

sometimes misunderstood to be. While it does start with a seemingly despairing notion that the universe is, at its heart, meaningless, it gives the individual human subject agency to act in a way that gives meaning to his or her own existence, even if this meaning is a willed illusion.

To be sure, if one transports these positive elements of action and *engagement* to *Rosencrantz*, one finds the title characters little able to act in an authentic way that might be considered to be “being-in-itself” or “being-for-others.” True, the characters are on a quest for some notion of the meaning of their existence, and they do not seem to have such standard recourses as religion or nation to which to turn. Lacking the capacity to act (barring Guil’s act of stabbing the Player, albeit with an inconsequential weapon), one finds *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* in the situation of Camus’ *Sisyphus*, always rolling their boulder toward an end that resolves nothing. Camus reimagined the plight of the ancient mythical figure of *Sisyphus* and reconfigured his struggle in modern terms. *Sisyphus* was an inventor who was punished by Zeus for an excess of cleverness and deceit, among other crimes, and so was sentenced to his eternal task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll down, necessitating a renewal of the task. While in Camus’s version the mythic hero transforms his seemingly meaningless (absurd) task by willing himself to put his entire being into it, *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* face an absurd situation with no apparent way of positively addressing it. Thus, there is an absurdity that is undeniable in *Stoppard* with no recourse to *engagement*.

STOPPARD AND THE “THEATER OF THE ABSURD”

Stoppard’s work is, appropriately, in the tradition of a kind of theater that came to be known as the “Theater of the Absurd.” It is a theatrical world in which the laws of physics, the constancy of identity, the meaning of words, and the predictability of human response are suspended. We might say it is a world unlike the one in which we live, but one that is recognizable nonetheless.

Since we have established a basic notion of the existential, it may be useful to suggest the ways that the Theater of the Absurd is distinct from the philosophical system of existentialism. In *Tom Stoppard and the Theater of the Absurd*, Victor L. Cahn describes the protagonists of Sartre’s and Camus’s fiction and theater as “tragic-heroic” as they battle against the prevailing meaninglessness of existence. The protagonists in works by absurdist playwrights like Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet, and Samuel Beckett, on the other hand, are “comic-pathetic”—they are

helpless and impotent victims of the circumstances of their meaninglessness.²³ In his seminal work on the Theater of the Absurd, Martin Esslin declares that, “The Theater of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images.”²⁴

WHAT’S GODOT GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz* is often compared to Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*. Both plays are set in a world without established order or fulfilling relationships. The relationships that do exist seem to sustain themselves because they are inevitable and because both participants in them are deeply afraid of being left alone. In fact, *Stoppard*’s *Rosencrantz* is said to have been influenced as much by Samuel Beckett as by William Shakespeare. Anyone who has carefully read Beckett plays like *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot* can immediately perceive the echo of Beckett in the work of *Stoppard*, the younger playwright—two characters, trapped in a seemingly endless, empty wasteland of life, desperately and often impotently seeking some semblance of an answer to profound and essential questions.

Waiting for Godot, Beckett’s most famous play, had an inarguably profound impact on the theater of the sixties. Composed in the late 1940s, with its first performance in 1953 and its first English language performance in 1955, it was voted “the most significant English Language play of the 20th Century” in a poll conducted by the British National Theatre. While its origin precedes the sixties, many of the most influential performances of the play occurred in the sixties, as theater at that time was under the sway of the same revolutionary spirit as music and politics.

In the sixties, Beckett, whose novels and plays had always stretched the bounds of convention, was producing work that was more and more nontraditional—sparse, minimalist, and unconcerned with entertainment or pleasure. His philosophical language was replaced with a much more vernacular language of the people, while his settings became increasingly abstract. As Ryan Diller writes in an article on Beckett’s theater in the sixties, “Rather than focusing on the abstract absurdities of reality in concrete locations, he exposed the concrete futilities of life in abstract settings.”²⁵

After the first performance of *Waiting for Godot* in New York, theater theorist June Schlueter maintained that

