

the real world beyond the fourth wall has no relevance to what occurs on this stage, but also is reminded that Ros and Guil are at the mercy of the action in which they are caught up. For instance, Guil says, “As soon as we make a move they’ll come pouring in from every side, shouting obscene instructions, confusing us with ridiculous remarks, messing us around from here to breakfast and getting our names wrong.”⁹¹ This is an accurate description of his and Ros’ plights as characters.

Ros and Guil are right to be apprehensive. They are soon set upon by Claudius, who orders Ros and Guil to find Hamlet, now the killer of Polonius, and discover what Hamlet has done with Polonius’ body. As an aside, Guil, now obsessed with death, hopes that more tears are shed for their deaths than they perceive to be shed for Polonius. In any case, they set out to do the king’s bidding but are uncertain of which direction to go. They try different courses, marching one way and another, but it seems that there is a limit to how far they may stray from their present location on the stage—they are trapped in their identity as stage characters. They finally spy Hamlet, dragging the body of Polonius, and go so far as to take off their belts and join them together to make a barrier. Predictably in the slapstick mode, Ros’ trousers slowly slide down to his ankles, and Hamlet never comes anywhere near to a point where he might have been stopped by their belts. After Hamlet has left the stage, the two friends call him back, and there follows a performance of most of their interaction from *Hamlet* (Act Four, Scene Two, lines 2–30).

Stoppard stays within Shakespeare, after skipping forward to line twelve or so of Act Three, where Claudius interviews the pair to discover what Hamlet has done with the body. Since they are as unable to discern Hamlet’s actions now as earlier, they become relieved and hopeful when Hamlet is escorted right past their area (their stage area), and they celebrate the end of their being caught up in this plot. Ros speaks for them both when he says, “I’m only glad that’s the last we’ve seen of him”⁹² —him meaning, of course, Hamlet. However, Ros turns around and realizes that Hamlet is there. In a shocking development, the pair decide that they have received permission, even from Hamlet, to go, which they do, leaving the stage with only the stage directions: “They go.”⁹³

ACT THREE READING GUIDE: “YOU CAN’T NOT-BE ON A BOAT”

ACT THREE: SHORT SUMMARY

Ros and Guil take temporary solace in being on a boat although they still lack direction. Their peace is broken

by the presence of Hamlet. They read their letter to the King of England asking to have Hamlet put to death, and they justify their part in it. The Tragedians arrive, having offended King Claudius. Pirates arrive, causing the disappearance of Hamlet, who is playing at king again. Ros and Guil re-read the letter, which is now their own death sentence. Guil, upset, stabs the Player, who only feigns a mortal wound. The Player discourses on death while his tragedians enact it. Ros and Guil wonder what to do before they disappear, and the last tableau of *Hamlet* appears on the stage.

ACT THREE: DETAILED REVIEW

At the beginning of Act Three, the audience in the theater is encompassed by complete darkness. The voices of Ros and Guil are heard, and Ros, in particular, questions whether they have already died. He is alarmed because while he can feel a leg, it feels dead. He pinches it, and it turns out to be Guil’s leg. We know that they are on a boat, due to the exaggerated nautical phrases the other offstage inhabitants are heard to use (e.g., “Reef down, me hearties!”), and eventually we know that they are accompanied on this boat by Hamlet, who has lit a lantern. Again, we follow the path of the two characters from Shakespeare’s play.

Ros and Guil’s memory of the messenger who summoned them, which they repeatedly recalled in Act One, is here replaced by their new charge—to take Hamlet to England. Guil begins to speak of the freedom that is found on a boat, but then begins to think of the limitations of that freedom (“our truancy is defined by one fixed star”⁹⁴) and concludes that they are simply programmed, scripted, for one purpose only: “we are brought round full circle to face again the single immutable fact—that we, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing a letter from one king to another, are taking Hamlet to England.”⁹⁵ Having discovered that Hamlet is sleeping, they are faced with the tedium of being confined to the deck with nothing to do. Ros takes out a coin.

This time, Ros wants to cheer Guil up, so he hides two coins, one in each fist, every time. Guil begins getting disturbed, as he had been with the “heads” coin tosses, and eventually he tricks Ros into revealing that he has been cheating all along. The source of the coins is King Claudius, who has paid to send them on this mission—although neither is willing to say how much he received, thinking that there may have been different fees.

There is nothing in Shakespeare to indicate that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know what is in the sealed letter they are to give to the king of England; the letter says

