



Author Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is taught in classes, reprised on world stages, has been an award-winning film, and is the subject of at least a hundred scholarly works.

March 2017 review in *Variety* magazine compared the 2017 production favorably to one in 2011 directed by the accomplished director Trevor Nunn, which is described as lumbering through "a weary two hours and 45 minutes," a version that "underlined the games but found little gravitas."¹¹⁵ Part of the streamlining of the current version is due to more economy in what happens with the Tragedians, and the play also finds Ros and Guil delivering their repartee with what the reviewer calls "Aaron Sorkin speed" (a reference to various Sorkin television productions, particularly *The West Wing*). Reviewer David Benedict praised Daniel Radcliffe for choosing the less showy role of Ros, allowing him to have an "effortless stillness," rather than showing the audience how hard he has worked. Susannah Clapp in her review in London's *The Observer* was appreciative of Radcliffe's "amiable and bewildered" Ros.¹¹⁶ Helen Lewis, in *The New Statesman*, offers a left-handed compliment in saying that the play is an "unlikely success," grounded as it is in "an absurdist style that is wildly out-of-step with current trends in theater." She does, however, praise the production, especially the casting of Radcliffe in a less than central role, saying, "he is perfectly cast here as a character saddled with the nagging feeling that something very bad is happening just on the edge of his vision."¹¹⁷

The glory of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is forever stamped in the cultural canon of the West, and powerful productions of the play have moved audiences for centuries. The role of Hamlet embodies honor, uncertainty, the strategic use of

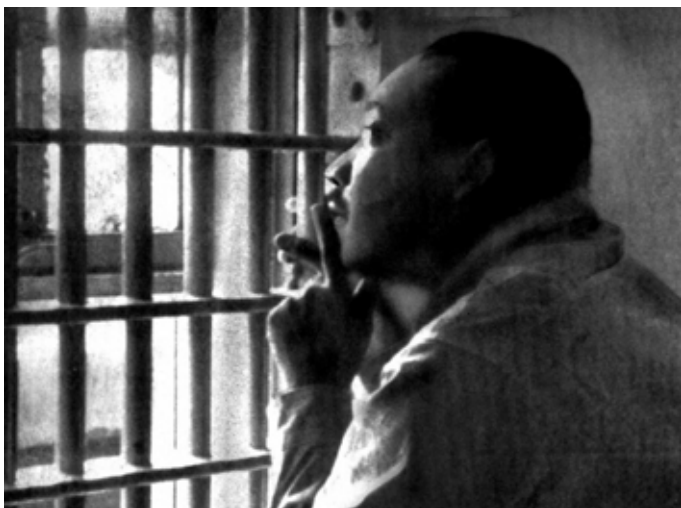
madness, realization of the truth, and resolution to act. The deft wordplay and the deeply insightful representations of human psychology combine for a fulfilling and even thrilling theatrical experience. There are few theatrical feats so admirable as a brilliantly conceived and acted Hamlet. This is especially the case for any actor who handles the central role with grace, passion, and insight.

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is also a classic, albeit in a very different way. There are three plum roles in the play—Ros, Guil, and the Player—but the skill involved in a successful production owes more to how the players work with and against each other rather than how they inhabit a soliloquy or how they feign madness. The questions asked by the two plays are different. Sure, Hamlet's "to be, or not to be" has the ring of the existential about it, but Hamlet seems sure of his central being—his questions mostly have to do with the afterlife and of "what dreams may come, / When we've shuffled off this mortal coil." Ros and Guil question the nature of the "mortal coil," and their questions involve the reality of their lives, their origins, their destiny, and the seeming emptiness of everything around them.

For better or worse, audiences of *Rosencrantz* have had their relationship to *Hamlet* altered. Attributes of *Rosencrantz* infiltrated productions of *Hamlet* in the late 60s and early 70s. Stoppard himself reports seeing at least two productions of *Hamlet* in which *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* are flipping coins as they make their first appearance. Viewers of *Hamlet* who know *Rosencrantz* will view the pair in Shakespeare as less eager to please the new King Claudius for their own profit and certainly less deserving of their final fate.

Stoppard's play was born in a moment when the striving for something new and original was tied up with absurdity, existentialism, and experimentalism in literature and theater. Even though some reviews of recent performances hint that the immediacy of the play has been diminished over time, one feels that the themes of uncertain reality and a desperation for life to be of significance will be human concerns for the conceivable future. Thus, the play retains its relevance, and audiences continue to enjoy the antic spirit with which it is performed. It is hoped that the readers of these pages will bring to their future interactions with the play some useful knowledge of the influences and the contexts of this play's creation.





Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. looks out the window of a jail cell. This photo was taken by the Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker in October 1967, when both leaders served time in the Jefferson County Jail in Birmingham.

Photograph United Press International

order to express a concept. King's rhetorical *logos* uses a strategy whereby he examines the meaning of a word from different perspectives, casting new light on what the word might signify. Three such words are "tension," "law," and "extremism."¹³⁶

When King advocates sit-ins, marches, and other forms of direct action, he does so not for the sake of the action, but for the tension it causes that leads to precisely what the writers of the "Call" most strongly support—negotiations with government representatives to change unjust policies. "I must confess I am not afraid of the word *tension*" (italics his), proclaims King, stating that he has "preached against violent tension" but sees tremendous potential in "constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth."¹³⁷ King insists that until a situation reaches a critical level of discomfort, it is too easy for those in power to protect and maintain the status quo.

After establishing that the present is the right moment for direct action, and that his action plan will lead to productive negotiations—which is a *logos*-oriented appeal to his audience—King turns to the clergy's concerns about demonstrators' willingness to break laws. This strategy augments his direct response to "A Call for Unity" with a response to "[An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense](#)," a previous editorial that was published on January 16, 1963, by many of the same signatories. King opens his inquiry into the topic of the law by pointing out that

his group is diligent about urging people to obey the law, namely the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 that outlawed segregation in public schools. He acknowledges the apparent paradox that some laws must be broken in order to urge adherence to another law, but goes on to differentiate between just and unjust laws.

Before giving concrete examples of just and unjust laws, King undertakes a historical and philosophical discussion of the law as it is addressed by [Augustine](#), [Aquinas](#), [Tillich](#), and [Buber](#). He examines the morality of law in an essential manner that claims that a just law is natural and recognizes the inherent value of all human beings. "An unjust law," he writes, "is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself." The inverse, he concludes, is a just law.¹³⁸ He furthers his case by calling unjust a "code inflicted upon a minority that the minority had no part in enacting or creating because they did not have the unhampered right to vote"—a condition that was clearly evident in Alabama in 1963.¹³⁹

Reminding his audience from where it is that he writes, King admits that there is nothing essentially wrong with a law that requires a permit for a parade. He goes on to write, "but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust." He claims that he breaks the law "*openly, lovingly*" (his italics) and with a willingness to accept the consequences. He equates his violation of the law to various historical examples that hold particular appeal to his audience of clergy—the civil disobedience of Christians who adhered to a higher moral law than that of earthly governments and those who offered aid to Jews in Nazi Germany even though it was unlawful to do so. Obedience to an unjust law, King implies, is a moral compromise that must not be tolerated, and this line of thought allows him to express his disappointment with the "white moderate" who has insisted that all advancement toward racial equality must be done "lawfully."

Another word that King examines is "extremism." After expressing disappointment that nonviolent action would be seen as extreme, he situates his methods in the middle of two opposing forces in the black community. He calls them "'the do-nothingism' of the complacent, and the hatred and despair of the black nationalist." The former refers to blacks who have either adjusted to segregation and/or have achieved middle-class status. The latter are black nationalist groups like Elijah Muhammed's [Nation of Islam](#),

