

A FABER CRITICAL GUIDE  
Tom Stoppard

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## A FABER CRITICAL GUIDE

# Tom Stoppard

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

*Jumpers*

*Travesties*

*Arcadia*

JIM HUNTER

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*faber and faber*

First published in 2000  
by Faber and Faber Limited  
3 Queen Square London WC1N 3AU  
Published in the United States by Faber and Faber Inc.,  
an affiliate of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York

Photoset by Wilmaset Ltd, Birkenhead, Wirral  
Printed in England by Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

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A CIP record for this book  
is available from the British Library  
ISBN 978-0-571-19782-8  
ISBN 0-571-19782-5

4 6 8 10 9 7 5

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## Editor's Preface

The *Faber Critical Guides* provide comprehensive introductions to major dramatists of the twentieth century.

The need to make an imaginative leap when reading dramatic texts is well known. Plays are written with live performance in mind. Often a theatre audience is confronted with a stage picture, a silent character or a vital movement – any of which might be missed in a simple 'reading'. The *Guides* advise you what to look for.

All plays emerge from a context – a background – the significance of which may vary but needs to be appreciated if the original impact of the play is to be understood. A writer may be challenging theatrical convention, reacting to the social and political life of the time or engaging with intellectual ideas. The *Guides* provide coverage of the appropriate context in each case.

A number of key texts are examined in each *Guide* in order to provide a sound introduction to the individual dramatists. Studying only one work is rarely enough to make informed judgements about the style and originality of writer's work. Considering several plays is also the only way to follow a writer's development.

Finally, the *Guides* are meant to be read in conjunction with the play texts. 'The play's the thing' and must always be the primary concern. Not only are all playwrights different but every play has its own distinctive features which the *Guides* are concerned to highlight.

## Note on References

There are few quotations in this book from critics, and each is identified as it occurs. There are many quotations from Tom Stoppard himself in interview, and references to these are abbreviated. A key interview is the long one given to the editors of *Theatre Quarterly*, issue 14, May–July 1974, quotations from which are identified by the name of the magazine. Other interviews were given in 1976 to Ronald Hayman and included in his very useful short study: *Contemporary Playwrights: Tom Stoppard* (Heinemann, 1979); quotations from these are identified by Hayman's name.

Other quotations come from *Conversations with Stoppard* by Mel Gussow, Nick Hern Books, 1995, and a large anthology, *Tom Stoppard In Conversation*, edited by Paul Delaney, University of Michigan Press, 1994 (which also reprinted the *Theatre Quarterly* interview). These are identified by the words *In Conversation* followed by the name of the particular interviewer.

Page references to the plays by Stoppard under discussion are to the single editions of the plays published by Faber (re-set in 2000). For each quotation from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *Jumpers* and *Travesties*, two page references are given: the first is to the Faber edition, the second is to the edition published by Grove in the United States. In the chapter on *Jumpers*, where a single page reference is given, this is to the Faber edition, which incorporates changes to the text made for the 1984

production at the Aldwych Theatre in London and includes a Coda substantially different from that in the Grove edition (see pages 79–80 for a discussion of the different Codas).

References to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: when Shakespeare's play alone is intended, the attendant lords are given their full names; concerning Stoppard's play specifically, they are called Ros and Guil; when both plays are equally meant, they are noted simply R. and G.

I am grateful to Gay Firth and Alistair Randall for bringing material to my notice, and to Jerry Burridge for help with Stoppard's references to physics and mathematics.

Thanks to Eric Dorster and Peter Stansfield, who have helped me clarify two notes.

J.H.

## Introduction

Tom Stoppard spoke English from an early age and has lived in England since he was nine. His writing shows a delight in English language and literature, and at one point uses the particularly English example of a cricket bat as an emblem of craftsmanship. Yet he was actually born Czech, as Thomas Straussler, in 1937; and was twice an infant refugee: first from the Nazis in 1939 and then in 1942 from Singapore and the Japanese, at which time his father died – 'in enemy hands, and that's that' (quoted by Kenneth Tynan in *Show People*).

In Darjeeling, in northern India, his mother worked for the Czech shoe company Bata, who had employed his father, and Tom boarded at an American multi-racial school. In 1946 his mother married Major Kenneth Stoppard and the family moved to England. Tom went to boarding prep school ('a privileged education, a lovely house, acres of parkland, we had a lovely time': *Sunday Times*, 1974) and on to a senior independent school. The danger and crises of his early childhood were followed by a relatively fortunate upbringing, in peacetime and in a stable country. This sequence in Stoppard's life – repeated danger overlaid by apparent security – almost certainly contributed to his later personality and to the plays we shall be studying; and I return to it in the final chapter of this book (p. 235).

Stoppard left school in 1954, aged seventeen and 'thoroughly bored by the idea of anything intellectual

... alienated by everyone from Shakespeare to Dickens' (*Theatre Quarterly*). For nine years he worked as a journalist in Bristol, eventually trying his hand at fiction and plays. In 1963 he moved to London, his first TV play was shown and a novel was commissioned; this was followed by plays for BBC Radio (including five episodes of *The Dales*, a radio soap with a huge regular audience) and short stories in a hardback anthology. Stoppard's apprenticeship was similar to that of most eventually successful dramatists: hard graft, gaining professional expertise by reviewing and writing playscripts for whatever market could be found.

The breakthrough year was 1966, when *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was acclaimed at the Edinburgh Festival. For well over thirty years since then, Stoppard has consistently held his position as one of England's most admired and enjoyed dramatists. He was knighted – becoming Sir Tom – in 1997. In addition to his own plays, he has scripted adaptations of European comedies and the screenplays of many films, including the 1999 success, *Shakespeare in Love*. He often attends rehearsals of his new plays, rarely making a direct intervention but remaining on hand to consider re-drafting a line or a whole scene; and directors and actors consistently say his presence is helpful.

Stoppard has been married twice and has four grown-up sons. He prefers to keep a low public profile, but emerged in the 1970s and 1980s to be politically active in human-rights protests against Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In 1977 he made his first return visit to Czechoslovakia, and became a friend of the dramatist Vaclav Havel, who at the time was just released from prison (he was re-imprisoned

later) and eventually became the country's first president after Communist rule. Stoppard describes himself as conservative, and is half-way religious – 'I approve of belief in God and I try to behave as if there is one, but that hardly amounts to faith' (*In Conversation: Guppy*). What he does firmly defend is his belief in moral absolutes: 'The difference between moral rules and the rules of tennis is that the rules of tennis can be changed' (see *Jumpers*, p. 40/49).

Theatre, Stoppard says in the preface to a collection of his plays, is 'first and foremost a recreation', and his own writing (screenplays apart) intends to make us smile or laugh. He gives us groan-worthy puns as well as dazzling ones, and sometimes an overlap with broad popular farce. Yet, in the four plays studied here, serious questions are never that far away, and are never in themselves mocked. When Guil puzzles about death, or George about God, or when Joyce pontificates about art, we can smile at the human inadequacies of the characters, but we are not invited to smile at their concerns. These comic plays are set against backgrounds of basic enquiry into reality itself, and into how human beings should conduct themselves. The plays themselves don't claim to advance such enquiry; they remain *plays*, entertainments, inviting us to smile. And this has troubled some spectators, who perhaps feel vaguely that it's all right to laugh at, say, a fat man caught in a revolving door, but not a philosopher wrestling with the problem of Goodness. Stoppard, I suspect, sees the latter as potentially just as funny, and the dimensions of revolving doors as much less interesting than the problem of Goodness. That doesn't mean that his play even begins to *solve* the problem, any more than



an enjoyable sit-com can solve problems of family tensions.

In a Stoppard play we can expect to find three particular elements: *brilliant language*; *absurd yet inspired theatrical ideas*; and *an intellectual frame of reference* which is not mocked, whatever else is.

The *brilliant language* is never far away. Try the speeches of the Player in *Rosencrantz*, Dotty in *Jumpers*, or everyone in *Travesties*. Or Septimus Hodge, on page 9 of *Arcadia*, running verbal rings round Ezra Chater who thinks that *he* is the poet. There are puns at the level of stand-up comedy (Bones-Foot-Jumper, *Jumpers*, p. 55/58), one-liners ('If I'm going to arrest her, I can hardly do it by Interflora,' *Jumpers*, p. 34/45), and innumerable verbal contests (much of *Rosencrantz*, for example). And there are long virtuoso speeches, toppling towers of language, most spectacular in *Travesties* but found even in the relative realism of *Arcadia* (try Thomasina and Septimus, p. 50).

Stoppard's most famous *theatrical idea* is one of his first: to set a play 'within and around the action of *Hamlet*', and make two attendant lords the main characters, so that we see them holding a rueful post-mortem on a brief fragment of Shakespeare's play ('He murdered us . . . Twenty-seven-three.' *Rosencrantz*, p. 48/57). A similar notion led to *The Real Inspector Hound*, in which the lives of critics watching a stale thriller are farcically confused with the action onstage. A more complex development is the modelling of *Travesties* on the template of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* – the very play over which two of the characters squabbled in real life. *Hamlet* turns up again in *Dogg's Hamlet*, which brings together Shakespeare, a school

speech day, and a linguistic 'investigation' by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein; the second half of the evening is *Cahoot's Macbeth*, based on the fact that leading Czech actors, banned for political reasons, were putting on shortened performances in private flats: here *Macbeth* is raided by an inspector of police, whose appearances coincide with those of Shakespeare's disputed Third Murderer and Banquo's Ghost.

This doesn't mean that all Stoppard's theatrical ideas use other people's plays. *Jumpers*, which is about philosophy, opens with an acrobatic display and has the plot of a murder story. *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* requires a symphony orchestra on stage. *Night and Day* seems essentially realistic, yet we are allowed to hear the inner thoughts of one character and for a while even see her fantasy self in a fantasy encounter; and *The Real Thing* opens with a gripping scene which we later discover to be from a stage play being written by a third character. In the 1990s, Stoppard has written three plays where different historical periods alternate and overlap on stage. Though one of his best plays was a realist drama for television (*Professional Foul*, 1977), theatre for Stoppard means theatricality, showbiz, a faint whiff of a conjuring act or a circus.

As for the *intellectual frame of reference* in so many of his plays, it may seem surprising from the man who quit school 'totally bored' at seventeen. But he turns out to write about people involved in philosophy, advanced mathematics and physics, and Latin and Greek scholarship. His speciality is to flick this intellectual material into the air so spectacularly that it becomes entertaining.

The plays studied in this book make me think of a bunch of street-dancers or skaters, raiding some great

historic buildings – a cathedral, say, a palace, and a place of government. They perform clattering jumps up and down the wide stairways, and swerve brilliantly round massive pillars; their noise and cries echo in vast spaces. Watching and enjoying this disrespectful yet skilful display, we still don't lose sight of the huge buildings themselves, or of what they stand for. Stoppard's plays present a unique interplay between fun and the most basic and serious challenges to human understanding. He writes jokes and comic routines; but at the same time he is also writing about moral responsibility, about goodness, and about our scientific, mathematical or philosophical understanding of reality.

Some of the point of the dancers' display is lost if we have no previous knowledge of the great buildings they are raiding. This is particularly true for *Rosencrantz*, which assumes a knowledge of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; and for *Travesties*, which takes it for granted that we know *The Importance of Being Earnest*. These are the essential master-works which form the structural bases for Stoppard's parodies. *Jumpers* and *Arcadia* do not lean on previous theatre in such a way, and to that extent can be taken more on their own terms, though I hope my notes will show how much they too are dancing within cathedrals.

## Context and Background

Born fifteen years earlier, Tom Stoppard might never have become a playwright at all. Nor for that matter might William Shakespeare, if born in 1549 rather than 1564. The man and the time need to coincide.

In 1954, when Stoppard left school, English theatre was about to be transformed. The next five years brought to London Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, and plays by Harold Pinter, Arnold Wesker and John Arden. Collectively these had relatively little in common, but each looked like a liberator when compared with the standard English drama of the time, gridlocked in middle-class talk in country houses. In Stoppard's own words to *Theatre Quarterly*: 'After 1956 everybody of my age who wanted to write, wanted to write plays.'

### Beyond Realism

At that time, plays could seem fresh simply by being about ordinary people. More significant for Stoppard was the reaction against realism. For more than a century realist conventions had dominated Western theatre. Audiences were confronted by curtains closing off the stage under a proscenium arch; the opening of those curtains seemed to remove the fourth wall of a room, apparently fully furnished, where characters showed no

awareness of being watched. Dialogue, too, had to seem realistic, which made it harder to get across basic information (who is who and where are we?) and led to mechanisms such as the one gleefully parodied in Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*: the telephone informatively answered. Mrs Drudge the cleaning woman just happens to be dusting the phone; the moment it rings she '*snatches it up*' and announces: 'Hello, the drawing-room of Lady Muldoon's country residence one morning in early spring?'

Some reaction against this realist stranglehold had begun as early as the 1920s, among poets and other experimental dramatists. But mainstream theatre remained unaltered, and several young 1950s playwrights continued to accept realist conventions, feeling less bothered about changing theatre than about changing society. And realism remains alive and well today: it makes up almost all the drama we normally watch (e.g. in Britain, *EastEnders*) because it's the natural mode of the camera. Film and television present much more accurate detail and yet can cut ruthlessly from significant moment to moment, far faster than stage realism. Theatre, we might say, has handed realism on, to the screen, and now with relief returns to what it does best, which is gathering a live audience together to see a *representation* which need not be a full *simulation*. Furniture, moods or vast spaces can be indicated by a gesture or two; within a few minutes the same actors can play quite different characters in completely altered settings; information can be given direct to the audience; action may slide into dance, and song or poetry or lavishly heightened speech may replace plodding prosaic dialogue.

Without this liberation, and the excitement surrounding it, Stoppard might never have started writing plays.

### Plays Inside Plays

*Hamlet*, the most famous play of the supreme dramatist, and the setting for Stoppard's first success, is itself partly about acting – seen not as something done just by professionals, but by all of us at times. Acting interests us, and yet because it falsifies reality it is dangerous. Early on, Hamlet himself decides to act mad, partly in order to deceive his family and partly in order to postpone having to take actual 'action' himself. He's unsure whether to trust his father's ghost, who has ordered Hamlet to revenge his murder; the ghost could possibly have been a devil with the power to 'assume a pleasing shape'. On the arrival of a troupe of professional actors, Hamlet gets them to assume shapes too, in an instant display of their skill; and is fascinated yet appalled that the First Player can weep and turn pale with simulated grief. (The theatre audience observes skill at two levels: that of the real actor, and that of the actor he's acting.)

Hamlet arranges for a play, 'The Murder of Gonzago', resembling the murder of his father, to be watched by the murderer Claudius, who has been *acting* innocent and whose reactions Hamlet and his friend Horatio will be closely watching. The theatre audience then finds itself watching actors acting people watching more actors acting more people watching *still more* actors acting *yet more* actors acting *even more people* (Claudius and his Queen) who are themselves watching – and all of this is simultaneous, a multiple theatrical excitement. This example is particularly relevant for Stoppard; but there

are innumerable other occasions in drama where stage characters themselves take part in play-acting. At the simplest level, actors dress up to play characters who then, in innumerable classical plays, put on a further layer of disguise. In twentieth-century theatre, stage characters often set up momentary 'plays' representing other scenes without even changing costume, in a casual role-play like that of young children.

Theatre, in other words, enjoys being highly self-conscious – fascinated by its own falseness, yet reckoning to reveal a kind of truth. At a serious level, it explores the whole relationship of illusion with reality; and at a comic level, it 'camps it up' – the phrase is associated with homosexuality, but it describes a deliberately overplayed style which anyone in the theatre can enjoy, and which indeed underlies Stoppard's *Travesties*. A play within a play capitalises on our enjoyment of play-acting, yet encourages us to be critical of what we see.

### Modernism and the Theatre of the Absurd

Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) gives a sharp new twist to this idea. Into a conventional theatre at rehearsal time (with bored actors and director standing around) walk six 'Characters', each wearing a face-mask defining their identity. They carry within them a powerful story, but their play itself has not yet been written. They persuade the actors to represent them on stage, but are then disappointed with the result: the actors perform too 'stagily', blinkered by past convention. The Characters find themselves insisting that they are more real than the actors who try to imitate them, because their 'reality' in art doesn't change. This

'immutable reality' is, however, 'terrible ... It should make you shudder to come near us.'

Pirandello was just one figure in the disruptive shift in Western culture which is called Modernism. Modernist art tended to be 'difficult' and challenged conventional expectations, and perhaps for those reasons took time to filter down the educational system. In my own school-days, which happened to be close to Tom Stoppard's both in years and geography, the early poetry of T. S. Eliot still seemed excitingly 'modern', and it became among Stoppard's favourites; so too did painters such as René Magritte, and the novelist Ernest Hemingway, about whom he once intended to write a play. *Travesties* of course features caricatures of two pioneer Modernists, James Joyce and Tristan Tzara. It seems that to understand influences on a writer who came to prominence in the 1960s, we might do best to look at the 1920s.

Negatively, Modernism was determined to reject nineteenth-century practices which had become so highly developed that they seemed to have nowhere further to go – the all-knowing psychological novel, huge and lavish symphonies and operas, painting which simulated conventional or photographic perception. As with other artistic revolutions, it was sometimes linked with social or political anger: Tzara's Dadaists (Modernists of an extreme kind) felt that the Western society which was continuing to fund the First World War must be rotten to its very soul: i.e. its art. The task of a Dadaist must be to mock and 'smash' traditional art (*Travesties*, p. 53/41). Philosophically, Modernism often seemed grim, particularly in literature, where religious faith was shown in collapse and psychology was causing the individual to mistrust his free will, his subconscious motives and his

very identity as a person, let alone his ability to communicate or love.

More positively, Modernism offered new ways of rendering reality: Cubist painting, collage (paralleled in the 'cut-up' technique of Eliot's *The Waste Land*), stream-of-consciousness writing such as that of Joyce or Virginia Woolf, and, in music, extensions of listeners' harmonic and rhythmic expectation. Being strange, 'difficult', 'intellectual' was almost a plus in itself: people needed to be shaken out of complacency, and the subtle crafting of a work of art was a high aim in life (see, of course, Joyce in *Travesties*). And though rebelling against its immediate predecessors, Modernism tended to be intensely interested in much older artistic traditions, both in early cultures (myth, ritual, dance) and Western masterpieces; Modernist art was full of allusions, some of which become parodies or indeed 'travesties'.

Much of this sounds like early Stoppard: disruptive effects, intellectual difficulty, individuals wondering who they are or what their purpose is, theatre and language constantly echoing and parodying themselves, street-dancing in cathedrals. By the 1960s, certain tricks of Modernism had become part of popular culture: a watered-down Cubism was common in newspaper cartoons, Stravinsky was echoed in the soundtracks of movie thrillers, and Dada lived again in the guitar-smashing rock bands.

A branch of Modernist theatre, emerging perhaps partly from Tzara's Dadaism, became known as the Theatre of the Absurd. This was at its height in the 1930s and 1940s, mostly in Paris; and it produced one great dramatist, the Irish-born Samuel Beckett, by then living in France. Absurdist theatre, as well as being Modernist-

grotesque (rhinoceroses and elephants in suburbia), also tended to be cyclical (as was implied by the original ending of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz*). Life was seen to be going nowhere, and all conventional aims and purposes were considered pointless, absurd. Absurdist plays were typically both ludicrous and pessimistic; one leader in the field, Eugène Ionesco, commented that he wanted always to remind the spectator that he would become a corpse.

*Rosencrantz* in 1966 looked like the first work of a would-be Absurdist; arguably it derives more from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* than from its setting in *Hamlet*. But it is altogether more exuberant, and gentler in tone, than most offerings from the Theatre of the Absurd; and ultimately simply less *serious*, much more concerned to provide a good evening out. This indeed led to some attacks from early critics who were determined to take it solemnly and then felt disappointed.

The true independent voice of Stoppard's theatre may come decked in Modernist clothes, yet has quite different inclinations. In his brilliant one-act play *After Magritte*, the lights go up on an utterly ludicrous scene: a domestic living room with various bodies in grotesque situations (for example, a man bare to the waist is standing on a chair wearing black evening-dress trousers and thigh-length green rubber waders). This looks obviously Modern and Absurd. But no: during the first half of the play everything in this opening tableau is gradually restored to normal, and rationally explained. At the moment of entire normality, a police inspector bursts in with the line, 'What is the meaning of this bizarre spectacle?' In the remainder of the play, again for entirely explicable reasons, a different but equally ludicrous tableau is again assembled; but this time we know at

each point why. Nothing is 'bizarre' when it's explained; the world is saner than it looks. Something similar happens in Stoppard's radio play *Artist Descending a Staircase* (its title another reference to Modernist art): extremely suspicious circumstances turn out in the end to have an entirely innocent explanation.

The central character of Stoppard's only novel, *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*, keeps finding that 'the commonplace had duped him into seeing absurdity' – though admittedly the sentence does continue, 'just as absurdity kept tricking him into accepting it as commonplace'. The mind behind these light-hearted plots is temperamentally disinclined to break up in Modernist despair, and is the same mind which twenty or more years later became fascinated by quantum physics. If the world looks chaotic, don't give up on it: try another angle of vision.

Stoppard takes particular delight in making the most unpromising material *fit* – which is why the conductor André Previn invited (challenged?) him to write a play which would require a symphony orchestra on stage; and why, in *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, he managed it. In *Cahoot's Macbeth*, the classic useless line of ancient phrase-books – 'His postilion has been struck by lightning' – actually turns out to be useful. Stoppard has spoken of the sheer joy, as he crafted *The Real Inspector Hound*, of finally realising – as if it was there already, unknown to him – that the body on stage is that of the missing critic Higgs. And having discovered, while writing *Travesties*, two perfect fits which were not of his own making (see this book, p. 114–15), Stoppard later described them to Ronald Hayman as 'almost like little signs from God that you're on the right track'.

It is of course a traditional craft of comedy, having

strewn the toys over the carpet, to then put them tidily away; in that, Stoppard was doing nothing new. But when in *Hapgood* and *Arcadia* he moves on to serious matters of the universe, to the apparent randomness of modern physics, it is with delighted interest rather than Modernist trepidation. The late twentieth-century 'chaos theory' which underpins *Arcadia* doesn't describe actual chaos – mere confusion and disorder – but *unpredictability*: definable mathematical processes can be observed, but we cannot know the pattern which will result. For the Stoppard who 'approves of belief in God' this may not be bad news, since it offers an exhilarating escape from Newtonian physics where, theoretically, if scientists were skilled enough, all the future could be known.

### Post-modernism?

Post-modernism is a word of our times which by its very nature is hard to define. It generally refers to a kind of free-floating in intellectual space, having cast ourselves off from all past explanations of why things seem as they are – not only the explanation by Newtonian physics, but also those of religion, Marxism, psychoanalysis, even history. Each of these large-scale theories is considered no longer roadworthy – partly because of a mistrust of language itself. They are seen as fabrications, 'grand narratives' rather than truth. So if all that's available is one sort of fabrication or another, perhaps we might just as well have fun with the entirely artificial, a 'virtual reality'; with pastiche (imitation), parody, travesty.

This sounds pretty much a make-over of Sir Archibald Jumper's gymnastics. It may also seem relevant to *Travesties*, where various grand narratives are mocked,

historical truth is constantly fractured, and a brilliant dance nevertheless goes on. As for language, although it is typically dazzling in these plays, it also poignantly falters, as in the meanderings of George and Carr in *Jumpers* and *Travesties* respectively. *Jumpers* dates from 1972, *Travesties* from 1974; so when in the 1980s smart people began to talk of post-modernism, Stoppard might reasonably have murmured that he'd already been there, showing his plays as his T-shirt.

But he might have added that 'there' wasn't somewhere he personally would wish to live. In *Jumpers* 'I wanted to suggest that atheists may be the cripples, lacking the strength to live with the idea of God' (*In Conversation: Kerensky*.) And on post-modernist free-floating he might well quote his philosopher Anderson, in *Professional Foul*:

you can persuade a man to believe almost anything provided he is clever enough, but it is much more difficult to persuade someone less clever. There is a sense of right and wrong which precedes utterance.

The plays studied in this book struck their first audiences as attractively flashy, up with the times, perhaps trend-setting. But – at least from *Jumpers* onwards – they are sympathetic to traditional beliefs: the notions of absolute good (with a possible absolute judge), of natural innocence, and of the almost heroic importance of art. Stoppard's conservatism has always distanced him politically from most other dramatists of his day; and his seriousness about moral issues, coupled with an underlying trust in life, works as a kind of Trojan horse within the walls of Modernist doubt and post-modernist anarchy. A, more than minus A.

## A and minus A

'Tom Stoppard Doesn't Know' was the title of a verbal and visual statement the playwright made for BBC Television in 1972. Later to Ronald Hayman he identified in himself the pattern 'firstly, A; secondly minus A'; or

that particular cube which on one side says for example: 'All Italians are voluble' and on the next side says, 'That is a naïve generalisation'; and then, 'No. it's not. Behind generalisations there must be some sort of basis.'

Time and again Stoppard would come out with similar binary oppositions, and traced them in his writing.

There is very often *no* single, clear statement in my plays. What there is, is a series of conflicting statements made by conflicting characters, and they tend to play out a sort of infinite leapfrog. (*Theatre Quarterly*)

This 'not knowing' clearly laid itself open to charges of fence-sitting; but seems rather to have represented a scrupulous integrity. It is important to tell the truth; essential not to pretend to certainties you don't actually have. The 'infinite leapfrog' in plays can lead to structural problems which will be touched on later. In human terms the 'A, minus A' opposition was effectively dramatised in Stoppard's novel *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*. Lord Malquist is a dandy, Moon an innocent who wants to find goodness.

## The Dandy and the Would-be-good

'Dandy' is not a word much used today. It is, however, the way Stoppard describes Sir Archibald Jumper; and

also, in 1986 (*In Conversation*, p. 5), how he felt himself to be seen by others, as 'this dandified wit'; he then added, in a typical 'A, minus A' formulation: 'It's all true and false.' The original meaning of the word was a fop, someone ostentatiously well-dressed, and it tended to extend to smart ways of behaving and talking. A dandy looked elegant, was socially sophisticated, and knew it. On the other hand he showed no interest in matters of conscience or morality.

The young Stoppard was elegant, a sharp dresser and good-looking, with some resemblance to his friend (and dandy of a sort) Mick Jagger. He was also a brilliant talker, yet fastidious about finding the right word and even in articulating it. He admired the deft style of Evelyn Waugh and – the most famous dandy in English letters – Oscar Wilde, who hovers ambivalently behind much of his work and actually appears on stage in *The Invention of Love* (1997). Lord Malquist, in Stoppard's novel, tends to echo Wilde: 'substance is ephemeral but style is eternal' (a Wilde character says: 'In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the thing'). And Malquist is utterly callous to the most obvious suffering.

Moon, in contrast, is 'wide-open' to everything from the starving in Asia to the wiping-out of the white rhino. And, oddly, Stoppard also gave the same name to other early innocents. 'Moon,' he said, 'is a person to whom things happen.' Then he added: 'I'm a Moon myself.' Certainly, Moon in the novel sounds very like the young Stoppard when he says:

I cannot commit myself to either side of a question. Because if you attach yourself to one or the other you disappear into it. And I can't even side with the balance

of morality because I don't know whether morality is an instinct or just an imposition.

This may be fence-sitting, but it is the opposite extreme from dandyism: here is a character so morally anxious that he questions the impulse to morality itself. The relevance to the struggle of ideas between George and Archie will be clear to students of *Jumpers*. There the dramatist's own sympathies are unquestionably with George, but the flashy, glittering manner of the play itself (and later of *Travesties*) might appear to side more with theatrical dandyism. Stoppard's work can easily be underestimated by those who assume that it offers dandyism and not much else.



## Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two relatively minor courtiers. But in Stoppard's play they are the central characters, always on stage. The rough idea had been used nearly a century earlier by W. S. Gilbert (later of 'Gilbert and Sullivan'), but whereas his verse-nonsense altered the course of Shakespeare's play, here *Hamlet* remains inviolable, a predetermined scheme which finally drowns the stage in 'dark and music'. Fragments of Shakespeare are seen, but most of the action of *Rosencrantz* seems to happen just outside *Hamlet*'s borders. So, for example, on p. 47/56 Hamlet and Polonius leave the stage to continue the action in Shakespeare, and Ros and Guil are left behind.

Ros and Guil can just about remember being called to court this morning, but nothing previously. They know what they are here for – to find out what is troubling Hamlet – but they cannot see a future for themselves after that. They seem to be confined to the stage, and ordinary chance – where coins fall different ways up at different times – seems to have deserted them. For them everything seems predestined.

Though they are dressed as Elizabethans, Stoppard gives them twentieth-century intellects. They attempt to make sense of their situation by rational means – we get scraps of traditional philosophical enquiry – yet they mistrust all perceptions. They are also modern in their fear of death as extinction, and the action of *Hamlet* never

## ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

allows them to forget death for long. Yet although *Rosencrantz* is set on the fringes of a famous tragedy, and touches on profound questions, its prime aim is entertainment, and particularly comedy. It smiles ruefully at our perplexities, rather than offering a serious investigation of them.

It also smiles at the nature of theatre itself, in this much helped by the intermittent presence of travelling players based loosely on those who appear in *Hamlet*.

### Two Background Texts

Art is sometimes said to draw on previous art as much as on real life. In Stoppard's case this is certainly so. Two of the world's best-known plays, *Hamlet* and *Waiting for Godot*, lie obviously behind *Rosencrantz*.

#### *Hamlet*

The following summary deals only with what is directly relevant to Stoppard's play:

The Danish King, Hamlet's father, has recently died, and his brother Claudius has taken the throne and married his queen, Gertrude. The former King's ghost tells Hamlet he was poisoned by Claudius, and demands revenge. But Hamlet hesitates, concealing his knowledge under an 'antic disposition' – a pretence of madness. Claudius summons to court Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who grew up with Hamlet, to engage him in conversation and find out what's on his mind. But Hamlet proves far too clever for them (see *Rosencrantz*, pp. 46–7/56–7).

A group of travelling players arrives at court. Hamlet

sets up a play, 'The Murder of Gonzago', which closely resembles the murder of his father. At the performance Claudius is guiltily shocked, but Hamlet fails to take the opportunity to accuse him in public (and, a little later, to kill him in private). Instead, he kills an eavesdropper in the Queen's room who turns out to be Polonius, Denmark's devious chief minister. Claudius sends Hamlet on a voyage to England, along with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who carry a sealed letter ordering that on arrival there he is to be killed. Hamlet intercepts the letter, rewrites it to order the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead, and escapes from the ship during a highly convenient pirate attack. The title of Stoppard's play is quoted from the last pages of Shakespeare's.

*Hamlet* depicts a corrupt, treacherous court in which people deviously use others for their own advantage; and the two most obviously used are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' seems to have them in mind:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool...

— a tool, that is, not only for those at court but also, as it were, for a supernatural Dramatist. This looks like Stoppard's starting-point; significantly he quotes Eliot's poem several times in *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*, published in the same week as the first performance of *Rosencrantz*. (The novel also includes a character writing 'a monograph on *Hamlet* as a source of book titles'.)

*Rosencrantz* puts two attendant lords centre stage, but unlike heroes they are deprived of freedom of action; they know they are being used, but not for what purpose or by what God or Dramatist — if any.

Hamlet himself, in Shakespeare, is a brooding intellectual, questioning everything: already what in the 1950s was called an anti-hero. Stoppard effectively transfers such doubts to Ros and Guil: in this modern view, attendant lords have minds and feelings too. Additionally, they are far more likely than a tragic hero to experience problems of identity. Shakespeare doesn't even allow Rosencrantz and Guildenstern separate personalities. Because they are falsely polite whenever they appear, they seem faceless and interchangeable: early on, as if to make this point, their names are switched in otherwise identical verse-lines (this is wittily choreographed in *Rosencrantz* on p. 28/36–7). Stoppard plays repeatedly on this: everyone muddles up Ros and Guil — even they themselves do so. Yet in his play they are given different temperaments; and whereas Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are spies who attract little or no sympathy, Ros and Guil are likeable, and 'a couple of bewildered innocents' (*In Conversation: Giles Gordon*).

In Shakespeare, Hamlet buys time by acting, pretending to be mad. This allows him to score points freely off everyone (in Stoppard, p. 48/57: 'He murdered us'), and it excites him almost to hysteria. Yet even as he is fascinated by it, he is appalled by other people's ability to put on a false face: a professional actor's skill is 'monstrous' (in Shakespeare this means offending against Nature itself); the King himself 'can smile, and smile, and be a villain'; and women's very beauty may make the whole sex corrupt. No appearance can be trusted any longer; the one

final certainty, which even face-paint 'an inch thick' cannot deny, is the skull beneath the skin: eventual death. Much of this, though at a lighter level, spills over into Stoppard's play, including its climax (pp. 114-16/123-4) about acting death.

### *Waiting for Godot*

Samuel Beckett was Irish by birth, but from his mid-twenties lived in France, and most of his work first appeared in French. His best-known play, *Waiting for Godot* – first performed in Paris in 1953 – develops primarily French ideas of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Vladimir and Estragon are two tramp-like clowns who meet on a country road in the evening to wait for Mr Godot to arrive. Instead of coming, Godot sends his apologies, via a boy-servant. Two other characters pass by and provide distraction. In the second act, the same pattern is followed, with variations: one early description of the play was that 'nothing happens, twice'. We get the strong sense that Vladimir and Estragon may turn up every evening for ever, yet that Godot will never come.

Beckett's play is both desperate and very funny. At the most basic level it shows how two characters doing nothing, and complaining of boredom, can occupy stage-time, exasperating and yet amusing their audience; it was soon imitated by scriptwriters for British radio and television (*Hancock's Half-Hour*, *Steptoe and Son*), and it prepared the way for the semi-realist plays of Harold Pinter. Some of the play is slapstick comedy – the moment on Stoppard's p. 82/89 when Ros removes his belt and his trousers slide down derives from Beckett, who of course got it from circus or pantomime. Its basic mode is two-

man cross-talk, as in, say, Morecambe and Wise and as intimated in much of *Rosencrantz* (e.g., pp. 33-43/41-50).

Yet Beckett calls his play 'a tragicomedy'. And as well as laughter, he builds in many melancholy pauses: one critic wrote that 'silence is pouring into this play like water into a sinking ship'. Audiences seem expected to share, up to a point, the boredom and frustration of the characters on stage; and are likely to feel that the play must therefore be symbolic, and ultimately serious. The cross-talk is interrupted by portentous references to Christianity (in the old days, 'they crucified quick') or the human condition ('They give birth astride of a grave'); and the suggestion of the English 'God' in the French name Godot is teasingly confirmed when we are told that Mr Godot keeps his sheep and goats separately.

*Waiting for Godot* is the most popular of Beckett's works, but his many other writings show the same highly distinctive combination of structural elegance, farcical humour and the darkest pathos. His subject-matter is the frustration of all human yearning – for a meaning to life (or to plays), for health and happiness, for love. His characters are not only physically frustrated – by illness, senility, physical handicap, burial up to the neck or in a dustbin – but also mentally blocked: fragments of philosophical enquiry get side-tracked, or repeatedly recycled, or interrupted. And yet they keep trying again, just as Beckett himself spoke of artists having 'nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express,' and yet 'the obligation to express'.

To some extent Ros and Guil are sufferers from the Beckett condition, dropped into the action of *Hamlet*. They are marginally more coherent than Beckett's

characters in their struggle to make sense of their situation; but in the end they are equally defeated:

GUIL: ... there must have been a moment, at the beginning, when we could have said – no. But somehow we missed it.

### *Rosencrantz: A Synopsis*

In Act One Ros and Guil, two well-dressed Elizabethans, are betting on the toss of a coin. Ros, who is backing 'heads', always wins. They begin to fear (p. 7/17) they are 'within un-, sub- or supernatural forces'. They recall (p. 10/19) being summoned to court, at dawn; but have no idea why.

The Tragedians enter (p. 12/21). They are very down-at-heel actors, reduced to bloody sensationalism and a feeble pornography dependent on the boy-player, Alfred, pulling on his skirt. When they leave (p. 25/34), two scenes from *Hamlet* follow – Hamlet silently intruding on Ophelia (offstage in Shakespeare), and Claudius instructing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet. Afterwards Ros and Guil are bewildered; but 'follow instructions ... Till events have played themselves out.' They try, unpromisingly, to rehearse their coming interrogation of Hamlet (p. 38ff/46ff), and the act ends as, in Shakespeare's lines, they greet him.

Act Two starts, again in Shakespeare, as Hamlet leaves them. Not only has he revealed little, he has confused Ros and Guil further (p. 46/56). Now they wait for someone else to come, something else to happen. A scrap of Shakespeare, setting up the play in which Hamlet hopes to trap Claudius (p. 53/62), leaves the chief Player on stage.

When Ros and Guil complain of not knowing what to do next, the Player advises them to 'Relax. Respond. That's what people do.' They share theories about what is wrong with Hamlet. After the Player leaves (p. 61/69), Ros calls 'Next!' but no one else comes. Ros broods on death (and the audience uneasily remember the play's title).

In a further scrap of Shakespeare (p. 64/72), Ros and Guil lyingly assure the King and Queen that their meeting with Hamlet went well. Next Hamlet is seen alone, contemplating suicide, after which he goes off with Ophelia. A figure dressed as the Queen enters and Ros, by now desperate to interrupt *somebody* in the know, puts his hands over her eyes and says 'Guess who?' It turns out to be the boy-player, Alfred; and we watch a rehearsal of 'The Murder of Gonzago'. But whereas that play was a re-enactment of events past, this one develops beyond Shakespeare into an anticipation of things *ahead* – the voyage, and the sealed orders – including two actors dressed just like Ros and Guil, who on arrival in England are promptly killed ... (p. 77/84). An uneasy discussion ensues, about whether real death is more convincing than an actor's rendering of it. Claudius is heard offstage interrupting the play; then appears to send Ros and Guil to seek Hamlet.

But (pp. 80ff/89ff) they seem tied to the stage. Hamlet must come to them, which he duly does, with Polonius's body. After more fragments of Shakespeare, Ros and Guil hope that their work is done, but leave muttering that 'anything could happen yet'.

Act Three begins in darkness (p. 88/97). After a caricature of nautical sound-effects, Ros and Guil grasp that they are 'on a boat', and that Hamlet is sleeping nearby. They have an immediate purpose – to deliver 'the

letter' to the English king – but (p. 96/105) cannot visualise their function or existence beyond that. More discussion of death. Ros wants to thwart whoever is controlling them. They open the letter, discover that it requires Hamlet's death, and suffer a very brief crisis of conscience – but then decide to seal up the letter again.

'*Impossibly*' (stage-direction, p. 105/114) the Tragedians climb out of barrels, as stowaways. Ros and Guil review the story so far, and Ros complains there isn't enough 'action'; instantly the pirates attack – another stage caricature. When the noise dies down, Hamlet has gone. Ros and Guil panic, re-open the letter, and now find their own names down for execution (p. 113/122). The Player is unmoved: 'In our experience, most things end in death'. This provokes an outburst from Guil, who sinks the Player's dagger deep into him. The ensuing death is impressive: the Tragedians applaud, after which the Player stands up, gratified. All the Tragedians then demonstrate their skills in dying, as darkness falls on them.

Ros and Guil are more baffled than ever. Ros disappears. Guil calls to him – trying both their names – then also disappears. The play fades out within Shakespeare's words.

'All the world's a stage'

... and all the men and women merely players.

Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, from which these words come, possibly opened the Globe Theatre in 1599, under the same motto in its Latin form: *totus mundus agit histrionem*. The comparison was already ancient; and we have many modern equivalents, talking of people who are

'acting out' or 'acting up', 'playing a role' or 'going through the motions'. From a religious point of view the idea might be reassuring: we are playing a part in a story understood and controlled by God, though not by us. The less comforting – and much commoner – view is that just as theatre is essentially an illusion, however persuasive, our 'real' lives may amount to little more. The comparison of life to play-acting occurs many times in Shakespeare, and in his late play, *The Tempest*, at the end of a play-within-a-play, we are told that 'the great globe itself ... shall dissolve ... like this insubstantial pageant faded.'

Shakespeare himself, however, had already used in some of his sonnets the opposite and equally traditional notion: *in a poem, beauty can last*. Reality may be questionable, worldly life may fade and die; but a work of art stands beyond mortality, fixed as itself. John Keats brooded on the 'truth' in the pictures on the side of an urn from ancient Greece; W. B. Yeats dreamed of becoming an artefact, a golden bird hammered out by the goldsmiths of Byzantium.

Golden birds are all very well, but if you discover you're a character locked forever inside the fixity of art, that's a nightmare. This is where many early spectators assumed that *Rosencrantz* was indebted to Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (see above, p. 10). Stoppard had in fact no direct knowledge of Pirandello, but may have absorbed him at second hand from *Next Time I'll Sing to You* by his friend James Saunders (who is credited with suggesting to Stoppard the expansion into a full-length play of his original verse-sketch about R. and G.). The terror of fixity felt by Pirandello's *Characters* is shared at the start of *Rosencrantz* by Guil, as the coins

keep falling heads up. To a mathematician this might seem 'a spectacular vindication ...' etc. (p. 6/16), but to common sense it is a denial of the 'reassuring' element of chance (p. 8) 'which we recognised as nature'. The difference is that Pirandello's Characters know their story, whereas Ros and Guil know only their first instructions. The Characters hope for liberation by having their story performed; but when Ros and Guil's story is performed in dumbshow in front of them (pp. 74-5/80), they feel more grimly trapped than before: since the play is fixed and 'written', they are in a sense already (as in the title line) 'dead'.

What the situation does offer at a lower level, as in Beckett's play, is the opportunity for many in-jokes about theatre itself. These start almost immediately (p. 2/12) when, after five 'Heads' from Ros, Guil is allowed to say: 'There is an art to the building of suspense.' Cue for laugh of (provisional) relief from already uneasy audience. Similar jokes follow. This, like *Godot*, is a play intensely conscious of its own theatricality, and therefore inevitably ironic.

The illusion created by actors interests us, pleases us, may gratify our fantasies; many spectators identify with Hamlet and gleefully score the points with him. And when theatre seems to create a virtual reality, it tempts not just our emotions but our intellect; like a mind-altering drug, it may seem to offer new insights – and to unstable personalities may be equally dangerous. By their very nature, plays tend to deal in issues of illusion and reality; and they may offer parallels to our world.

This seems to be why Stoppard brings the Tragedians on in each act. Not only is *Rosencrantz* about two characters caught up in a play, with parallels to the

human situation (is someone 'watching'? is a logic at work?) but acting itself is examined. The Tragedians show why theatre was banned under the Puritans, and why anxieties are felt today about what's available on video: at worst the actor's craft can degenerate into sadistic pornography, and an audience into voyeurs. Yet the Tragedians have real skill (we are told, p. 75/83, that they can even die 'from a great height': a pity we miss that one). Guil feels '*fear, vengeance, scorn*' (p. 114/123 – a revealing stage-note) at such claims to act death: but when in fury he stabs the Player, he is clearly taken in by the feigned death that follows. Like Hamlet watching the First Player weep and turn pale, Guil cannot tell the appearance from the reality; which is worrying for us all because we constantly make deductions about reality from appearances.

## Death

This is only one of many topics in *Hamlet*, but is highlighted in Stoppard's title. As his Player says, Elizabethan tragedy demanded plenty of bodies at the end: 'a slaughterhouse – eight corpses all told' (p. 75/83); and it is significant that whereas the travelling actors in Shakespeare are equally happy to perform 'tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral', they become in Stoppard specialist Tragedians, for whom 'Blood is compulsory' (p. 24/33). Dying is their stock in trade.

*Rosencrantz* omits Shakespeare's late scene in which Hamlet talks with gravediggers merrily chucking up old skulls. Hamlet's comments, as Renaissance man, are mainly on the vanity of human aspirations: a skull might be that of a lawyer who specialised in purchases of land,

but now ironically it is the 'fine dirt' itself which fills his 'fine pate'. Earlier ('To be or not to be') Hamlet says that he would not fear death if he could be sure it meant extinction, but that he dreads continuing consciousness, in some 'undiscovered country' of purgatory or hell. Yet 400 years later, after a major shift in beliefs, extinction rather than an after-life is the commoner fear; and in this respect Ros and Guil are entirely modern.

Unlike us, however, they are characters in a classic play, and on p. 76/84 find themselves watching their fate enacted in front of them. Stoppard's title goes further, implying that they were dead even at the start. There is a tension here between the fear of mortality and the horror of being immortal within art – the horror felt by the characters of Pirandello and, by implication, Beckett. A spun coin always comes down the same way, there is no wind and considerable doubt about the direction of the sun, and the fact that Ros and Guil can remember nothing before they were needed by the story suggests that they exist only for its purposes (but therefore *must* always exist for its purposes). There is still a hint of this at the end (p. 117: 'we'll know better next time' – we doubt if they will); though the predominant mood of the closing pages is more conventionally human: death is 'the endless time of never coming back'.

### Reasoning

*Jumpers*, Stoppard's next major play, is about a philosopher; and already in *Rosencrantz* the main characters show a relish for the activity of logical reasoning. Philosophy is a serious business, trying to clarify the most fundamental questions of belief and

perception; but it often approaches them by apparent playfulness – simplified or fanciful examples similar to Guil's unicorn story (pp. 11–12/21). We know nothing of Ros and Guil's lives outside the play – for the very good reason that they don't *have* them – but we can see that both men are by nature questioners, who want to puzzle things out. Guil is the more abstract and intellectually minded, Ros earthier (see him on toenails, on p. 9/18, or utterly ignoring Guil's unicorn story, p. 12/21). But both long to get a mental grip on their situation, as is seen in their respective attempts to sum things up on pp. 102–103: it makes them feel better to do so.

Almost as soon as the play begins (pp. 2–3/12–13) Guil is trying to assess their situation in terms of supposed mathematical 'laws' (probability, averages, diminished returns; in fact these are all popular myths). On p. 6/16 he draws up a 'list of possible explanations' and on pp. 6–7/17 offers mock-'syllogisms', a term from logic (see this book, p. 45). On p. 11/21 he goes into his unicorn story and on p. 51/60 the one about the Chinese philosopher. And so on: even Ros knows the philosophers' term '*non sequitur*' (p. 35/42), and is ironically (shamefacedly?) accused by Guil of applying logic (p. 102/111). Stoppard's first success identified him as a writer interested in the games philosophers play, and one early critic (who also made the mistake of taking the play as deathly serious, and grumbling about its jokes) even described him as 'a philosophy graduate'.

### Characters

*Rosencrantz* is clearly not a play about subtle interpersonal relationships between richly drawn characters.

All Stoppard's early work tends towards comic cartoon, dominated by grotesque situations and the brilliantly worded bubbles coming out of people's heads. In later years, most strikingly in *Arcadia*, he has shown that he can, when he chooses, create skilful and rapid art-work of a psychologically realistic kind; but as late as 1978 he was still saying 'character doesn't really interest me very much'. If the characters in *Rosencrantz* seem less fully rounded and well-known to us than those in *EastEnders*, or even the principal figures in *Hamlet*, that's because Stoppard is aiming for something different.

The most obvious thing to note about Ros and Guil is that they are Elizabethan gentlemen only in appearance. Apart from a gag about the 'fashionable theory' of the earth going round the sun (p. 116/125) no attempt at all is made to link their mental processes to the Renaissance world of corrupt grandeur in which they have roles to play. They are walking anachronisms, though not as garish as the later beach umbrella – they don't talk about motor-bikes or movies, but psychologically they think and feel like members of the modern audience. Both the humour and the darkness of Stoppard's play derive substantially from this blending of ancient and modern.

Ros and Guil are also more defined as individuals than Shakespeare's interchangeable Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Theatrically, they needed to be: they are centre-stage virtually throughout their play, and although the main drama is about their *common* situation, there had to be some tension between them, if only at the level of a comic double-act. Such double-acts (almost always male, and probably somewhere on your TV this week) typically present an image of irritated but long-term friendship,

almost like a marriage. One is sharp-witted, or at least imagines he is; the other more of a numbskull, though sometimes his may be the final victory. One may be fat, the other thin; or they are tall and short; but the essential basic for comedy, as for drama of any kind, is that they must differ.

Stoppard's theatrical instinct transformed Shakespeare's bland courtiers, not quite into straight-man and idiot, but into a cerebral Guil (thinking more abstractly, trying to reason beyond his direct experience) and a more down-to-earth Ros. After Guil has spent two pages playing at abstract philosophy (pp. 7–8/17–18), Ros is more interested in his toenails. Ros is not a fool, but of the two he is the more easily fooled (e.g., by the Player, p. 54/63) and he prefers to get back to basics, even if they include a very basic fear of death (pp. 62–3/70–71). He is also the nicer of the two (p. 6/15). Stoppard has spoken of them as

carrying out a dialogue which I carry out with myself. One of them is fairly intellectual, fairly incisive; the other one is thicker, nicer in a curious way, more sympathetic. (*In Conversation: Giles Gordon.*)

In their reactions to the letter ordering the death of Hamlet they anticipate later Stoppard work in which cleverness (especially with words) is opposed to natural innocence. Guil's sweetly reasonable speech excusing them from doing anything about it (pp. 101–102/110–11) anticipates Archie in *Jumpers*. But, mostly, Guil is decent. Unlike other double-act straight-men, he takes no joy in scoring points off his partner, if only because he feels their joint situation is too worrying for that; he is, rather, always the one trying to *interpret* their situation. He can



be exasperated by Ros (pp. 60, 85/68, 93) but also concerned and gentle ('nursemaid', p. 29/38, 'quietly', p. 39/47).

Guil is disgusted by the Players, whereas Ros is more earthily tempted. This may be partly because in Guil they cause 'fright' (p. 17/27) – a fear for his own self-control or dignity? – but his compassion for Alfred (pp. 22–3) is clear enough. Finally, Guil is not only the more intellectual, he is also a stagey poet, letting his voice ring and sob in a series of speeches (pp. 4–5, 7–8, 17–18, 30, 86, 104, 116/14, 17–18, 27, 38–9, 94, 112, 125) which have been understandably described as 'kitsch' (cheap and false) but which are all part of the play's theatricality. 'On the wind of a windless day' ... 'our names shouted in a certain dawn' ... 'Yesterday was blue, like smoke.'

This 'ham' poetry is similar to that developed in the central speech of the Player (pp. 55–6/64), where it is more obviously appropriate and where Guil himself gives it the ironical slow clap. The Player is the only substantial 'character' in the play after Ros and Guil, and this showman fallen on hard times has been given a sharpness which keeps him mentally up to pace with them. The Player is equally at home either side of the looking-glass; he belongs in the Elizabethan play and understands its attitudes, yet he can speak with Ros and Guil in the voice of an aging actor-manager from the provincial repertory circuit of the first half of the twentieth century. He can discuss with them (and the audience) the nature of dramatic spectacle, the experience in which everyone there in the theatre is involved. Above all he is a supremely confident character, where Ros and Guil feel desperately insecure; jarringly confident (for the audience

as well as the attendant lords) about the fact that 'most things end in death'.

He is not Shakespeare's First Player, who is an honest professional at the height of his powers. This Player has few moral scruples; his standing on the coin (p. 25/34) may be merely amusing, but his exploitation of Alfred is not (least of all when it's the Player's barrel that Alfred emerges from, p. 106/114). But both dramatists use their Players to explore the relationship of acting to reality. In Shakespeare (end of Act II, scene ii) Hamlet, acting mad because everyone round him also seems to be acting, is alarmed by the brilliant feigning of the First Player, who turns pale and weeps with entirely simulated grief. Stoppard's Ros and Guil, half-aware they're in a play but far from happy about it, are confronted by the hardened theatricality of the Tragedians, who know that they only exist when an audience sees them, and never question the script ('Decides? It is *written*.' p. 72/80).

A note on the Shakespearean roles in the play. Some productions have turned these into grotesque caricatures, or even puppets. It's an obvious temptation, but to yield to it is to make Ros and Guil also ridiculous. The text carefully avoids it; the stage-directions on p. 70/98, for example, are appropriate enough for this telescoped version, where Ophelia may understandably wail and totter; the instructions 'quiet edge' and 'quick clipped sentence' seem genuine notes for actors. The scraps of *Hamlet* should look like a conventional but uninspired performance: the action has to be serious enough for Ros and Guil to be convincingly caught up in it, but not so interesting that it distracts us from their predicament. The only points at which Stoppard allows himself to travesty *Hamlet* are in Act Three, where there is no Shakespearean

action; and some may feel that even these – the beach umbrella (p. 90/99) and the spitting (p. 108/116) – slightly damage the play's consistency.

### Stagecraft

Like a number of twentieth-century dramatists, Stoppard entertains partly by making us highly conscious of the experience, of the playing we have consented to witness. The parallelism between theatre and life itself is discussed above, pp. 28–9; but our interest in that parallel would not carry us through the evening; we are also talking showbiz, and the play itself must be skilfully made. The main effects of *Rosencrantz* could probably be achieved within half an hour; and the text we are studying is both an expansion of earlier material and one which could be ruthlessly cut. I have seen an amateur version reduced to one act (though probably without Stoppard's approval) and his own film-script is said to use less than half the original dialogue. We can be realistic about this; we are not dealing with scripture divinely inspired.

*Rosencrantz* follows Beckett and many 1950s radio-comedy writers in openly highlighting its need to fill up time. The audience is teased for having paid money to come here at all (and indeed some have walked out in disgust). In *Waiting for Godot* the underlying implication is nevertheless that anything else they might have done would have been equally pointless. Perhaps their time might even be better passed here, where at least there is a story to follow.

*Rosencrantz* has, however, far richer material than Beckett's play. To his original brilliant notion of following Ros and Guil in and out of Shakespeare's

play, Stoppard then added a further idea almost better still – adapting Shakespeare's travelling players into go-betweens, who link the fixed course of the classic play with the modern speech and concerns of Ros and Guil, and can also provoke thoughts about theatre itself. Stoppard is thus able to ring the changes on three different kinds of action: the duologues of Ros and Guil; their interplay with the Player and Tragedians; and the fragments of *Hamlet*.

He uses every scene from Shakespeare in which R. and G. appear, except the by-play with a recorder (III. ii. 270ff) – though words of Hamlet in that scene mysteriously find their way into Guil's mouth on p. 104. The story of *Hamlet* maps out a clear course for this play, and a well-known one; the funny and disturbing scenes are of course Stoppard's, yet as we sit in the audience we are always looking forward to the next scrap of Shakespeare to see how it will be handled.

Initially the play follows the structure of *Waiting for Godot*: two men with nothing to do, trying to work out why they're here, eventually interrupted by distant sounds drawing nearer (an elementary theatrical trick: the audience strains to hear, and is quickened with anticipation) and then by what Beckett's Vladimir calls 'reinforcements' (in the task of getting through the evening). This pattern is exactly repeated in Stoppard's third act: just when the duologue is flagging, the recorder is heard again; and in Act Two the Player also enters at a comparable point, though he arrives via Shakespeare.

Stoppard holds back his third option, the action of *Hamlet*, till relatively late in Act One. It's an effective delay, making us enjoyably impatient to see how, if indeed at all, Shakespeare will be used; meanwhile the

duologue, and then the interaction with the Tragedians, can be well established. The delay also paces the arrival of the vital scene in which R. and G. interrogate Hamlet: this can then begin as we break up for the first interval, and end as we return, giving the strong and important impression that the action of *Hamlet* is going on, offstage, continuously.

There is far more of *Hamlet* in Act Two, coming relatively fast and furious, and less of the double-act (which will need to fill much of Act Three). Act Two – and indeed the whole play – pivots round the ‘dress rehearsal’ (pp. 69–75/76–82), which is brilliantly crafted. The dumbshow to be performed in front of Claudius suddenly takes on a life of its own (p. 74/80) and develops into a dumbshow of the further action of *Hamlet*, in which the audience perceives (though they themselves apparently don’t) that Ros and Guil are doomed. The blackout (p. 77/84) then takes us on to the premature end of ‘The Murder of Gonzago’, curtailed by Claudius; after which the dead likenesses of Ros and Guil rise and prove now to be Ros and Guil themselves, still alive though still doomed. These few pages have been the most exciting in the whole play, both in their melodramatic material and in the overlapping of different dramas. Now, from here on, Stoppard’s play must surely be gradually – and appropriately – running down.

The idea of a third act seems problematic. The last line of Act Two – ‘anything could happen yet’ – may at first seem merely a feeble curtain-line. But Ros is expressing a *hope* (he doesn’t want to believe that his fate is already determined). And as for the dramatist, he is reminding us that he is now out on his own. We have now passed the last point in *Hamlet* at which R. and G. are seen; we are

out of the Shakespearean shipping lanes and into uncharted seas – we are, indeed, on a boat. This does involve some damage to the previous elegant idea that Ros and Guil are unable to leave the stage; clearly, at the end of Act Two they have to. Stoppard contrives the change of rules deftly enough, however, with Ros’s line (p. 87/95) ‘He *said* we can go.’ Hamlet in fact *told* them to go; but Ros’s ‘can’ is ambiguous: perhaps Hamlet has freed them from a spell and they are now capable of going.

The Shakespearean basis for Act Three is minimal: events merely summarised by Hamlet on his return, and including one shameless piece of plot-forcing, the attack by pirates which enables Hamlet to change ships. That at least Stoppard feels licensed to mock, in a piece of Goon or Blackadder-ish action on p. 109/117–18 (after a previous distinct echo of Goon-dom on p. 89/98). The other bit of Shakespearean plot is the letter to the English king, which Hamlet discovers and alters to order the deaths of R. and G. By allowing Ros and Guil to discover it first, Stoppard raises the possibility that they might in some way disrupt the predetermined course of things, but makes it also a moment of moral choice, the first they have ever had. Ros wants to save Hamlet, Guil dissuades him. If Ros’s better moral instinct had prevailed, who knows? – perhaps, after all, the fixed plan might have been broken. If they had warned Hamlet of the contents of the letter, he would presumably have been grateful, would not have substituted their names, and the line ‘Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead’ would never have been spoken.

It is a fine touch, from a dramatist whose later plays will often feature moral choices. The other device which energises Act Three departs entirely from Shakespeare:

the re-introduction of the Tragedians, with a passable explanation of why they urgently stowed away on a ship. 'Pleased to see us?' asks the Player (p. 106/114). He gets no response; Guil, in particular, has always been hostile to him. And the Player's apparent warmth vanishes when the rewritten letter is read out (pp. 113-14/122). Now the Tragedians 'form a casually menacing circle'; if the script says Ros and Guil are to die, that's it, die they must.

It's still impossible to see how Stoppard can end his play: there will have to be some kind of fudge. And so indeed there is, but it's brilliantly appropriate: Guil's attack on the Player (first verbal, then physical) brings together in a climax two long-running themes: death, and the nature and ethics of theatrical illusion. An actor gives a convincing rendering of death in agony. We in the audience know it is only acting; but it is acting of the one event which can never have been personally experienced. Theatre often plays out things that frighten or disturb us, but Ancient Greek and neo-classical French drama refused to allow this feigning of death on stage. The argument for and against allowing it goes on in our stomachs as we watch. Since in this case the actor is acting a Player who has previously boasted that his team can die 'heroically, comically, ironically, slowly, suddenly, disgustingly, charmingly, or from a great height,' we are also unsure whether he is acting death, or only acting a Player acting death.

It partly depends whose reaction we watch. If we watch Guil's, he is sure he has killed the Player, and so is Ros; if we watch the Tragedians, we see on their faces only 'interest'. So theatre shows us different reactions, which become different versions of the event. If Guil has 'really' killed the Player, it is instantly significant in several ways:

it means the Tragedians are wrong this time, the deceivers deceived (that'll teach them to muck about with death); it means the intellectual, fastidious Guil has committed murder; and above all it means he has successfully interfered in the proposed destiny of himself and the Tragedians within the play of *Hamlet*. (Or perhaps he has not: because within *that* play none of them is needed any more.)

The theatre is tensely still after the body has ceased to move. Very faintly, though our intellects immediately reject it, we recognise the astronomically remote possibility that the actor is genuinely dead (the idea is used in several classic detective stories including one called *Hamlet, Revenge!*). Much more credibly, within Stoppard's play Guil may really have killed the Player; something of this kind happens at the end of Pirandello's play. Then the Tragedians begin to applaud enthusiastically, and for a second we are flooded with embarrassment, not yet certainly for ourselves but possibly for them, because the Player may not get up. And then of course he does, and we feel the more thoroughly fooled ourselves. Immediately, as if mercilessly, the Player then directs a cavalcade of violent deaths, apparently mocking us in the audience and also, of course, mocking the undying Ros and Guil. Yet this time the Tragedians, we gradually and very cautiously sense, are 'really' dying. The deaths are compelling in themselves, and they also include (for the second time, the first being on p. 76/84) those of the Spies wearing the same cloaks as Ros and Guil ... who, like us in the audience, remain watching.

This is *theatre*. Call it pretence or trickery or fooling about, it is a special kind of shared excitement which at the very least passes an evening and at most can feel as

profound as religious ritual. The student working at home on the mere text of a play has to make a conscious and repeated effort not to undervalue this live event, which is richer not only than the printed page, but also than film or video. It is always a gathering of human beings, performers as well as audience, in one place together.

## Textual Notes

### Act One

- 1/1 *a place without any visible character* – scenery of any kind would suggest a distinct place, with a before and after – the kind of recognisable reality Ros and Guil keep hoping to latch on to. Instead they are in an Absurdist limbo.
- *character note* – Stoppard departs from the faceless interchangeability of Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Ros doesn't think abstractly about the long sequence of 'heads', just about his friendship. But Guil is 'worried by the implications' – which he explores in the next few pages.
- 2/2 There is an art to the building up of suspense – Guil may seem to step out of character here, to tease an uneasy audience and make them laugh. But at a realist level this is also Guil trying not to panic – see his character note on p. 1 – and making a nervous joke to Ros.
- *has nowhere to go ... examining the confines of the stage* – gradually it will appear that Guil and Ros are unable to leave the stage (having no existence beyond it?).

- 3/13 law of diminishing returns – Like Guil's earlier 'laws' – of probability and averages – this is not a scientific law at all, just a popular perception or belief. The longer the 'heads' go on, the less Guil and Ros can find the 'energy' to be surprised, or even bother to spin the next.
- 4/14 I'm relieved ... spun coins! – Guil is slightly reassured by this glimpse of normal (as it were, realistic) self-interest in the trusting Ros. He touches and pulls him closer, and wants to insist that they have a past together. But 'as long as I remember ... I forget' (a joke more or less instantly repeated on p. 7/16) is consistent with their having no past at all, outside their play.
- 5/15 *fear? ... (In fury ...)* – Guil is exasperated and alarmed at Ros's failure to see any implications.
- 6/15 I'm afraid it is – his *one* day, for his transitory theatrical usefulness.
- 6/16 possible explanations – Guil longs for intellectual control.
- children of Israel – protected by God, in Judaeo-Christian scripture, whereas God condemned Lot's wife (to become an unmoving fixity).
  - syllogism – in philosophy, a basic format for logical argument, often (as in the two nonsense versions on this page) in three statements: two premises and a conclusion.
- 7/17 *wheels at Ros and raps out* – he needs to awaken Ros to the 'implications'.
- The scientific approach ... – Guil persists in trying to reason like a philosopher (attempting

to analyse experience dispassionately and without 'panic'). 'Postulate' is a term from philosophy meaning 'claim as true for the sake of this argument'.

- 8/18 fortuitous – happening by chance; 'ordained' – predestined.
- after death ... But you're not dead – a deceptively light-hearted introduction to the topic which will loom over the play.
- 9/18 I cut my fingernails ... And yet ... toenails – these are contradictory experiences, but both suggest non-time, a lack of past or future.
- 10/20 Which way ... direction – they are in a place of no geography, with no future to go to (*do we*) or past arrived from (*did we*). A pun then develops on *direction*.
- 11/20 demolish – Guil sets an imaginary philosophical problem.
- 11/21 A man ... a deer – again a kind of thought-experiment from philosophy. The un-, sub- or supernatural sight is most alarming when there are two witnesses (and Ros and Guil are two). When there are many we feel reassured, though Guil, in a thoroughly twentieth-century caution, still sees 'reality' as only 'the name we give' it.
- In Stoppard's early plays, strange occurrences often prove to have rational explanations (see discussion in this book, p. 13–14). But note here the final reverse twist, where the extraordinary ('horse with an arrow in its forehead') is mistaken for the humdrum ('deer'). 'Recites' may suggest yet another twist: is the crowd

itself deluded, saying what it has been trained to say?

- 12/21 Halt! – the Players arrive at the corresponding point at which Pozzo and Lucky arrive (again heralded by noises off) in *Waiting for Godot*. The meta-theatre joke in Beckett (Pozzo and Lucky helping to pass time for those stuck on stage) is here more or less reversed (those on stage are the audience the Players need).
- 13/22 Tumblers – acrobats; 'tumble' – sexual romp.
- Guildenstern ... Rosencrantz – Shakespeare himself seems to have set up this confusion (see p. 26/35), perhaps to suggest the falseness of interchangeable cardboard spies. In Stoppard it becomes both funny and pathetic: even their own identity feels uncertain. Note, however, '*without embarrassment*': they are behaving like actors gradually getting into their parts, and it's a perfectly normal problem in theatre circles to be unable to remember which of these two lords is which.
  - Don't clap too loudly – a similar music-hall joke occurs in John Osborne's *The Entertainer*.
- 14/23 dénouements – conclusions of plots.  
flagrante delicto – caught in the act.
- 15/24 A nest of children – this is paraphrased from Shakespeare, where it was a genuine topical reference.
- There's one born every minute – meaning, one idiot: the Player is disgruntled that Ros has failed to pick up his sexual hint ('stoop ... bent'). But of course the line makes literal sense referring back to the 'children'.

- 16/25 Chance ... fate – compare p. 8/18: ‘the fortuitous and the ordained’.
- 17/26 caught up in the action – the Player instantly assumes that Guil is showing interest in pornography (‘You’re quicker than your friend’), but in fact Guil’s mind is running more on the unknown function that awaits him and Ros: he is looking for some guide or pointer.
- It could have been ... – see the last note. Guil feels ‘rage’ because he expected better than this; and ‘fright’ because he may not get it (and also his violence to the Player suggests he may feel sexually threatened).
- 18/27 *resumes the struggle* – though the theatre audience never sees this stage direction, and here it simply refers to Alfred’s movements, the words come from the very first lines of *Waiting for Godot*, where they mean the decision to continue with life itself.
- 22/31 Was it for this? – compare ‘It could have been’ on p. 18/27. Also an echo of Wilfred Owen’s poem ‘Futility’, on a dead young soldier: ‘Was it for this the clay grew tall?’
- 23/32 You and I, Alfred ... – Guil seems to be thinking that he and Alfred could simply walk out now. This play would then fold; so would *Hamlet* and the play within it in which Alfred is due to act. But the word *could* means they won’t; and one reason is that Guil by now realises they *couldn’t*. Alfred’s snuffle, however, suggests that he fears Guil has in mind some new sexual abuse.

- -cide – killing; ‘matri’, etc: mother, father, brother, wife and (after Ros’s pun) self.
- vice versa – (with a pun on ‘vice’) gods hoping to capture maidenheads.
- 24/33 rhetoric – elaborate speeches.
- we’ll let you know – the traditional line of dismissal to actors who have auditioned.
- Thirty-eight! – Ros hopes this is some Kama-Sutra-like sexual position, but it’s simply a players’ code, such as might be called in rugby or American football.
- 25/34 *immobility* – Stoppard here tricks his audience. The previous pages have accustomed us to Ros and Guil’s inability to leave the stage, with grim hints of predestination, and at first here we seem to be getting more of the same. But the Player turns out not to be suffering from any such condition: he’s merely a crook.
- 26/35 *Hamlet, with his doublet* – here we see onstage a scene which is offstage in Shakespeare, where it is described by Ophelia in the words which make up most of the stage-direction here.
- Welcome, dear Rosencrantz – the speeches from here to the top of p. 29/38 come accurately from Shakespeare; but the stage directions are Stoppard’s own mischievous choreography.
- 27/36 During the ‘*Fractional suspense*’, the Queen decides not to risk repeating her husband’s muddle of their names. On p. 28/36–7 Ros and Guil themselves get caught out.
- 29/38 *high* and dry – at last, with huge relief, Guil arrives at the usual word-pairing. The previous attempts represent both their faltering grip on

- everything, and also a typically Stoppardian mockery of cliché.
- 'wife' ... 'house' – these words seem to come haphazardly to Guil's mind, but they remind us what fundamental information we lack about these two characters. (Do they perhaps also lack it themselves?)
  - 30/39 a grotesque – a weird person.
    - Consistency is all I ask! – as a director might of his actors, perhaps. This starts a series of similar patterned exclamations, each with rhyming partner; others are on pp. 37 and 93/45 and 102.
    - our daily mask – as stage characters, rather than people.
  - 32/41 amnesiac – suffering from loss of memory.
    - Elephantine – legendarily, elephants never forget.
      - retainer – at court meant a servant; so Guil has got into a twist.
    - Words, words – from *Waiting for Godot*, where it is a shortened quotation from *Hamlet*; so the wheel of reference comes full circle.
    - A short, blunt human pyramid – obviously, this is taking 'constructive' far too literally, and with only two of them it would be extremely 'short' and 'blunt'. Yet six years later Stoppard demanded an actual human pyramid, early in *Jumpers*.
  - 33/42 The idea of the questions game is borrowed from *Next Time I'll Sing to You* (1963) by Stoppard's friend James Saunders. There the analogy is with cricket; here, the tennis term

- 'love' is used. Many of the questions have obvious ironic significance in Ros and Guil's situation.
- 34/42 rhetoric – here means questions that can't reasonably expect an answer. (In Saunders: 'the bowling of rhetorical questions ... shall constitute a no-ball.')
  - 35/43 *non-sequitur* – means 'it doesn't follow logically'.
  - 36/45 *Triumph dawns* – because Ros answered rightly to his name.
  - 37/46 How do you know? – in Shakespeare, they are supposed to have known Hamlet for years, but here Guil only seems to know what he has just been told (p. 27/35) about Hamlet's 'transformation'.
  - 39/47 You've forgotten – Ros is supposed to be practising 'gleaning' information from Hamlet. Challenged, Ros reverts to their previous confusion, and promptly gets that wrong too.
    - hypothesis* – (here) imaginary situation.
  - 41/49 Let me ... king – this is a more or less accurate summary of the background in Shakespeare.
    - Usurpation – illegally seizing a throne.
  - 44/53 How dost thou Guildenstern? – again the words are Shakespeare's, the stage directions Stoppard's. And they move offstage for the scene which is onstage in Shakespeare.

## Act Two

- 46/55 The whole text until Hamlet and Polonius's exit is Shakespeare's. Hamlet shows himself far from mad; he bids a courteous welcome-



back and goodbye-for-now to R. and G., and asks them not to take offence if he welcomes the Players more heartily. He is a shrewd, polished prince in a devious court where hints are everything; even as he gracefully apologises for his coolness, he leaves R. and G. in no doubt that it is consciously intended.

- but mad north north-west – only a touch ‘off’ (i.e. not seriously mad).
- handsaw – (possibly) a heron.

47/57 Again, Stoppard’s onstage scene begins as Shakespeare’s goes offstage.

48/57 Half of what he said ... – a more or less fair description of how in *Hamlet* he does indeed tease them, as well as being a joke about the linguistic difficulty of Shakespeare for today’s audiences.

50/58 Pragmatism – a practical approach; this is another of Guil’s semi-philosophical terms. He of course knows they are unable to go anywhere, even to ‘have a look’.

50/59 *Draught*, yes – actors often complain that stages are draughty places.

51/59 It’s what we’re counting on – i.e. to keep the play going: another Godot-like joke. But ‘Ultimately’ (with its faint suggestion of the end of the world, a Last Judgement, etc.) makes it sound much more portentous.

51/60 If we start being arbitrary ... lost – this briefly and lightly glances at theological debate in which free will (‘arbitrary’ here means independent, on our own initiative) is set against predestination.

– Perhaps even decisions which seem to us spontaneous are actually predetermined (by Fate or God or – some might think today – our genes); if so, we are ‘lost’ in hopes of being able to act independently.

– Envy him – this is a fierce twist. The philosopher’s uncertainty might seem to make him unenviably insecure; but he does at least have a choice between two clear identities, whereas Guil and Ros (and perhaps we ourselves?) can be sure of none.

– Fire! – yelling *Fire!* in a theatre is a traditional example of where ‘free speech’ should be restricted.

53/62 The speeches as far as ‘Good, my Lord’ are from *Hamlet*, and crucial to its plot.

54/62 dumbshows – a mime summarising the play to follow. See pp. 69–76/76–83.

55/63 that somebody is *watching* – obviously this makes sense to fellow-actors, but it’s also a passing reference to a view in philosophy (and incidentally some twentieth-century physics) that something doesn’t exist or happen till it is observed.

thirty-eight? – see note on p. 24/33.

56/64 if these eyes could weep! – primarily, Guil is mocking the Player’s ‘camp’ or ‘kitsch’ style, as in ‘silent on the road to Elsinore.’ But, secondly, does Guil, as a ‘character’ with a scripted role in a play, have enough personality or freedom to ‘weep’?

– with a vengeance ... figure of speech – revenge is the central topic of *Hamlet*.

- 57/65 Escapism! – this is the charge often levelled by ‘social realists’ at literary subject-matter comfortably distant from the audience’s own problems. But in this case a King and Queen will indeed be the audience.
- the wind is blowing ... two levels – see p. 50/59.
- 58/67 honoured – a faint hint here of the moral insistence of Stoppard’s later plays. Even in a state of uncertainty we should endeavour to trust and be trustworthy.
- 61/69 Next! – the cry to actors waiting for audition: come on stage and do your stuff. A running joke develops: Ros demanding more professional support to keep the action going (‘Come out talking!’ ... ‘taking us for granted,’ pp. 63–4/71–2) but then instantly objecting when it arrives (p. 65/73; ‘public park’, p. 67–75).
- 63/71 to death! – as in, ‘with a vengeance’ on p. 56, Guil’s cliché is over-appropriate.
- yet! ... Schmarsus ... already – caricature Jewish forms of speech. (The Jew Saul changed his name to Paul when converted to Christianity.)
  - Blue, red – either of these would be standard before ‘in the face’; but ‘green’ isn’t. Guil frequently seems cast as straight-man, correcting a dimmer Ros.
  - Silverstein! ... Abdullah – Silverstein is a Jewish name; Abdullah a Moslem one. The idea of eternity seems to have set Ros’s mind running vaguely on religious conversion (possibly because it might bring salvation?), but we never

- know how this story might have developed, nor the one started at the bottom of the page.
- 64/72 Did he receive you well? ... Affront Ophelia ... – these lines are Shakespeare’s.
- 66/74 *weighing up the pros and cons* ... – in other words, Hamlet is at this moment murmuring to himself the most famous soliloquy in all drama, ‘To be or not to be’; not the ideal time for Ros to ‘accost him’ with ‘Now look here, what’s it all about ...’ (See Guil’s comment on p. 67/74: ‘I thought your direct informal approach was going to stop this thing dead in its tracks.’)
- *No point in looking* – Ros muddles two proverbial sayings: ‘never look a gift horse in the mouth’ and ‘don’t move till you see the whites of its eyes’.
- 67/75 I’m not going to stand for it ... Guess who?! – Ros is determined to interrupt the action of *Hamlet*, which is ignoring him.
- 68/76 Stop picking your nose – in Jean Genet’s *The Balcony*, a Queen is described picking her nose. The line about ‘cerebral process ... blood’ occurs also in Stoppard’s novel, *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon*.
- 70/77 *The mime* – the dumbshow is from Shakespeare – and the debate about its function is an old one in literary criticism. Pages 69–70/77 jumble together different bits of Shakespeare, including some of his directions for the mime.
- 72/80 It is *written* – as if foretold (predestined) in ancient scripture.
- The bad ... means – a twist of Oscar Wilde’s lines in *The Importance of Being Earnest*,

- themselves a parody of Victorian moralising:  
 'The good ended happily, and the bad  
 unhappily. That is what Fiction means.'
- 73/80 good story ... mirror life – basic traditional theories for drama, the first vaguely based on Aristotle, the second echoing words of Hamlet himself ('hold the mirror up to nature').
- 73/81 It's all the same to me – literally true: the Player has no life separate from art. (Nor, we are pretty sure by now, do Ros and Guil.)
- The mime now becomes a dumbshow of *Hamlet* itself; the Player still speaks of 'Lucianus' but the story told is more or less Hamlet's.
- 74/81 *oedipal* – son in love with mother, as in the Oedipus legend.
- two smiling ... spies – the Player's apparent struggle to find the right words allows him ironic stage-business at the expense of Ros and Guil, who remain unaware.
- 74/82 hoist by their own petard? – the phrase (meaning 'blown up by their own bomb') comes from *Hamlet*.
- 75/83 a long time since ... when was it? – not only does Ros fail to recognise his own coat, he is again fumbling for a past he does not have (compare pp. 5 and 7).
- 76/84 a sheep – or a lamb – English proverb: 'as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb'.
- suspend one's disbelief – the phrase comes from S. T. Coleridge, who said that in a theatre things are obviously false, but the audience 'willingly' co-operates in this way. Here the

- twist, of course, is that it was in fact a uniquely *genuine* stage-occurrence.
- 77/85 it was light all the time, you see – Guil is now convinced of the fixity of his condition ('I've been taken in before'), but this time Stoppard has tricked him, since the light did indeed come up 'as a sunrise'.
- They're waiting – Guil means the other characters, but it's true also of the audience, the view of which Ros has just found vaguely familiar.
  - Good old east – Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* has the line 'Good old north'.
- 78/86 *Small pause* – neither remembers his name being Guildenstern – which is perhaps the main reason for their '*desperation*'.
- seek him out – makes them hesitate for two reasons: (a) it sounds risky, if Hamlet is now killing people; (b) it would involve leaving the stage, but 'getting somewhere' (mid-p. 80/88, back in '*original positions*') is just what they seem unable to do.
- 82/89 Properly – they have been watching deaths acted by the Players.
- 80/90 Lord Hamlet! ... Bring in the lord – the spoken words are all from Shakespeare – but the farcical action is Stoppard's. This passage was not in his original version but was added after a suggestion by Laurence Olivier.
- 86/93 Good sir ... Fortinbras – the Hamlet–Soldier exchange is again from Shakespeare.
- Meanwhile, Ros and Guil feel as if the seasons

of the year (and life?) are telescoping inwards – from spring to autumn in ten lines.

87/95 He *said* we can go; anything could happen yet – are discussed above, this book, p. 41.

### Act Three

Here the play can no longer weave in and out of Shakespeare's, since that doesn't include the events on the boat (they are merely summarised by Hamlet himself afterwards). This has led some critics to see Ros and Guil as now free to choose their own future; but it seems to me they are still trapped in the story of *Hamlet*.

89/98 it feels like my leg ... Dead – (a) a variant on the old confusion over which of them is which; and (b) a reminder of the title theme, which is now increasingly dominant.

– We're on a boat – the pitch darkness means that this act has so far resembled radio, and here is a trick from the Goon Shows which the schoolboy Stoppard enjoyed in the 1950s: absurd excess of sound-clichés followed by this Eccles-like perception.

90/99 *a gaudy striped umbrella* – suddenly Stoppard allows himself one huge comic anachronism, a joke he avoids elsewhere in the play though it can tempt directors (one production ended with music from an advertisement – 'happiness is a cigar named Hamlet'). For the first time Shakespeare's play seems to be mocked, and perhaps diminished.

92/100 Where? ... disbelief – like a fooled child, Guil looks around for 'Those eskimos'. His faculty

for mistrust has been exhausted in the first two acts.

93/101 *Guil licks a finger* – there still seems no clear wind direction. Front rows of the audience are relieved when he sends Ros the other way.

93/102 For those in peril on the sea – the refrain of a well-known hymn.

our daily cue – as characters in a play.

95/104 say something original! ... stagnant! – Stoppard waves his red rag closer than ever to the potentially infuriated bull (the audience). Compare *Waiting for Godot*: 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.'

96/105 keep us going a bit – although Ros and Guil have by now accepted that they exist only for the story, they still want to 'live' in it as long as possible.

99/107 I don't believe in it anyway – compare p. 100/108, 'I have no confidence in England', p. 106/114, 'all right for England'; p. 112/121 'a dead end' – a series of laughs for British audiences (better still for the original Scottish audience!).

– clutching at ... drowning man – the hidden proverb which has tripped Ros up is 'You can't make bricks without straw.'

100/109 (*angrily*) Let me finish – for once (because he is playing a king) Ros has become the dominant one – and Guil doesn't like it.

101/110 We're his *friends* – i.e., we can't possibly let him go to his death. Throughout the play Ros has tended to show the 'average man's' reactions, where Guil is cleverer and more

- cerebral. Stoppard's later work, for example *Jumpers*, often pits instinctive human decency against intellectual amorality: 'you can persuade a man of anything if he is clever enough', and Guil's long speech ('Well, yes, and then again no') shows him persuading *himself*, resisting (see following speeches) both logic and justice.
- You've only got their word for it – Ros and Guil have no memory of any such 'young days'. The script tells them all they know.
  - 102/110 Socrates – Ancient Greek philosopher. 'Philosophically' is therefore a sort of pun, Guil's main meaning being the popular one of accepting life's ups and downs.
  - assuming you were in character – a standard reassurance to actors covering up errors: keep behaving as your character would, and the audience will notice nothing. Of course Ros and Guil have no option but to remain in character.
  - 104/112 governing ... eloquent music – extracted from Hamlet showing a recorder to Guildenstern, *Hamlet* III, ii.
  - 105/114 Plausibility is all I ... – see note on p. 30: here Ros begs for another theatre requirement, offended by the notion that the Players may be inside the barrels.
  - *coda* – musical end-piece. This is the last of these paired lines, and Guil's tone may suggest everything running down.
  - Call us ... tune – The proverb is 'Whoever pays the piper calls the tune,' so Guil's line is appropriate both to the pipe just heard and to

- the idea that he has to perform in someone else's story.
- 106/114 *from the Player's barrel* – compare p. 22/31, 'Do you lose often, Alfred?'
  - 108/116 without restriction. Within limits ... – this contradiction sums up their predicament, as does Hamlet's boomeranging spit three lines later – as if a glass wall confined all the characters within the play.
  - 109/118 *The Pirates attack* – in Shakespeare this is a blatant plot-mechanism (to get Hamlet off the ship and back to Denmark): fair game for Stoppard's mockery.
  - Action! – Hamlet here appears the most unheroic of 'heroes'. The disappearance of the barrel in which Ros and Guil hid momentarily suggests the play's title.
  - 110/119 *not a pick up* – i.e., not referring to the Player's words, but to what may have happened to Hamlet. The word 'dead' presses more and more on our ears.
  - 112/120 *ingratiating* – trying to win favour. Ros invents a bet Guil would be certain to win. Compare p. 94/103 'I wanted to make you happy.'
  - 113/122 *double takes* – a standard trick of comedy; he belatedly understands (long after the audience) what he's just said.
  - 114/122 contained within a larger one – compare note on p. 108/116.
  - 115/123 *he pushes the blade in ...* – this seems to be Guil departing from any predetermined script, taking action of his own for the first time. And the audience should be fooled by the Player's

'death'. One critic even suggests that his recovery is 'magic'; but surely the point is that the dagger at the Player's belt is a collapsible one, an ancient theatrical prop. That is the kind of dagger *he* needs, since his whole existence is onstage; and Guil's attempt at an independent 'plot' has failed.

- 115/124 cheated – by having a real dagger and thus genuinely dying, instead of using his technique. We perhaps remember the actor, p. 76/84, whose genuine hanging wasn't convincing.
- 116/125 the fashionable theory – that the planets revolve round the sun – a new and controversial idea to Elizabethans.
- 117/126 next time – their play may be performed again (but the audience knows they will never be free to 'know better').
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead – the entire play has been building up to its title line, which we now hear in its Shakespearean context. Originally, and much less strongly in my view, Stoppard ended his play with a messenger banging on a shutter all over again (see p. 9/19).

## Jumpers

In *Jumpers* Stoppard is trying, in his own words to *Theatre Quarterly*, 'to end up by contriving the perfect marriage between the play of ideas and farce or perhaps even high comedy'. A simpler starting-point may be to see it as a satire: that is, a comic story which holds up for ridicule some tendencies of its time. Satire is at heart serious, even angry; but it often uses the broadest comic tricks and traditions.

*Jumpers* satirises twentieth-century relativist thinkers – those who claim that there are no absolute values such as goodness, truth, or beauty, but simply the relative opinions of individuals depending on where they are 'coming from' and where they stand. If in fact they don't stand anywhere consistently, but keep always 'jumping' about, they can lose all moral sense. The play shows such relativism not only dominating the intellectual world of a university, but also taking over politically in a whole country.

Also satirised, however, is the central character, George, a philosopher who resists relativism. He persists in believing in altruism, the unselfish instinct to act for others' benefit. He is convinced that human beings have a moral conscience, and that beyond us is some sort of god. But George is an ineffectual person. He gets confused even on his own professional ground – in a lecture we hear him preparing – and he is unable to help his wife, Dotty, who is suffering a mental breakdown. She is, surprisingly, a