

Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead: A Play Beyond 'Absurdity'.

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Abstract

The phrase "Absurd Drama" or "The Theatre of the Absurd" gained currency as a result of Martin Esslin's book The Theatre of the Absurd published in 1961. This phrase has been used as a critical peg to such disparate playwrights as Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Genet, Adamov and Stoppard. The absurd theatre accepts the absence of symmetry in the world. God does not exist, nor does any world order normally accepted as a result of his presence. Consequently, our existence is reduced merely to confusion. After two terrible wars, the man seems to have lost his centre. Until the end of the second world war man was under an illusion that religion could be substituted by material progress, nationalism and other totalitarian fallacies. But all this was shattered by war. Life had lost all its meaning.

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In The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus tried to diagnose the human situation in a world of shattered and disillusioned beliefs:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his, setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.¹

In fact, Camus has used the word 'Absurdity' in philosophical terms. He has seen man trapped in this universe, struggling hard to find meaning in his life and thereby achieve triumph over the absurdity around him. Here man is seen as a "tragic-heroic' figure, struggling nobly against an unknowable universe..."²

In the absurd theatre, however, man is viewed as “‘Comic-pathetic’... as little more than a clown, bumbling and fumbling his way through the incomprehensible maze that is existence, to both the amusement and the pity of the artist-observer and the audience.”³ The absurd theatre aims to point out that the dignity of man lies in his ability and courage to face the harsh reality in all its meaninglessness, to accept it without any kind of illusions and to laugh at it.

According to Martin Esslin, “‘Absurd’ originally means ‘out of harmony,’ in a musical context...incongruous, unreasonable, illogical. In common usage ‘absurd’ may simply mean ‘ridiculous’...”⁴ One of the important functions of the Theatre of the Absurd is to search out some meaning in this absurd universe. It makes an effort to make man aware of the ultimate harsh realities of his condition. Its attempt is to re-establish an awareness in man regarding the ultimate reality of his condition. It expresses modern man's endeavour to come to terms with the world in which he lives. Esslin points out, "It attempts to make him (man) face up to the human condition as it really is, to free him from illusions that are bound to cause constant mal-adjustment and disappointment."⁵

In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco pointed out, "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."⁶ This sense of absurdity, of being senseless and useless is the main theme of the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd. They present a world without divine order, devoid of meaningful relationships and genuine love. They present life as no longer precious and so death brings no terror in their plays. They present man with his absurdist consciousness in which there is a lack of order, symmetry and purpose. As life does not seem to have a beginning, a middle and an end, similarly absurd plays also don't have it.

In order to present the absurdity of the situation, the Theatre of the Absurd has to develop certain distinct characteristics. As man is unable to communicate with others in this absurd universe, absurd theatre depicts the futility of speech. Language is made reductive. There are long pauses and silences in the plays. There is a crisis of identity. Characters don't know who they are. There is verbal incoherence also.

Like other playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, Tom Stoppard deals with the anxiety and confusion of life. He presents man as a helpless, hapless creature caught up in the forces impervious to reason. He presents the helplessness of a man who has lost his identity and faith in God. Stoppard's world “is implausible and irrational and also full of cruelty and pain. His characters are victims of accidental calamities which threaten and occasionally destroy them.”⁷ Stoppard intermingles the logical with the absurd. He develops his themes through a series of devices. He makes fantastic incidents logical and exaggerates ordinary and rational occurrences to such an extent that they appear absurd and inexplicable. He leaves his heroes in a bewilderment which is both sad and funny. His plays consist of many farcical situations and abstract ideas. He makes use of parody in a seemingly aimless fashion. His characters are

bewildered victims of hostile circumstances and are therefore figures of farce. They are at the mercy of every situation and are, as noted in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, “without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation.”⁸

In this play, Stoppard has used the devices of parody and pastiche to reveal the absurdity of the situation. Ronald Bryden in his review of the first production of this play points out, “Mr. Stoppard has taken up the vestigial lives of Hamlet’s two Wittenberg cronies, and made out of them an existentialist fable unabashedly indebted to Waiting for Godot...”⁹ Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead seems to have some strong influence from Waiting for Godot. Both these plays are about two men who lack knowledge and power and are trying to grapple with this absurd world which is full of uncertainties. Guildenstern resembles Vladimir or Didi, while Rosencrantz resembles Estragon or Gogo. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two peripheral figures in Hamlet. But in this play, Stoppard has made them central figures. In fact, Stoppard is the first dramatist to build a whole play out of two peripheral theatrical figures. He shows us two figures who have lost their memory of the past and at the same time have no understanding of the present. They have no idea that they are going to be caught up in a series of incomprehensible events. This play began as a Shakespearean pastiche, but it has transcended its origin. No doubt, Stoppard has borrowed characters from Hamlet, but he has made them speculate philosophically upon the reality of the situation which they themselves are unable to understand. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Stoppard has presented his heroes as two likeable but at the same time utterly confused characters. They are engaged in a perpetual struggle to understand the complex situations around them. As Ronald Bryden points out, “They are frightened strangers in a world somebody else seems to have made.”¹⁰ The absurdity of the situation increases and culminates in their journey to England without the prince they are supposed to bring with them and instead carrying a letter pronouncing their own deaths.

Just like Vladimir and Estragon, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern depict their author’s angst about the human predicament. Strong similarities exist between these two plays, but Stoppard depicts two courtiers encountering a predicament and represents an experience which is essentially different from those of Vladimir and Estragon. Beckett's characters have to face interminable waiting, but Stoppard’s characters face sudden and inexplicable change. In Act One of the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are seen tossing coins which invariably come down “Heads” (p.7). For Rosencrantz, this is an interesting coincidence but for Guildenstern, it is the source of considerable fear. “Fear!” he cries furiously, “the crack that might flood your brain with light!” (p.10). Here again, we find a close parallel between Vladimir and Estragon. Guildenstern shows great strain and fear in the long run of 'heads' at the beginning of the play. He does most of the philosophising in the play and is much more mentally alert than Rosencrantz. Both Estragon and Rosencrantz want to leave the stage, but Vladimir and Guildenstern remain on the stage either waiting for Godot or waiting on the king. Gogo finds it difficult to play at Pozzo and Lucky. Similarly, Rosencrantz has even more difficulty in understanding how to play at questioning

Hamlet. The scenes in which Guildenstern plays the role of a nursemaid to Guildenstern find a close parallel with the scenes where Vladimir comforts and sings to Gogo. Rosencrantz's plea to Guildenstern, "Don't leave me!" (p.56) reminds us of Estragon's "Stay with me!"¹¹ But it is not that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead has only similarities with Waiting for Godot, dissimilarities, of course, occur. In Waiting for Godot, the main cry of Didi and Gogo is that nothing happens but in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, there occur rapid changes. Estragon and Vladimir are sick of time but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seldom care for the passage of time. Instead, they resort to games to pass the time and they try to avoid their own predicament. Beckett deals with the uncertainty and frustration of Vladimir and Estragon in their endless waiting. But Stoppard's aim is somewhat different. He deals with the uncertainty felt by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in trying to understand the meaning of events which ultimately lead them to their deaths. While Vladimir and Estragon remember bits of their past life sometimes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seldom do it.

Parallels and contrasts of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with Estragon and Vladimir point out the absurdity of the situation in which they are held. They are presented as two confused characters who are never sure of their identities. They don't know what they have to do or not. They are never sure of anything. They either spend their time playing games or in confused talks. They don't remember anything at all. They pose questions to each other but are unable to answer them. In between there are long pauses which hint at their confused and absurd situation:

Guil: What's the first thing you remember?

Ros: Oh, let's see... The first thing that comes into my head, you mean?

Guil: No - the first thing you remember.

Ros: Ah. (Pause.) No, it's no good, it's gone. It was a long time ago.

Guil (patient but edged): You don't get my meaning. What is the first thing after all the things you've forgotten?

Ros: Oh I see. (Pause.) I've forgotten the question.

(p.11)

Unsure of certitudes, they live always in suppositions, never sure of their place in the universe:

Guil: Are you happy?

Ros: What?

Guil: Content? At ease?

Ros: I suppose so.

Guil: What are you going to do now?

Ros: I don't know. What do you want to do?

(PP-11-12)

Their sense of confusion finds its best example when they do not seem completely sure which one of them is Rosencrantz and which is Guildenstern:

Ros: My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz. (Guil confers briefly with him.)

(Without embarrassment.) I'm sorry- his name's Guildenstern, and I'm Rosencrantz.

(pp.16-17)

They are unsure of their own names, of any past experience, of what exactly they are meant to do. The only thing they know is that they were sent for:

Guil: A man standing in his saddle in the half-lit, half-alive dawn banged on the shutters and called two names. He was just a hat and a cloak levitating in the grey plume of his own breath, but when he called we came. That much is certain- we came.

(p.29)

But they don't know what for they came there. They are at the mercy of whatever happens and whoever comes on next:

Ros: What are you playing at?

Guil: Words, words. They're all we have to go on. (Pause.)

Ros: Shouldn't we be doing something –

Constructive?

Guil: What did you have in mind?...

A short, blunt human pyramid...?

Ros: We could go.

Guil: Where?

Ros: After him.

Guil: Why? They've got us placed now if we start moving around, we'll all be chasing each other all night. (Hiatus.)

Ros: (at footlights): How very intriguing! (Turns.) I feel like a spectator – an appalling prospect. The only thing that makes it bearable is the irrational belief that somebody interesting will come on in a minute...

(p. 31)

Here again we find a close parallel with *Waiting for Godot*. Like Gogo and Didi, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are also waiting for somebody/something but are never sure of future. They have lost their sense of time which depicts the absurdity of their situation:

Guil: ... We have been spinning coins together since I don't know when and in all that time (if it is all that time) I don't suppose either of us was more than a couple of gold pieces up or down.

(p.12)

This is not all, references to their lost sense of time recur in the play:

Guil: Statement! Two-all. Game point.

Ros: What's the matter with you today?

Guil: When?

Ros: What?

(p.32)

This 'when' and 'what' depicts their confused sense of time. They have completely lost their sense of identity. As they are unable to understand the present, past and future, they have no option but to rely on the little they are told. When they find themselves caught up in hostile circumstances, they take it lightly and try to relax:

Guil: There's a logic at work- it's all done for you, don't worry. Enjoy it. Relax. To be taken in hand and led, like being a child again, even without the innocence...

(p.30)

This 'logic at work' points to the hostile events at work, ultimately leading to their deaths. In fact, they have failed to comprehend their identities, their pasts and their probable actions. Through Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's plight Stoppard has depicted the fragility of conventions on which our lives depend.

To bring about the absurdity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's life, Stoppard makes use of symbols. The most important symbol is coin-tossing. It is a symbol of capricious and deterministic happenings. Joseph E. Duncan points out, "The long run of 'heads' is a kind of epiphany, revealing an absurdist universe and foreshadowing the unbreakable chain of events in the Hamlet pattern which will catch up Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and sweep them along to their deaths."¹² He further says, "Rosencrantz may be a parody of the absurdist god revealed in the run of 'heads', but it is also implied that the absurdist god may be like him."¹³ Another symbol used in the play is the summons which is also related to the run of 'heads':

Guil: The Sun came up about as often as it went down, in the long run, and a coin showed heads about as often as it showed tails. Then a messenger arrived. We had been sent for. Nothing else happened. Ninety-two coins spun consecutively have come down heads ninety-two consecutive times... and for the last three minutes on the wind, of a windless day I have heard the sound of drums and flute...

(p.13)

A little later Guildenstern again makes a reference to summons:

Guil: Practically starting from scratch.... An awakening, man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters, our names shouted in a certain dawn, a message, a summons.... A new record for heads and tails. We have not been... picked out... simply to be abandoned... set loose to find our own way.... We are entitled to some direction I would have thought.

Ros (alert, listening): I say--! I say—

Guil: Yes?

Ros: I can hear-- I thought I heard—music.

(pp. 14-15)

According to C.J. Gianakaris, “Guildenstern’s comment about lack of direction has been cited to show the loneliness and frustration of absurd man.”¹⁴ This direction means their being directed to England and their deaths. Stoppard has made use of silences and pitch darkness to highlight the absurdity. The third act of the play opens in silence and darkness which suggests nothingness and death. This is supplemented by the use of reductive dialogue.

An absurd situation is there following an explosion:

Guil: Don’t bother. You can feel, can’t you ?

Ros: Ah! There’s life in me yet!

Guil: What are you feeling?

Ros: A leg. Yes, it feels like my leg.

Guil: How does it feel ?

Ros: Dead.

Guil: Dead?

(p. 73)

Many references are made to death in the third act of the play. As life is no longer worth living, it is better to die. Stoppard, like other playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, suggests that death is a release from the difficulties of life, so one shouldn't be afraid of it:

Guil: ...What is so terrible about death?... Since we don't know what death is, it is illogical to fear it. It might be... very nice. Certainly it is a release from the burden of life, and, for the godly, a haven and a reward.

(p.83)

In fact, Stoppard's endeavour through this play has been to depict the existentialist predicament of man in this universe. No doubt, this play is a parody, a pastiche, but it deals with the fundamental problems of modern men who are confused, bewildered, helpless and nothing more than non-entities. Throughout the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are bothered about their existence in the world:

Guil: Are you deaf?

Ros: Am I dead?

Guil: Yes or no?

Ros: Is there a choice? Is there a God?

Ros: Foul! No non sequiturs, three-two,one game all.

Guil (Seriously): What's your name?

Ros: What's yours?

Guil: I asked first.

(pp. 32-33).

But they are never able to know their names in the real sense. They don't know their position in this world. They don't know whether God is present or not. All these problems are not the problems of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern only, rather they are the problems of each and every

individual who is struggling hard to live in this absurd universe. Man is condemned to exist in this world where basically he is lost:

Guil: Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are... condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one- that is the meaning of order. If we start being arbitrary it'll just be a shambles at least let us hope so. Because if we happened, just happened to discover, or even suspect, that our spontaneity was part of their order, we'd know that we were lost.

(p.44)

Through this play, Stoppard has depicted the moral decadence of the present age too:

Player: Why, we grow rusty and you catch us at the very point of decadence- by this time tomorrow we might have forgotten everything we ever knew....

Ros: Tumblers, are you? Player: We can give you a tumble if that's your taste, and times being what they are.... Otherwise, for a jingle of coin we can do you a selection of gory romances, full of fine cadence and corpses, pirated from the Italian; and it doesn't take much to make a jingle even a single coin has music in it.

(p.16)

Thus, the absurdity in the universe, the decadence of the age, the problem of existence, meaninglessness, anxiety and confusion of life are depicted in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead elaborately. But Tom Stoppard in this play goes even a step beyond that. He extends the range of absurdity and opens new horizons for its expression and implication by using new techniques like pastiche in an entirely different way. No doubt, this play began as a Shakespearean pastiche but by putting the plot, character and dialogues in an entirely different context, Stoppard brought a turning point for British Theatre. Basically, this play is "a terse, comic and touching comment on the vulnerability and incomprehension of two peripheral characters from Hamlet who become instruments of their own death."¹⁵ But in fact through the dilemma of these two characters, the predicament of the whole of mankind is focussed upon. These two characters are groping in an existential void, which may point to the void, in each and

every individual's life in the present age. In doing so he moves a step beyond the Theatre of the Absurd. As Cahn suggests that in *Rosencrantz*, "Stoppard confronts absurdity head-on and at the same time takes the initial steps towards moving beyond absurdity."¹⁶ This play is in fact a "non-naturalistic step ahead of the Absurdist."¹⁷

Tim Brassell also points out, "I would be more accurate... to see Stoppard as starting 'beyond absurdity', having digested the movement's bold dramatic adventurousness and turned it to his own, unique advantage."¹⁸ This 'unique advantage' was, of course, taken in order to depict the meaninglessness of our existence. He weaves the borrowed text into the warp and woof of a new thematic texture so as to comment upon the present human condition. This type of technique was earlier neglected by the preceding absurdist playwrights. But Tom Stoppard succeeds in his attempt and can be safely put in the category of post-modernist experimenters in modern theatre.

References

¹Quoted in Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, Rev. And enl. ed. (1961;rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968), p. 23.

²Victar Cahn, "Stoppard and the Theatre of the Absurd," Tom Stoppard: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Jumpers and Travesties: A casebook, ed. T. Bareham (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1990), p. 38.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴ Esslin, p. 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

⁶ Quoted in Esslin, p. 23.

⁷ Gabrielle Scott Robinson, "Stoppard and Disorder," A Casebook, p. 49.

⁸ Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead (1967; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p.91. All subsequent references to the text of this play are from the same edition and page numbers in all such cases have been given within parantheses immediately after the quotation.

⁹ Ronald Bryden, "Reviews of Early Productions," A Case book, p.69.

¹⁰ Quoted in Tim Brassell, Tom Stoppard: An Assessment (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd;1985), p.39.

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1956), p.58.

¹² Joseph E.Duncan, "Stoppard and Beckett," A Casebook, pp. 79-80.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.80.

¹⁴ Quoted in E. Duncan, p79.

¹⁵ Nandini Bhaskaran, Times of India, 15 Nov. 1992, p. 18, Col.6.

¹⁶ Quoted in Brassell, p.61.

¹⁷ Nandini Bhaskaran, p.18, Col.6

¹⁸ Brassell, p.61.