

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





*In Act Three of *Rosencrantz, Ros and Guil* once again turn to a game involving coins.*

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know what is in the sealed letter they are to give to the king of England; the letter says that Hamlet is to be executed when he reaches England. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simply think that Hamlet's uncle cares for his nephew and so is having them take Hamlet out of harm's way after Polonius' death.

After Guil complains about Ros' lack of initiative in their social interactions, and Ros gets distraught with the seeming emptiness of everything, Guil, who had been so harsh a moment before, becomes very tender, and tries to console his friend. He insists that they do exist for a reason, that they have been given an assignment, and that although the end result of the assignment has no certain established goal, there is the certainty that they carry a letter. What becomes uncertain at that moment is that neither of them is certain where the letter is—Guil is sure that it is Ros whom the king entrusted with the letter. For once, however, the deductive reasoning through which Guil probes the secrets of life is effective, and he deduces that Ros does not have the letter. It must be in his own pocket, he says, and it is.

In what is no doubt intended as an insider joke to the audience sitting in the theater in London, Ros proclaims that he doesn't believe in England and cannot conjure up a picture of what it might be like to be in a country by that name. Aside from the joke, this also points to his lack of experience beyond what he has experienced onstage. One way the pair have been able to cast themselves into experience in the past has been to play roles, as when Ros played the role of Guil interviewing Hamlet, played by Guil. This time, in order to forecast what will happen when they greet the king in England, Ros takes the king's role, and

Guil that of Ros and Guil. Ros' king is imperious and harsh, claiming no knowledge of what they are speaking of, except for a knowledge of Hamlet, whom he dismisses as a lunatic. Finally, to placate the pretend king, Guil produces the real letter, which Ros, as king, snatches from him and opens. He reads the pleasantries and salutations and comes to the point "that on reading this letter, without delay, I should have Hamlet's head cut off----!"⁹⁶

Here is a point of divergence. Literary critics read Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as henchmen. Stoppard, on the other hand, sees them simply as ridiculous victims of an unlucky fate. In Shakespeare, when Hamlet himself is the one who unseals the letter they carry and reads it, Hamlet assumes that the pair are in cahoots with Claudius, and therefore Hamlet alters the instructions so that the bearers of the letter are to be put to death. Here, in *Rosencrantz*, it is evident that the pair of friends has no idea of the content of the letter they carry.

What to do, upon the discovery, is the question. Rosencrantz suffers pangs of conscience, saying "We're his friends," with his evidence of the friendship being limited to a quote from the Queen, who has established that they were "[F]rom our young days brought up with him."⁹⁷ When Guil notes that they have only the words of others to base this idea of friendship upon (they seem to have no memory of it), Ros responds, "But that's what we depend on."⁹⁸

Guil, by now, has embraced the fact that they are scripted, carried along by inevitability, and he resorts to philosophical meditations on death to placate their collective conscience—he's mortal and would die in any case; he's one man in a vast population, so, no great matter; death is unknowable, so what is there to fear in it; death may be a release. They decide it is best to simply reseal the letter as best they can and proceed as if they don't know the content. Ros can only rehearse the events of his life within the play, showing what has brought him and Guil to this point. Stage directions indicate nightfall, then daybreak, and Ros, upon awakening, rehearses events again.

Ros and Guil hear familiar music, and the pair discover that the Tragedians are within the barrels that are onstage—the entire company is stowed away in three barrels. Guil intones another altered snatch of The Lord's Prayer when he says, upon hearing the music, "call us this day our daily tune."⁹⁹ This acts as a cue for the lids to pop open and the Player and Tragedians to emerge, "impossibly," from the barrels. It seems that the play they had performed at the request of Hamlet earned the king's disfavor, and they were forced to flee Elsinore, their lives in peril.

