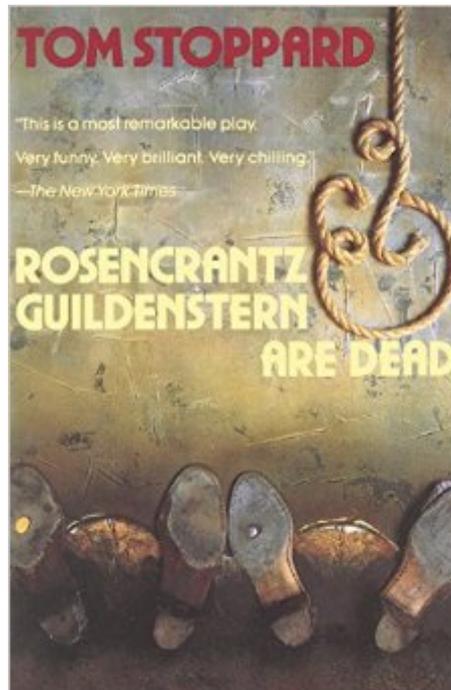


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Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead



Synopsis

Acclaimed as a modern dramatic masterpiece, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* is the fabulously inventive tale of Hamlet as told from the worm's-eye view of the bewildered Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two minor characters in Shakespeare's play. In Tom Stoppard's best-known work, this Shakespearean Laurel and Hardy finally get a chance to take the lead role, but do so in a world where echoes of *Waiting for Godot* resound, where reality and illusion intermix, and where fate leads our two heroes to a tragic but inevitable end. Tom Stoppard was catapulted into the front ranks of modern playwrights overnight when *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* opened in London in 1967. Its subsequent run in New York brought it the same enthusiastic acclaim, and the play has since been performed numerous times in the major theatrical centers of the world. It has won top honors for play and playwright in a poll of London Theater critics, and in its printed form it was chosen one of the "Notable Books of 1967" by the American Library Association.

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Customer Reviews

R&G Are Dead has much to recommend it. It is the story of two of the bit players from Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. If you haven't read or seen Hamlet, the book will probably not be of much interest, but, in a nutshell, R&G are Hamlet's school chums who are called to Denmark by Hamlet's uncle, the King of Denmark, given the task of cheering him up and, when this fails, and the King realizes that Hamlet is a threat to his life, are given the task of sending Hamlet to his death.

Hamlet turns the tables on this plot and has R&G killed instead. R&G, although bit players, are actually in a surprising number of scenes (most of which are cut out from stage and film productions of Hamlet) and this play, interweaving these scenes with others, produces a rich picture of these two characters, entirely missing from Shakespeare's epic play. The most obviously interesting part of this work is its attempt to explain why these characters die. When you learn at the end of Hamlet that R&G have died, you are left with a nagging sensation that something is wrong. This play fleshes this out. All of Shakespeare's tragedies are, by definition, bloody (as the Players in this work make evidently clear) but R&G's deaths are not demanded by the plot or by the passions of any of the characters. We do not dwell on R&G's deaths in Hamlet because more important and tragic events consume us. This book makes us focus on the gratuitousness of R&G's deaths. In addition, it makes their deaths as tragic as those of the main characters in Hamlet by putting them the center of the story. Of course, we do not get any real answers as to why these characters die. Other than by changing the story of Hamlet, there can be no answer to this question.

In this play Tom Stoppard has pulled two minor characters from Hamlet and given us a glimpse of what may lay behind the mundane exteriors of everyday life and more importantly the limits of possibility of meaning contained in the world of literature. What is important about this is that Stoppard is showing us that the lives of common people and minor characters can also make for some great literature too. Philosophically, I would tend to say that this play is securely grounded in the genre that has been called the Theater of the Absurd, which in turn owes much to the thinking of Albert Camus. Having said this, I have to say that this play has some definite similarities with the works of Beckett, especially *Godot*, but also that of Harold Pinter's, "*The Birthday Party*", especially in terms of dialogue, plot direction, and character development. So if you like the work of these playwrights you would certainly enjoy this, which would also be of great interest to Shakespeare students/fans as well as anyone interested in the ideas of existentialist thought. Despite these similarities R&G and at the same time because of them, this work seems at times to be conscious of breaking new ground and testing the limits of absurdity and interaction with the audience. The symbolism, for example, seems to be much more important to the action and meaning of this play than it is in other works of this genre. Whereas, *Godot* seems to stress the repetitiveness of dialogue, R&G is suggestive of just the opposite--the seemingly endless play of meaning implicit in each uttered word. This comes out through the characters lack of confidence in what they struggle to say, and the way that their views seem to change with each situation, which illustrates the uncertainty of meaning and life.

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