

# Tom Stoppard's Plays: A Study

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## Abstract:

In this article I have tried to present Tom Stoppard's plays as Absurd plays. The Theatre of the Absurd has its roots in such 20<sup>th</sup> century literary movements as expressionism and surrealism. Martin Esslin coined the term "*The Theatre of the Absurd*" in 1960. Esslin grouped these plays around the broad theme of the Absurd related to the way Albert Camus uses the term in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). The human beings are responsible for their own actions despite the prevailing uncertainty about right or wrong. Many have examined the plays such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search for an Author* and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* through an existential lens. Main quality of an existential work includes the existence of anti-heroes, unstable understanding of the past and unstable identities.

The movement of absurd drama rose in Paris, France now that it was seen as the centre of art of the world at that time. Theatre of absurd resists the traditional forms of conservative drama which has a tradition based on strong roots and in it the inharmoniousness between the human being and the world is portrayed. The Theatre of absurd minimizes all the ocular and responsive elements on stage.

Some scholars argues that the Absurd term have to be used only to refer to the cultural group in Europe in the 1950s - 1960s connected with the works of the Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Jean Genet, Frank Kafka, Harold Pinter, and Tom Stoppard. Former scholars expand the term to Albert Camus and yet others extend it as far back as Socrates.

## Key words:

Absurd Theatre, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Existentialism, Tom Stoppard, meaningless, nothingness, Sartre

## Full Length Paper:

Tom Stoppard is a Czech-born British dramatist. He was born "Tomas Straussler" in Zlin, Czechoslovakia in 1937. His family was in Singapore. Tom lived in Darjeeling, India for some time. However his father remained in India, his Martha mother who married Kenneth Stoppard migrated to England. Stoppard had his primary education and became a freelance writer for English papers. Later he started writing for the theatre. Even he adopted the pseudonym William Boot (taken from Evelyn Waugh's SCOOP). As for

Stoppard's personal life he married Jose Ingle in 1965 and divorced her in 1972 and he married Dr Miriam Moore-Robinson in 1972 and divorced her in 1992. He has two sons from each marriage.

Tom Stoppard is dramatist and something of an eclectic who has experimented with a variety of forms in his writing for stage and television. A heavy reliance on intellectual wit and allusion as in the case of N. F. Simpson, is the characterization of Stoppard's plays. In fact, his plays have achieved a great success at West End. Now he is established as a leading comic playwright. His major works include *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974), *Dirty Linen* (1976), *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977), *Night and Day* (1978), *On the Razzle* (1981), *The Real Thing* (1982), *Rough Crossing* (1985) and *Hapgood* (1987). His television plays are *Professional Foul* (1977) and *Squaring the Circle* (1984). Stoppard also translated a number of plays including those of Mrozek, Nestroy, Schnitzler and Havel, and was heavily influenced by the work of the Polish and Czech absurdists.

Tom Stoppard's best play is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is, in fact, his most representative work. While participating in a colloquium sponsored by the Ford Foundation in Berlin in 1964, Stoppard wrote a one act play that later became *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The play was enacted at Cranston Street Hall at Edinburg Festival in 1967. The play attracted a vast audience and became instantly popular. Thereafter, it was staged at Old Vic Theatre in London in the same year.

Criticism of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is complex and varied. The play focuses on two minor characters from *Hamlet*, and examines the ideas of fate and free will. Hard critics called it a plagiarism of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Stoppard was called a 'parasite.' Some people called him a parodist as he parodied Shakespeare's language with his colloquial language. Irving called Stoppard 'a Bookish playwright,' while Jim Hunter said he was 'a player.' Roger Sales terms *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as 'theater of theatre.' Cheryl Faroane writes Stoppard is a "committed, hard-working theatrical practitioner."<sup>1</sup> *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *Rosencrantz* for short became labelled as a difficult play as it has an intellectual context, exploring the theme of absurd. Roger Sales observes, "the play presents problems... *Rosencrantz* is 'about' the theatre and theatricality and is therefore not quite so easy to contextualise."<sup>2</sup> It has placed a great emphasis on fashion, in common with the regency and Elizabethan ones. Stoppard himself was a dedicated follower of the sixties fashions and he sounds like a king's road dandy. So when the play achieved an instant success at Edinburg, it was staged on both sides of the Atlantic. Maybe Stoppard has written the play with Shakespeare's help but he wrote the script in accordance with the 60's mythology and it is here lies his originality.

The theme of the play is just as same as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Yet Tom Stoppard's play projects Ros and Guil, but not Hamlet. Stoppard seems to ask the question as to why Ros and Guil should suffer for Hamlet's sake. They are, soon on arriving to the King of England, beheaded. He calls this absurd.

The modern play *Rosencrantz* begins with two Elizabethans passing their time in a place without any visible character. They are well dressed. Each of them has a moneybag and they want to play with money. As Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* influenced Stoppard, he makes use of syllogism and repetitions. The characters Ros and Guil want to pass their time. Yet they worry as to how to pass it. For instance,  
ROSS: Heads.

(He picks it up and puts it in his bag. The process is repeated.)

Heads.

(Again.)

ROSS: Heads.

(Again.)

Heads.

(Again.)

Heads.

GUIL: (Flipping a coin): There is an art to the building up of suspense.

ROSS: Heads.

GUIL: (Flipping another): Though it can be done by luck alone.<sup>3</sup>

As the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, Ros and Guil pass their time by telling syllogism which is a form of reasoning in which a conclusion is drawn from two given or assumed propositions. An example can be: “All trains are long; some buses are long; therefore some buses are trains.”<sup>4</sup> We see they speak of nothing important. For instance,

GUIL: Too late for what?

ROSS: How do I know? We haven't got there yet.

GUIL: Then what are we doing here, I ask myself?

ROSS: You might well ask.

GUIL: We better get on.

ROSS: You might well think.

GUIL: We better get on.

Ros (actively): Right! (Pause). On where?

GUIL: Forward.<sup>5</sup>

Later Guil narrates a unicorn story. Roger Sales observes, “He wants to associate himself with unicorns and therefore with mystery, mythology and poetry.”<sup>6</sup> Time passing is a recurring theme in *Rosencrantz*. Ros and Guil pass their time by playing coins, saying syllogism and asking each other nonsense questions.

GUIL (seriously): What's your name?

ROS: What's yours?

GUIL: I asked first.

ROS: Statement. One—love.

GUIL: What's your name when you're at home?

ROS: What's yours?

GUIL: When I'm at home?

ROS: Is it different at home?

GUIL: What home?

ROS: Haven't you got one?

GUIL: Why do you ask?

ROS: What are driving at?

GUIL: What's your name?<sup>7</sup>

Stoppard's *Rosencrantz* bears a resemblance with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Certain features like informal language, parodying, broken ceremonies, abrupt ending at Act One, and the dance of death in Act Two are of absurd theatre.

Roger Sales says the two tramps-like sentries who are content to wait passively for instructions and believe that they will be punished if they do not do so, may represent the absurdity of the so-called 'ages of faith' rather than that of a secular society. As for the difference between Godot and Rosencrantz, although Hamlet eventually appears in Ros, he nevertheless fulfils some of the same functions as the absent Godot does in Beckett's play. But Ros and Guil, like Estragon and Vladimir are desperately seeking a sense of direction and purpose.

### **TOM STOPPARD'S RADIO AND TELEVISION PLAYS:**

Tom Stoppard has contributed much for the radio and television. In 1977 he visited Russia as a member of Amnesty International. Later Stoppard became concerned with a number of human rights issues which have been dealt in his later works. He wrote, at the request of Andre Previn, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977). It was inspired by a meeting with the Russian exile Viktor Fainberg. His next Television play, *Professional Foul* (1977), was Stoppard's contribution to Amnesty International's declaration of 1977 as Prisoner of Conscience Year. His other works such as *Dogg's Hamlet*, *Cahoot's Macbeth* (1979) and *Squaring the Circle* (1984) are direct attacks on the oppressive old regimes of Eastern Europe. Not all of Stoppard's plays however, are political. One of his works, *The Invention of Love* (1977), is about the relationship between famous scholar and poet A. E. Housman and the man he loved his entire life, Moses Jackson, a handsome athlete who did not return his feelings. The play got rare reviews at the Royal National Theatre in 1997.

Stoppard has written a number of screenplays apart from his works for the stage. They include *The Human Factor* (1979), *Empire of the Sun* (1987) and *Billy Bathgate* (1991). His screenplay for *Brazil* (1985) which he co-authored with Terry Gilliam and Charles McKeown, was nominated for an Academy Award in 1985, and in (1999), he won an Oscar for "Best Screenplay" for *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) which he co-authored with Marc Norman. Other awards include the John Whiting Award (1967), the EVENING STANDARD Award (1968, 1975, 1979, 1983), the Italia Prize for radio plays (1968), three Tony Award (1968, 1976, 1984), the Shakespeare Prize (1979), an Outer Circle Award (1984) and a Drama Desk Award (1984)

Tom Stoppard has established an international reputation as a writer. He is well known for his serious comedies. His plays are plays of ideas. They deal with philosophical issues. Yet he combines the philosophical ideas he presents with verbal wit and visual humour. The chief characteristics of his work are his linguistic complexity, with its puns, jokes, innuendo, and other wordplay.



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