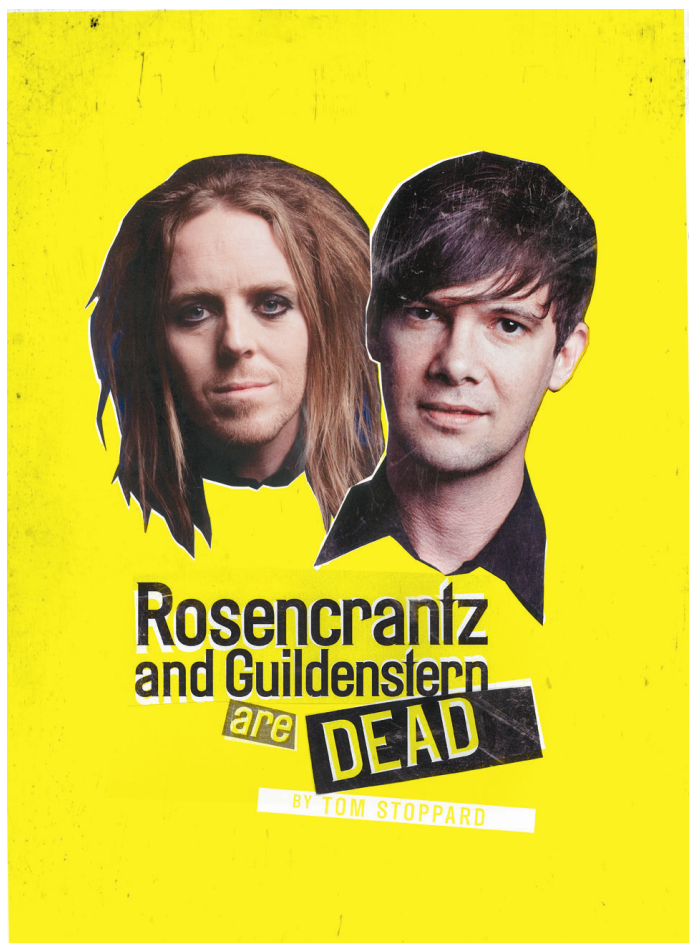


Sydney Theatre Company presents

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

By Tom Stoppard



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Education Resource written and compiled by Kerreen Ely-Harper



AIM of exercise or section



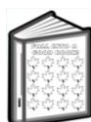
Extension Exercises



Download and watch



Drama Exercises



English Exercises



Play online

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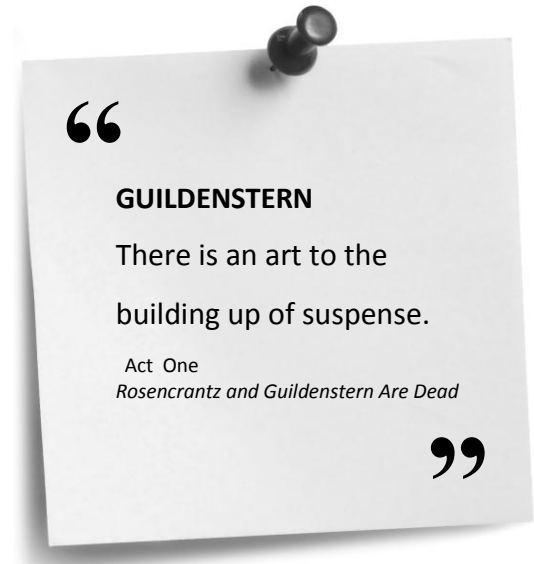
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CREATIVE TEAM

Director	Simon Phillips
Designer	Gabriela Tylesova
Lighting Designer	Nick Schlieper
Musical Director	Alan John
Sound Designer	Steve Francis
Assistant Director	Sarah Giles

CAST

Rosencrantz	Tim Minchin
Guildenstern	Toby Schmitz
Hamlet	Tim Walter
Claudius	Chris Stollery
Polonius	John Gaden
Ophelia	Adele Querol



THEMES

Hamlet

Absurdist Theatre

Identity & Belonging

Black Comedy

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SYNOPSIS

Act One

Two characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are playing a game of heads and tails. Rosencrantz wins an improbable ninety-two "heads" in a row. From here on everything is an existentialist metaphor and a meta-narrative to Shakespeare's play.

Guildenstern attempts to rationalise the situation by questioning if time has stopped dead, leading to a discussion on the laws of probability as the two characters try to understand their existence in present time and place. How did they get here and why? Memories of their past are blurry and their 'future blank'.

They begin to piece together how they came to be here following the revelation they were sent for by King Claudius and Queen Gertrude to find out what is wrong with Prince Hamlet.

A troupe of Tragedians arrive and offer to perform a show in which they can also participate. Guildenstern invites the leading Player to a bet. Another coin is tossed. The Player loses but cannot pay his debt and offers one of the actors, Alfred, as payment. Guildenstern is not impressed by his offer and asks for a play instead. The Tragedians begin preparations for their performance. Rosencrantz looks down at the coin and reveals it is tails for the first time.

A sudden shift in time and place takes them into Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Now in Elsinore, they watch an exchange between a half-dressed, dishevelled Hamlet chasing Ophelia. Catching her by the wrist, Hamlet suddenly collapses with a sigh and lets her go. He exits the stage walking backwards keeping his eyes on her, while she runs off in the opposite direction. This scene (which happens off stage in *Hamlet*) is followed by a meeting with Claudius and Gertrude. The King and Queen confuse who is who, calling them both by the wrong name.

They rehearse their meeting with Hamlet with Guildenstern pretending to be him and Rosencrantz asking him questions. They try to imagine their arrival in England before Hamlet has exchanged the letters, with Rosencrantz playing the English King. They then swap roles and

are confronted with learning about their own death sentences. The question and answer game leads to only more confusion about their identities and confirms their fate as inevitable.

Hamlet crosses the stage but does not see them. Their memories are triggered and they work out that the cause of Hamlet's extraordinary behaviour is that his mother has married his father's brother too soon after his death. Hamlet returns, followed by Polonius. They make themselves known and Hamlet enthusiastically returns their greeting, although he gets their names wrong. They all laugh at the mistake.

Act Two

The previous scene from Shakespeare's play (Act 2, Scene 2) continues with Polonius announcing that the actors have arrived. Hamlet and Polonius exit leaving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to discuss their situation in light of knowing that Hamlet is responsible for their murder: "He murdered us.....he *murdered* us". Now fully aware of their fate they lose their bearings and speculate about which direction they came from. A play on Hamlet's earlier comment, "I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw". They return to spinning coins and a game of hand bluff.

Polonius enters followed by Hamlet and the Tragedians. Hamlet asks the Player to perform 'The Murder of Gonzago' tomorrow night. He then exits. The Player is angry with them both for not having stayed to watch the play they had asked for. Describing the silence of having no audience as "obscene" the Player laments the entire performance as a loss of dignity. He warns them to "concentrate on not losing your heads" and to stop questioning their situation "at every turn". They return to debating what afflicts Hamlet. The Player says he has to leave to learn his lines for Gonzago.

Alone again, they contemplate their future and the imminence of death. Rosencrantz wonders whether death is like being asleep in a box and explores the notion we are all born with "an intuition of mortality".

Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius and Ophelia enter as in Shakespeare's Act 3, Scene 1. Gertrude enquires after Hamlet. They tell them he has called for a play to be performed. Polonius

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confirms this to be true and Claudius is pleased to hear Hamlet is “so inclined”. They exit leaving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern alone. Rosencrantz complains about the constant demands being made on them. Rosencrantz attempts to leave but quickly returns having seen Hamlet.

Hamlet enters. They watch him. Rosencrantz makes a move toward him but his nerve fails. Ophelia enters and they begin the “orisons be all my sins remembered” scene and then both disappear into the wings. Rosencrantz is becoming increasingly distressed by all the comings and goings of characters comparing it to like “living in public park”.

The Tragedians return for a dress rehearsal. They enact in dumb show ‘The Murder of Gonzago’ (as written in Shakespeare’s text), the death of Polonius (Shakespeare’s Act 3, Scene 5) and the deaths of “friends - courtiers - to two spies” at sea. The actors playing the roles of the “two spies” are wearing the same coats as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The revelation that they are in fact witnessing their own death causes Guildenstern to challenge the Player’s ability to act death.

The dumb show resumes with the “two spies” performing their deaths as the lights also begin to fade. Lying dead still, there is a blackout.

As the lights come up again, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are in the same positions as the actors playing the dead spies. Claudius and Gertrude enter telling them that Hamlet has murdered Polonius and command them to get Hamlet and bring Polonius’s body to the Chapel. Pleased they have something finally to do they go off to look for Hamlet. They walk in opposite directions, cross paths, stop, turn round, repeat the sequence, eventually returning to their original positions not having got anywhere.

Hamlet enters dragging Polonius’s body. They watch him as he exits with the body. When he returns they ask him what he has done with Polonius. He refuses to disclose where the body is, answering cryptically it is with the “King”. Following Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* Claudius plots that Hamlet must be sent to England and killed.

Neither Rosencrantz nor Guildenstern fully understand what is going on, but enjoy a moment of relief from this “trying episode”. Hamlet reappears talking with a soldier from Fortinbras’s army who agrees to allow them to accompany him to England. Naïve of their impending execution, they are hopeful of being free soon.

Act Three

Now on a ship, but not knowing how they got there, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to determine whether they are still alive. They realize they are not dead and are in fact on board a boat. They remember they are taking Hamlet to England and have been asked by Claudius to deliver a letter to the English King. They play another round of coin hand bluff. Recounting again why they are there, they become confused about who actually has the letter, thinking the other has it. Guildenstern eventually produces the letter and after a brief rehearsal of them giving it to the English King, they read it together and separate.

Now knowing that Claudius has asked for Hamlet to be killed, Rosencrantz says it’s “awful” and he’s done nothing to hurt him so how can they go through with handing over the letter? Guildenstern says they are “little men” and should “leave well alone” and deliver the letter.

The light begins to go down. Hamlet appears. Rosencrantz complies and declares they are escorting Hamlet to England “for his own good”. In the darkness Hamlet switches the letters while both are asleep.

The following morning they wake up to hear a piper playing. The stowaway Tragedians appear from their hiding place inside three barrels. The Player explains they are on the run from Claudius as their “tactless” play had offended him. Hamlet appears in front of the audience momentarily. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern summarize the incidents that have led them and the Players to be on the ship. On Rosencrantz’s call for some “sustained action” a group of Pirates attack. Although no pirates are actually visible on stage, everyone goes frantic drawing their swords. After a series of collisions and near misses, they all hide in the barrels. The lights fade.

The lights come up and they get out of their respective barrels – all except Hamlet, who has disappeared. They need him to secure their release. In a panic they re-read the letter to discover they are to be “put to sudden death”.

The Player tells them to accept the situation as “most things end in death”. Guildenstern snatches a dagger from the Player’s belt and holds the point to the Player’s throat. He pushes the blade into his throat and the Player falls to his knees dying. A moment of silence. The Tragedians begin to applaud. The Player stands up. Holding out his hand to retrieve the dagger from Guildenstern, he reveals it was a trick knife.

The Tragedians resume their performance of the final scene from *Hamlet*.

A lighting change reveals Rosencrantz and Guildenstern alone once more. Rosencrantz begins to cry not understanding what they did wrong and why they have to die. He then quickly pulls himself together and decides death will come as a relief. He disappears from view without Guildenstern noticing he’s gone.

Guildenstern wonders if they missed something and that next time “we’ll know next time”. He disappears too.

The lights come up, revealing the final scene of *Hamlet*. The King, Queen, Laertes and Hamlet are all dead. Horatio holds Hamlet, and Fortinbras is there. Two Ambassadors from England announce that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

Consider

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is a play as much about the dilemmas and anxieties of its protagonists as it is about how to write drama for a modern audience.

Tom Stoppard does not aim to destroy Shakespeare’s text, rather to manipulate it and re-orient into a meta-narrative space to make a new work within and around it.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will never escape their narrative fate but we are always hopeful they might.

The only inevitably in life is death.

References

The Spectre of Shakespeare in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Benjamin Vonwiller, 2008.

Time: Limits and Constraints, Editors, Jo Alyson Parker, Paul. A Harris, Christian Steineck, 'Dramatic Time: Phenomena and Dilemmas', Chapter 10, Carol A Fischer, 2010

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE PLAY

The clever idea

The original idea to re-tell the story of *Hamlet* from the point of view of minor characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern came from Kenneth Ewing, Stoppard's literary agent. Stoppard developed the idea into a short theatre piece for a young playwright's conference in Berlin in 1964 and by 1966 it had become a full-length three-act play.

Stoppard says Rosencrantz and Guildenstern "chose themselves". He explains:

The play *Hamlet* and the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the only play and the only characters on which you could write my kind of play. They are so much more than merely bit players in another famous play. *Hamlet* I suppose is the most famous play in any language, it is part of a sort of common mythology. I am continually being asked politely whether I will write about the messenger in *Oedipus Rex*, which misses the point.

Initially Stoppard set the play in England, but shifted the focus to have the characters remain 'within their play' :

If you write a play about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in England, you can't count on people knowing who they are and how they got there. So one tended to get back into the end of *Hamlet* a bit. But the explanations were always partial and ambiguous, so one went back a bit further into the plot, and as soon as I started doing this I totally lost interest in England. The interesting thing was them at Elsinore.

Their entrapment within their own narrative becomes the intrigue on which the dramatic tension of the play relies. Will Rosencrantz and Guildenstern escape their fate or not? Their struggle against an inevitable end gains our sympathy as a metaphor for our own mortality. As Rosencrantz so hauntingly suggests, "we must be born with an intuition of mortality".

The play is often compared to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* with its focus on 'two figures struggling to find identity and a purpose in a world that makes little sense'. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* continues to speak to audiences reminding us of our need for companionship, a place to call home and a name we can be remembered by in a world where nothing is ever permanent, entirely safe or secure.

The clever playwright – Tom Stoppard

Stoppard's work consistently demonstrates intellectual ingenuity and a concern for the human condition. He is Czechoslovakian born and of Jewish background. As a young boy his family left Czechoslovakia with the coming of the Second World War. He spent the next few years in Singapore and India, arriving in England in 1946 at the age of nine.

Stoppard says "I've had a charmed life": "I was never shot at, never starving, I wasn't killed in a camp, like many of my family were". His father was a doctor who was killed in Japan serving in the war. His mother remarried a man named Stoppard. Due to the family's constant travelling all the family records were lost and he grew up knowing little of his family history. Although he says "I'm not self-conscious in my writing....I don't like to analyse my work" it is interesting to note that many of his works explore the fallibility of memory and history and the temporary nature of things, even names: "people in my plays keep getting their names wrong a lot, they change their names a lot".

In 1954 he joined a newspaper in Bristol as a journalist. One of his roles was to write theatre reviews. He became involved in Bristol's Old Vic theatre and began writing plays. His playwright contemporaries were Harold Pinter, Caryl Churchill, John Osborne, and Arnold Wesker. He says the 1960's was a great time to be writing for the British theatre when the play had the status of what the novel is today.

Stoppard has written radio plays, screenplays and adapted novels for film and television. He wrote the dialogue for *Indiana Jones*. He says in film the writer's role is to serve the director, but because "theatre is text led", the writer in the theatre he believes is a "privileged person".

Stoppard's work has been criticised for being intellectually cool and at times overly 'clever'. He agrees in his early work he was guilty of being fatally attracted "to language for its own sake". Although he says he loves the rehearsal process, he doesn't like improvising as a method of writing plays. He describes his approach to playwriting as methodical and controlled: "I want to write it, I want them [the actors] to learn it, and say it precisely as I wrote it". He regards live performance as one of "the mysteries of our culture".

In a recent Q&A on being asked a question from the audience on his advice to writers, he replied:

When I started off I fundamentally thought I had to know a lot about the play I was writing in order to be able to write it , and now and for some time past now, I fundamentally believe that I have to start writing with the minimum amount of knowledge necessary. It's just a lot better if you find out where it takes you.

References:

'The Spectre of Shakespeare in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*',
Benjamin Vonwiller

Video Q&A Interview , Wheelers Centre, Melbourne, 50minutes, with Alison Croggan, 2011

<http://wheelercentre.com/videos/video/tom-stoppard/>

Trevor Nunn's production, Chichester Festival, 2011

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/jun/01/rosencrantz-guildenstern-dead-review>



Additional Resources

Tom Stoppard

Biography

Sydney Theatre Company Magazine Feature

<http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/magazine/posts/2012/september/feature-on-stoppard.aspx>

British Council Literature Site

<http://literature.britishcouncil.org/tom-stoppard>

Encyclopaedia Britannica

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/567460/Tom-Stoppard>

Interviews & Articles

Video, Wheelers Centre, Melbourne, 50minutes, with Alison Crogan, 2011

<http://wheelercentre.com/videos/video/tom-stoppard/>

BBC Radio audio download and transcript

http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/stoppard_transcript.shtml

The Economist

<http://moreintelligentlife.com/content/arts/versions-stoppard?page=full>

New York Times Archives – reviews, articles etc

http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/s/tom_stoppard/index.html

The Paris Review, 1988

<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2467/the-art-of-theater-no-7-tom-stoppard>

Theater Talk, 2008

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vr92r-PlrXk>

Charlie Rose, 2007

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoSnabj-Cc4>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/jun/01/rosencrantz-guildenstern-dead-review>

Film Texts By Stoppard

Brazil, 1985

Empire of the Sun, 1987

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, 1990

Shakespeare In Love, 1998

Anna Karenina, 2012

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Productions & Reviews

The Guardian, Old Vic production, 1967

<http://century.guardian.co.uk/1960-1969/Story/0,,106469,00.html>

Trevor Nunn's production, Chichester Festival, 2011

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/jun/01/rosencrantz-guildenstern-dead-review>

Comparative Texts

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1600-1602 circa

Jean Paul-Sartre, *No Exit*, 1944

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting For Godot*, 1953

Absurdist Theatre

Martin Esslin, *The Theater of the Absurd*, 2001

Oscar Brockett, *History Of Theatre*, 1968

Ian Johnson lecture on the play as an example of Absurdist theatre.

<http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/introser/stoppard.htm>

Existentialist Themes on Film

Blade Runner, 1982

The Truman Show, 1998

The Matrix, 1999

City Slickers, 1991

Fight Club, 1999

American Beauty, 1999

Groundhog Day, 1993

External Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind, 2004

Donnie Darko, 2001

Memento, 2000

Coin Flipping

ABC Science 'Flipping Coins' Lesson Plan 19 pdf on how to run a coin flipping exercise. ABC science on line, 2008

<http://www.abc.net.au/science/surfingscientist/>

Film & Television Scenes

Scarface: The Shame Of a Nation, 1932 – coin throwing gangster George Raft

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRNnASzxFBgQ>



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Some like it Hot, 1959

La Bamba, 1987

The Dark Knight, 2003

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJma8pVAvH4>

Note the irony of having Gary Oldman appear in this scene, considering his role as Rosencrantz in the film version of the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, 1990

<http://movieclips.com/RBpDN-rosencrantz-and-guildenstern-are-dead-movie-heads/>

Batman Forever, 1995

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBLsp4dBqGU>

No Country For Old Men, 2007

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3B_rRmkbA9I

The Vampire Diaries, TV show

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtfO-DnkCX0>

Opposed To Reason



AIM: To understand the history and theatrical conventions of absurdism and the philosophy of existentialism and their application in the play.

Absurdism

The absurdist theatre movement had its origins in France in the late 1800's, early 1900's. Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* is considered one of the first absurdist plays to be produced. The theatre increasingly became a vehicle for representing and commenting on the growing social and political unrest in Europe, which would eventually lead to the outbreak of the First and Second World Wars.



Research the rise of the absurdist theatre movement in Europe, 1890-1960.

Choose 1 of the following writers to study:

- Alfred Jarry
- Jean Paul Sartre
- Albert Camus
- Samuel Beckett
- Eugene Ionesco
- Jean Genet
- Arthur Adamov



Note: Choose another writer that may not be on the list that you consider to be an absurdist.



Give a 2 minute presentation on the work of your chosen writer.

Your presentation must include:

- 3 key features of their work
- 1 quote from one of their plays (or other literary texts)
- reasons why you have chosen them
- 1 thing you think is interesting or surprising about their work or personal history
- your opinion on if you think their work is still relevant to a contemporary audience and why.



A world without logic

Academic Ian Johnson describes the absurdist world in theatre as ‘without logic and without the comfortable reminders of a logical structure: a confidence about time and space and memory’.



Discuss this statement with reference to the world represented in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.



Find 3 examples from the play that demonstrate it is a world ‘without logic’.

Find 3 quotes about time.

Find 5 quotes about memory and remembering.

Reflection:

Why do the other characters keep forgetting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s names?

Why is a lack of memory important to the play’s absurdist narrative structure?

Without hope

In absurdist drama human beings are shown to be in an ‘absurd’, unbelievable and ridiculous situation. The characters may have no convictions or hope, with their lives regulated by fate or some outside or incomprehensible force.

The key features of absurdism are:

- anti-realism
- the grotesque
- a deep concern for the human condition.

Give specific examples (supported by quotes) from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* of these three key features.

+

Extension:

Drawing on your research

Add another key feature to the above list. **Support** with an example from the play.

In the background notes, Stoppard is quoted as saying “the play *Hamlet* and the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the only play and the only characters on which you could write my kind of play”. In the light of your research on absurdism and existentialism what does he mean by “my kind of play”?

Existentialism



Google the word ‘existentialism’.

Write down the meaning of the word.

The key trait of the existentialist character is to question the value and purpose of your existence. There is no belief in a higher order (a supreme deity or supernatural being) or meaning to be found in the world beyond the physical world.

How does the philosophy of existentialism apply to the play?

Give an example of an existentialist moment in the play when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern question their existence.



Extension:



Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* often questions the value and purpose of his existence. Can you think of an example, when *Hamlet* demonstrates the characteristics of being in an existentialist frame of mind?

Black Comedy

Black comedy is often associated with absurdism.



Define your understanding of black comedy.

List favourite black comedies from film, television, cartoons, and books.

Find a youtube clip you consider black comedy.

What makes it a black comedy rather than another form of comedy, such as romantic, slapstick or situation comedy?

Form pairs.

Select a serious subject.



Devise & Perform a 1 minute scene with two characters where you treat the subject matter in a humorous manner.



Extension:

Repeat the scene, where you treat the subject matter in a serious more socially appropriate manner.

Discuss the different outcomes and audience responses to both approaches.

Reflection:

How much does comedy rely on human frailty?

Performance Viewing Task:

Choose a moment in the performance you consider black comedy.

What happens in this scene? Why is it an example of black comedy?



Game On!

 **AIM:** To explore the play's use of the coin flipping game as a metaphor for life, death and the laws of probability.

Chance V's Fate

Heads or Tails?



Research the origins of coin flipping

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coin_flipping

Where did the practice originate?

Have you ever tossed a coin to make a decision, settle a dispute, or decide between two options?

Why is it an honour to be selected to toss the coin in a professional sporting event, like the AFL or NRL Grand Finals?

Watch on Youtube the 2010 NRL Grand Final advertisement 'To improve your odds'

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHkZLXkYhE>

List 3 key features of the video – who is in the video, what is the main action, what is the message being given to the viewer?

Reflection:

Why have the advertisers associated cancer with the betting odds of tossing a coin?

Life or Death?

“The only morality in a cruel world is chance - unbiased, unprejudiced, fair”.

Harvey Dent/ 'Two Face'
The Dark Knight

Watch the well-known coin flipping scenes in film and television listed in the 'Additional Resources'.

Can you think of other examples to add to the list where a character's fate is decided by the toss of a coin (dice or another object)?

What do these scenes all have in common?

Select your favourite scene. Why have the characters resorted to coin tossing to solve a problem or make a decision?



Copy, Perform & Film one of your favourite film coin tossing scenes.

OR

Write & Perform a new scene entitled 'Luck can turn on the toss of a coin'. Two characters must toss a coin that will change the course of the action.



Extension:

Discuss Batman character Harvey Dent's defence of chance as "unbiased, unprejudiced, fair" rather than subject to the laws of probability.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJma8pVAvH4>

The Laws of Probability



Research the laws of probability.

Consult with your maths or science teachers to explain the laws of probability as applied to the game of heads and tails.

Check out these links:

<http://www.fourmilab.ch/rpkp/experiments/statistics.html>

<http://www.basic-mathematics.com/coin-toss-probability.html>

Write a 150 summary of your understanding of the concept of probability.

Write a 50 word description of how the laws of probability apply to coin flipping.

Read the guidelines on how to play a game of heads & tails.

http://www.ehow.com/how_7715321_play-head-tails-quarter-game.html

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Note: the following task can be conducted as a whole class activity under supervision or by students independently outside the classroom.

Teachers See ABC Science Lesson Plan 19 for guidelines on how to run a coin throwing whole class experiment with follow up activities.

<http://www.abc.net.au/science/surfingscientist/>

Students Consult with your teachers on how to devise a chart recording system that will enable you to run an experiment to explore how the laws of probability can be applied to calculate the odds in a game of heads and tails.

Form teams of pairs OR play against yourself (as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sometimes do)

Play a game of heads & tails with a two-sided coin. **Note** for ‘fairness’ when playing as a class all the coins between pairs should be of the same value.

Toss a single coin 10 times.

Write down every time it’s heads or tails. Keep a tally.

Toss the coin 50 times & **Record** the results onto your chart.

Toss the coin 92 times & **Record** the results onto your chart.

Compare the individual or team’s results. What discoveries did you make?

Reflection:

Compare your findings to the first scene in the play.

Discuss the likelihood of “Ninety-two coins spun consecutively have come down heads ninety-two consecutive times” in reality.

Why does Stoppard have the characters act out an improbable result?

How is the consecutive result of heads a metaphor for fate?

What is the audience being told, but the characters fail to understand?



Extension:

Discuss Guildenstern's possible explanations as "One. I'm willing it" or "Two. Time has stopped dead" in the light of the result being improbable and therefore against the natural laws of science.

Can science explain everything in life? Is human will power beyond the laws of probability?

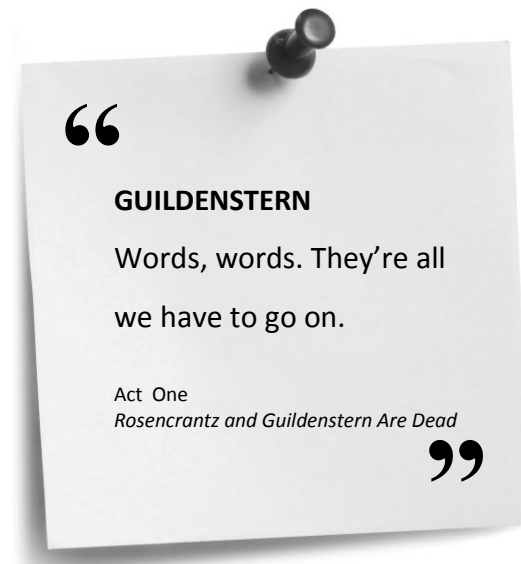


Debate For OR Against Guildenstern's statement:

The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear.

Performance Viewing Task:

Why does the play open with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern playing a game of heads and tails? The result of the game makes no difference to their fate. So why do they continue to toss the coin throughout the play? As a time waster? In the hope it will offer a sign? To challenge the laws of probability?



Playing With The Rules

 **AIM: To examine and critique Stoppard's re-working and re-contextualising of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in an existentialist world.**

The Theatre As a Rehearsed Game Of Fate V's Chance

The Player has no more control over his fate than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, however, the crucial difference is that he is aware of that fact, and accepts it:

Oh yes. We have no control. Tonight we play to the court.
Or the night after. Or to the tavern. Or not.



Discuss the Player's comments with reference to the role and function of theatre as a representation of the real rather than being 'actual' real life.

Examine the scene at the end of Act 3 where Guildenstern 'kills' the Player with the fake knife. Why does the Player know it is only a theatre performance and Guildenstern does not?

Discuss what you consider to be the 'rules' of live theatre performance as opposed to a real life event.



Write a Rule Book for actors performing in a tragedy.

Consider

Health & Safety

Morals & Ethics

Audience Relationship

Believability & Truthfulness

Dramatic Affect

Reflection:

Can the theatre sometimes be a safer place than real life?

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD 23

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Extension:
Compare & Contrast your actor's rule book with the Player's speeches on the performing of tragedy.

Stoppard describes live theatre performance as one of "the mysteries of our culture". What does he mean?

How does his interest in the theatre and the role and function of the actor manifest itself in the play as drama? **Give** specific examples to support your response.

Look at the STC promotion page for the production

<http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/community/education/secondary/2013-productions/rosencrantz-and-guildenstern-are-dead.aspx>

The play is described as 'It's absurdist, it's existential, it's meta-theatrical'.

What is your understanding of the term 'meta-theatrical'?

Do they regard the play as 'meta-theatrical'? How is it 'meta-theatrical'?

Performance Viewing Task:

Why do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, fail to recognise themselves when their mimic deaths are presented in dumb-show?

What does this tell us about their level of self-knowledge and awareness of others?

What does it tell us about their tragic function in the drama?

The struggle to act

They struggle to act independently of Shakespeare's plot, to operate outside of Shakespearean boundaries, and much of the play centres on the dramatic potential of the limitations imposed by Shakespeare.

Benjamin Vonwiller

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Discuss this statement with reference to your comparative readings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the selected excerpts incorporated into Stoppard's re-working of the play.

Do you agree that the dramatic potential, dramatic tension and suspense is created through our witnessing of how these minor characters navigate their way through a story we already know?

How does seeing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from a 'backstage' point of view inform your reading of Shakespeare's play?

Do you like Hamlet less or more in Stoppard's play? **Explain** in detail your response.

The existentialist tragedy comes from when a character fails to recognize the answers to their search for meaning and purpose are to be found within themselves. This inability to know the self can lead to inaction, over thinking, anxiety, paranoia and despair.

How are *Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* similar in their quest for meaning?



Compare & Contrast an example from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* when Hamlet displays similar behaviours and dilemmas to Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Why does Stoppard not rescue Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from their fate, when he had the opportunity to do so in his re-working of the play?

If Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had escaped Shakespeare's fate and not died how would it have changed your reading of the play?



“

PLAYER

We're *actors* – we're the
opposite of people!

Act Two
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

”