; instead, he feels more excited to be like a spectator (p30). Without true identities, they have difficulty telling when they are their genuine self and when they are acting.

There are other examples of role playing within the play. In order to find out the cause of Hamlet’s transformation, Guil pretends to be Hamlet and Ros questions him (p35-36). In Act III, to imagine what they are going to say when they see the King of England, the two act out a possible script for their arrival in England. This time Ros takes the part of the King of England (p78-79). Here role play helps Ros and Guil figure out what they try to get at. It is ironic that these two ‘actors’ can only understand things better by pretending to be someone else. It is hard for them to figure things out when they are themselves.

## 6. LITERARY AND REAL-LIFE REFERENCE

Literary references within the play in *R and G* could be said abundant. Critics have had a long list of possible direct and indirect references, among which *Hamlet*, *Waiting for Godot* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* are to be briefly covered respectively. *Hamlet* is the only direct reference, the others allegory.

The play’s reference to *Hamlet* can be immediately detected from the title: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two minor characters from *Hamlet*. The whole play

is an adaptation or parody of *Hamlet*, from which a lot of dialogues are directly taken. Relying on the audience knowledge of *Hamlet*, Stoppard transforms a revenge tragedy into an Absurd drama, which shifts the focus from royalty to common man, the context from Elizabethan times to 1960s.

Stoppard’s *R and G* may rank among the most successful adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. It engenders wonderful metadramatic effect and brings exciting experience to the audience through the shift of perspectives. Stoppard takes minor characters into the limelight and offstage Hamlet onstage. The two minor characters apparently lack confidence to take active actions when brought to the foreground while Hamlet is trivialized instead of a romantic hero. The audience constantly fall in and out of *Hamlet*’s familiar lines. They hear colloquial modern English for a while then Elizabethan verse and prose, and they hear Ros and Guil switch between the languages of different times. They are also busy moving between two frameworks ---- that of Shakespeare’s and of Stoppard’s.

The double even triple vision created by the dizzying shifting of perspective as we move abruptly back and forth from Stoppard’s world to Shakespeare’s. This is greatly effective in depicting the predicament Ros and Guil are caught up and far beyond their comprehension.

Though Stoppard denied any direct links between *R and G* and *Waiting for Godot*<sup>4</sup>, it is impossible not to associate the play with *Godot*. Hayman (1979) argued that *R and G* could not have been conceived without *Godot*. Like Vladimir and Estragon, Ros and Guil appear as a pair, one apparently more sophisticated while the other more physical. Vladimir and Estragon know little about themselves, no better do Ros and Guil know about themselves. The main action in both plays is waiting. Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for the mysterious Godot. Ros and Guil are waiting for orders and death. Language is fully used by both pair to fill the idleness created by inaction. Both the pairs give their destiny to some outer force. Though Vladimir and Estragon think about committing suicide but somehow they leave it to Godot (Maybe Godot will bring them death. Who knows). Likewise, Ros and Guil could have avoided death but they just let it happen. In spite of the differences of the two plays, the knowledge of *Waiting for Godot* and a quick association with it will surely enhance our understanding of Ros and Guil’s plight.

The connection between *R and G* and T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is the main characters’ inability and lack of free will to be decisive (Johnston, 1999). Brassell (1985) even argued that Eliot’s poem, rather than other writings, “even perhaps *Hamlet* itself, provides the real genesis” of *R and G* (p67). Prufrock’s “No, I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous, someone titled Awnrout on the Internet. <http://www.echeat.com/essay.php?t=27696>.

meant to be; Am attendant lord, one that I will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two, Advise the prince; withal, an easy tool, / Deferential, glad to be of use, Politic, cautious, and meticulous; / Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse; At times, indeed almost ridiculous ---- Almost, at times, the Fool”<sup>5</sup> is exactly characteristic of Stoppard’s two protagonists. They merely discuss who they are, but never do anything to define themselves because they are always “deferential, glad to be of use” like Prufrock.

As Prufrock acknowledges at the end of the poem that he is, in effect, already dead, Ros and Guil share with him the same quality of “the living dead”. Their roundabout way of talking, their insecurity about their identity and memories, their frequent questioning, and their confusion about what they are doing add up to the notion that they are already dead. Apart from the anxiety, uncertainty and helplessness they have, they still prefer to settle for a life like death, as Ros comments, “Life in a box (coffin) is better than no life at all” (p51). Their trivial presence, lack of sense of identity and their indecisiveness make their existence no different from being dead.

Another example of literary and real-life reference in the play is “A Chinaman of the T’ang Dynasty” (p43) mentioned by Guil. This Chinaman is Chuang Chou or Chuang Tsu, a well-known ancient philosopher in China. The real person reference may have much greater metadramatic effect on Chinese audience than on Western audience, most of whom may not know about this Chinaman. Guil is wrong about the time Chuang Chou lived in, but he seems to understand the message in Chuang Chou’s butterfly dream. Though Chuang Chou was not sure whether he had dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly was dreaming it was Chuang Chou, he was not bothered by the possible dual identities. Chuang Chou perceived it as a transformation of beings and would feel comfortable and imperturbable to be either Chuang Chou with all his wit or a butterfly flying about happily and enjoying the life<sup>6</sup>.

Here we can see the sharp contrast between Ros, Guil and Chuang Chou. Chuang Chou’s learning and wisdom would not panic him no matter he deemed himself a man or a butterfly. He had free will to perceive and live his own life. On the contrary, Ros and Guil, for all the capability they have, believe or choose to believe that they are condemned to a fixed order they should follow or else they would be lost. When Stoppard puts them downstage and they have to make their own decision, they do not know what to do. Anyway, Shakespeare does not endow them any free will. They do not feel safe without being instructed, neither do they feel safe to act on their own. The pair’s uncertainty and insecurity is evident in Guil’s envy of the Chinese philosopher’s “two-fold security.”

<sup>5</sup> Second-hand Internet sources.

<sup>6</sup> Different versions of translation found at <http://www3.telus.net/arktos/dream/bfly.html>.

## 7. SELF-REFERENCE

Self-reference should be one of the main features of *R and G* throughout the play. At times Stoppard surfaces the theatricality to remind us that we are watching actors playing, displaying in front of us the very nature of theatrical fiction.

One example of self-reference is the Player’s self-conscious theatricality, which sets the performers apart from the audience, like “two sides of the same coin” (p16). He is always on stage: “We’re actors ---- we’re the opposite of people!” “We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade; that someone would be watching.” (p45-46). By separating the Tragedians from Ros and Guil, the Player doubles the vision ---- we are watching the play, and Ros and Guil in the play are the audience of the Tragedians. The Player understands his playworld quite well. Life on stage is always prewritten: “everyone who is marked for death dies;” “We follow directions ---- there is no choice involved.” (p57-58). The Player finds order in art. After all, there is a script and there is logic to the action: “There’s a design at work in all art...events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion” (p57). The Tragedians create their own reality by acting, accepting or at least resigning themselves to the shifting reality they are given.

Unfortunately Stoppard’s two protagonists are confused when they try hard to separate life and art, incapable of perceiving the dialectics between the two. Guil’s “There is an art to the building up of suspense” (p7) at the outset of the play starts their, as well as our journey of theatricality, and it seems to me that Ros and Guil’s world are actually in suspense: between life and art, between reality and fiction, they have never find a right place where they could feel certainty and security. Ros wants a story that is well-made, “with a beginning, middle and end”, like the world he wants to be in ---- in good order that he can understand and follow. Guil prefers “art to mirror life” (p58) so it can reveal meaning and significance, which the two trivial characters try to seek. But they are offered neither order nor meaning. Neither are they made to perceive that like the players, they live in the same playworld where the normal rules of probability and expectation are simply not operating. To them, the world of the players is unreal, especially when it comes to death, the only reality left certain to them, as Guil asserts, “...the only end is death ---- if you can’t count on that, what can you count on?” “...death. It’s just a man failing to reappear, that’s all ---- now you see him, now you don’t, that’s the only thing that’s real...” (p61). Toward the end of the play, in response to the Player’s “In our experience, most things end in death”, Guil is scornful:

Your experience! ---- Actors! I’m talking about death ---- and you’ve never experienced that. And you

cannot act it. You die a thousand casual death ---- with none of that intensity which squeezes out life...and no blood runs cold anywhere. Because even as you die you know that you will come back in a different hat. But no one gets up after death ---- there is no applause ---- there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that's ---- death ----" (p89).

But again, Guil is mistaken. He is convinced that the Player is dead, only to discover himself fooled (we are as well fooled) by what he derides as "the mechanics of cheap melodrama" (p61). By killing the Player, Guil unwittingly demonstrates the fictional nature of what he believes to be the real. The death of the Player is just another fiction, part of an improvised drama. Reality can be created and acted. What is truly real?! The two protagonists start from nowhere and now are still in the middle of nowhere, asking "Who are we" (P89), unable

to identify themselves in their failure to understand a world of art and life, "which is a kind of integrity" (p20), to borrow the Player's words.

Ros and Guil, the title characters of Tom Stoppard's *R and G*, demonstrate us a confused, helpless world of two common persons who have no sense of identity and certainty. With his perfect use of metadrama in the play, Stoppard presents us a kaleidoscopic world through which his two protagonists' baffled situation was vividly observed and perceived. Tom Stoppard, as Martin Esslin (1966) described Jean Genet's theatre as labyrinths constructed where man was caught in his distorted images in a maze of mirrors and was not able to get out, also builds a labyrinths with his metadramatic skills to mirror human condition carrying resemblance with that of his two protagonists.

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