

*ROSENCRANTZ & GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD, AND
OBSCURED BY LANGUAGE*

BY

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Fine Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Tom Stoppard's 1967 play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* focuses on two minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. However, in Stoppard's re-telling, language is the focus because nothing much happens; the action is already predetermined. Drawing on Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*, this scenographic design created a dramatic world in which the events happening around Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are beyond their control and beyond even their understanding. The scenic design incorporated unmotivated, unexplained flying objects that mirrored the characters' lack of control, and the lighting design emphasized the different moods of each set. To underscore the play's contemporary relevance, the court members were costumed as religious clergy and the players' costumes drew upon contemporary popular entertainment genres. Supplementary visual materials include groundplans, side sections, front and paint elevations, pictures of the models, swatched costume renderings, and lighting storyboards, plot, and paperwork.

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Roger Ebert describes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as “the ants, without the rubber tree plant.” This is in reference to Frank Sinatra’s song “High Hopes,” in which ants complete the seemingly impossible task of moving a rubber tree plant simply because they do not know the task is impossible. This analogy is a succinct and accurate description of the two main characters in Stoppard’s play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The two friends are the type of people who might be able to accomplish the impossible due to sheer ignorance, but their lives are so convoluted and out of their control that they do not even have the opportunity, because there is not a clear goal or task to complete. They are “replaceable pawns in the chess game of history” (Gussow), drifting along in the eddies and whirls of life. Stoppard takes full advantage of this idea in the play, and creates main characters with no clear goals or desires, providing an unusual basis for a play structure in which, much like Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, language is the focus because nothing much happens.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were initially created by William Shakespeare, in his play *Hamlet*. Their characters have been fleshed out and added to by Stoppard, but the basic plot lines, relationships, and character traits are from Shakespeare. In the original depiction of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, they are bit characters, caught up in the intricate plot of *Hamlet*, eventually betrayed by both Claudius and Hamlet himself, and wind up being executed. They are boyhood friends of Hamlet, asked by Claudius and Gertrude to come to the castle and try to cheer Hamlet up and determine why he is barely able to tell, in Hamlet’s words, a “hawk from a handsaw” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 2.2.272). They are unable to do so, and wind up accompanying Hamlet, at Claudius’s bidding, on a ship to England. Presumably, they do not know that the letter they are

carrying with them from Claudius contains orders for the English to execute Hamlet. Hamlet discovers the plan and switches the letter for one requesting that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, instead of Hamlet, be executed. The plan is a success, and the two are pronounced dead at the end of the play.

Stoppard's version of the play gives away the ending with the title and works within a pre-determined framework of plot. Given that the ending is inevitable from the beginning, the suspense and interest of the piece is not in finding out what will happen, but rather in how and why it will happen. The audience is pulled in to a world where the two main characters only leave the stage once, despite several attempts to do so; the set changes around them without their knowledge or consent; and the events happening around them are not only beyond their control, but beyond even their understanding. The result is "an acrobatic display of linguistic pyrotechnics as well as a provocative existential comedy about life in limbo" (Gussow).

I chose this play for a number of reasons, some of which are much more romantic than others. In high school, we often went to see shows at the universities and theatres in the nearest city. I already knew that I enjoyed theatre, but there were a handful of productions that I saw in these few years that really sparked my love of and desire to continually be a part of theatre. One of these was *An Inspector Calls* by J. B. Priestley, another was *Deadline* by Kurt Kleinmann, and the final was *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard. I loved *An Inspector Calls* because, for one of the first times in watching a play, my interest was genuinely held until the very end; I was riveted, eagerly awaiting the ending when everything would make sense. Of course, Priestley does not tie loose ends up that neatly, but instead comes up with a much more difficult

and rewarding plot device, which is that the audience is left not knowing exactly what happened or will happen. This audience experience inspired my love of plot, good storytelling, and the craft of suspenseful writing. I loved *Deadline* because the play was a visual treat, to use the cliché, and one that stayed with me in the coming years. In retrospect, I think it was this production that sparked my interest in design. I was amazed at how the smallest detail, from the set to the costumes, lights, props and makeup, were all done in shades of gray, just like a newspaper, the subject of the plot. Later, I would direct and design a show in black and white, in an attempt to recreate the mesmerizing experience I had. Finally, watching *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* sparked in me a love of language in theatre. The characters are at once motivated by, perplexed by, and bound by language, which for them, like all of us, is their only means of communication. To be simultaneously so liberated as to be able to communicate with such an abundance of word choices, and so limited as to only be able to communicate with those limited words available to language, is an idea that I have been intrigued with ever since.

Tom Stoppard's style is somewhat difficult to describe. He is usually lumped in with absurdism, which is probably the most accurate single-word description for him. Some of his other works include *Arcadia*, *Jumpers*, *Travesties*, *The Real Inspector Hound*, and *The Real Thing*. Many of his plays share motifs such as illusion vs. reality, chaos vs. order, language and its limitations, and metatheatre. Both *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* and one of his most famous screenplays, *Shakespeare In Love*, deal with Shakespeare and elaborate on the conceptions we have of his characters and his life. Like *Ros & Guil* (as I will now refer to the play), *The Real Inspector Hound* deals

with a framework laid down in another play, Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, although not in such an obvious way. The characters and plot are clearly references to one of Christie's most famous works, but Stoppard does not make a direct connection or reference to Christie's play.

A play that references or acknowledges either itself, the theatre at large, or other plays falls into the category of metatheatre, a technique that has been around since at least the time of Shakespeare, but that has only recently developed as a term. The most common and easily recognized form of metatheatre is the "play within a play" device, which, in *Ros & Guil*, Stoppard uses on multiple layers. To begin with, *Ros & Guil* is itself a play within a play, since it takes place in the wings of the play *Hamlet* – or, to put it another way, simultaneously with *Hamlet*, where the characters of *Hamlet* enter onstage of *Ros & Guil* when they exit offstage from *Hamlet*. To further complicate things, Stoppard then adds in another play within a play, when the Players perform for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Another possible layering of this idea occurs when the Players emerge from the barrels on the ship, dress in their costumes from the play that they had performed at the castle, which is the play within a play from *Hamlet*, and which re-enacts the murder of Hamlet's father. Thus, the characters in a play within a play (*Ros & Guil* within *Hamlet*) are re-enacting a play within a play (the mini play within *Hamlet*), which is itself happening within another play (a mini play within *Ros & Guil*). Quickly, this all stops making sense and becomes confused. This is part of Stoppard's goal: to point out how "reality" is actually fluid, subjective, and not to be trusted. His manipulation of events very successfully accomplishes this, so that the audience is constantly wondering what they are actually watching versus what they should be seeing.

The idea that reality is fleeting and subjective is another common theme in Stoppard's works, and he often highlights this idea through the use of something that appears to be reality but then turns out to be illusion. By contrasting what we think we are seeing, or what we expect to see, with what we are actually seeing, Stoppard is able to illuminate the fluidity of those things that we take for granted to be hard fact. For example, the first time the audience has any indication of which character is which happens eleven pages into the script, when Rosencrantz announces to the Players, "My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz" (Stoppard 22). The two then briefly confer, and Rosencrantz corrects himself, saying "I'm sorry – *his* name's Guildenstern, and *I'm* Rosencrantz." Thus, our first formal introduction to the two main characters is an incorrect one. This happens several times throughout the show, as various characters, including Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves, address the two by the wrong names.

I have always been drawn to the Theatre of the Absurd, in various forms. Although, ironically, the limits of language require us to assign some sort of capitalized proper noun when speaking about a group or "movement" such as the Absurdist, to do so is really to miscommunicate their ideas. Martin Esslin says in *The Theatre of the Absurd* that each of these "Absurdist" artists is more accurately "an individual who regards himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private world" (22). Therefore, any description of them as a group is betrayed by language in the exact way that they were rebelling against. Esslin says that "the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought"

(24). Absurdism, to me, does not offer any solutions in and of itself, but rather points out the need for an answer by demonstrating how ineffectual our current methods of looking at the world are. Thus, it is not didactic, and is often comical and unexpected, while dealing with real issues that affect our everyday lives. This is theatre that appeals to me, and *Ros & Guil* is a perfect example.

I was drawn to this play in particular for a number of reasons, including the humor, the clever word play, and the motif of the unexpected becoming the norm. However, one of the single most important reasons this particular project resonated with me personally is that I feel that the crisis that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are going through in searching for and not finding meaning can be mirrored in my life, where I too am searching for meaning. Specifically, I have found that the religion of my childhood, which in my mind was clear cut, straightforward, and absolutely correct, no longer fits into the “adult” world and reality in which I am living. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern thought they knew the way the world worked. They had lives which were presumably comfortable. They were friends with the Prince of Denmark, welcome at court, and educated members of the upper class. Then, suddenly, someone knocks on their door with a summons to go to the castle, and in that moment their world shifts by a few degrees. In this shift, the vision with which they previously viewed the world is obstructed and now there is something in the way, keeping them from seeing the big picture of their lives. I feel as if issues in my life have caused my world to shift; it no longer makes sense the way I thought it did, and the religion in which I had had unwavering, dogmatic faith no longer lines up with the world I am in now. As Martin Esslin describes a similar phenomenon,

the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, [...] they have been tested and found wanting, [...] and] they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war. (23)

For Stoppard, who grew up during World War II, this idea of religion being unmasked during the war no doubt informed his writing of the play (Billington). Although I am growing up in a generation in this country that has not lived through a major war on our land, this play still resonates with me. While I was working on this project, someone asked me why, over forty years after it was written, this play had relevance to a modern audience. I believe that my generation is also going through a crisis of faith. We have not lived through a war, but the religion of our parents seems to fit in less and less with the world we are introduced to in adulthood, which is more and more complicated every day and is full of ambiguous ethical issues raised by advances in technology, the United States' status as a superpower and the obligation that entails, and the progression of social norms. I often feel like Guildenstern, trying desperately to make sense out of things over which I feel I have no control, finding that my old template of religion no longer covers the page on which I am drawing. I think that many other people my age feel the same way, and we are searching for answers. As I highlighted in my costume design choices, I believe that this play is relevant for contemporary audiences because it resonates deeply with anyone searching for something which seems obscure at best and nonexistent at worst.

Scenic Design

The overall design concept for the show is that Ros and Guil are living in a world that they do not have control of, and I wanted to represent that in as visual a way as possible. The audience should have a literal, visual representation for how out of control these two characters' world is. I normally start the design process with whichever aspect of the design I develop clear ideas for first. With this design, the set definitely evolved first. In reading the script, the play seems to call for three distinct settings: the forest, or general nondescript setting at the beginning; the castle; and then a ship. Stoppard describes the first setting as "a place without any visible character" (11). The two characters are clearly traveling, at least in theory, though the limits of theatre mean that even people who are traveling stay in the same place, since otherwise they would be offstage and we could no longer see them. Consequently, Ros and Guil are in a paradoxical traveling stasis at the opening of the play. I chose the image of a bare tree with a groundcloth suggestive of grass for a very specific reason. Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, which is described as "A Tragicomedy in Two Acts," opens on a scene that takes place on "A country road. A tree. Evening" (849). The production is usually done with a basically bare stage, with a single tree, often without leaves during Act 1, in the background. I wanted to evoke this specific image for a number of reasons.

The first reason is that it indeed fits in with the opening mood of this play. Ros and Guil are, at first, in a fairly ordinary world, where things seem to make sense, but are at the same time slightly off kilter. The scene, upon first inspection, looks ordinary and not unwelcoming. There are places to sit, if the two so choose, and the green groundcloth

looks fairly inviting. The only indication that something might be awry initially is that the tree is completely bare and skeletal, yet the grass is green and seems to be covered with green leaves. The leaves obviously did not fall from this tree, and as there are no other trees present, this is a bit perplexing. The audience might or might not be consciously aware of this minor juxtaposition, but will hopefully be at least somewhat subconsciously aware that something is slightly “off” about what at first seems a perfectly normal place.

I am also hoping to make, at least for some members of the audience, a conscious connection with Beckett’s play, which shares a number of similarities with *Ros & Guil*. An awareness of these connections will enhance the audience’s enjoyment of, appreciation for, and understanding of what is happening in Stoppard’s work. For audience members who do not make the connection, the setting still serves this play, and provides the needed suggestion of location and time of day specific to this script. On a lighting note, I find the image of a backlit, leaf-less tree to be quite striking, visually and emotionally.

The parallels between *Ros & Guil* and *Waiting for Godot* are worth noting. Both plays have recurring motifs which seem to have nothing to do with anything, yet are discussed at length, and relied upon to bring the action back to familiar ground when it has wandered. In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon spends a significant portion of the “action” trying to take off his boot. He does not accomplish anything when he does, as there is nothing to be found inside but his foot, but the interaction with his shoes happens several times. Along the same lines, Vladimir repeatedly takes off his hat, peers into it, and finds nothing. This can be compared to the game of spinning coins with which Ros

and Guil are so entranced. In both cases, the action is repeated throughout the play as a recurring device. Additionally, the two main characters in each of the two plays are strikingly similar. Rosencrantz can be compared to Estragon, while Guildenstern is comparable to Vladimir. Rosencrantz and Estragon are both the weaker, simpler of the two pairs. They both accept things at face value, not interested in what the underlying reason is. They are both protected and comforted by the other man, to some extent. Rosencrantz is the one who cannot remember his own name, and Estragon does not usually remember why they are waiting for Godot at all. Interestingly, both of these characters' pants also fall down, after each character takes off his own belt. Rosencrantz removes his belt in order to string it together with Guildenstern's to make a trap to catch Hamlet, who simply walks around it as any semi-intelligent person would do. Estragon loses his pants after he takes off his belt of cord in order to pull on it with Vladimir to test whether or not it is strong enough that they might hang themselves with it. The plot point is irrelevant, but the parallel visual images are striking. In contrast, Guildenstern and Vladimir are both much more interested in why things happen, and in getting to the bottom of what is going on, although neither is very successful. Furthermore, the Players in *Ros & Guil* can also to some extent be compared to Lucky, Pozzo, and the Boy in *Waiting for Godot*, who provide distraction and some level of entertainment to both sets of main characters. Finally, both plays revolve around two main characters who are waiting for something to happen, clearly either not in control or unable to take control of their own destiny, searching for meaning in a world that will provide them with none.

If the first set is described as paying homage to *Waiting for Godot*, the second set might be described as vaguely referencing *Hamlet*. Much of the action of *Hamlet* takes

place in the same castle that is depicted in *Ros & Guil*, since the two plays share a cast of characters and general plot outline. The arches are designed to be indicative of a castle, while remaining in the same style as the first setting. The three large arches, diminishing in size as if toward a vanishing point, provide a feeling of claustrophobia, and seem to indicate that not only are Ros & Guil not in control of their environment or path, but, since the first setting was much more open, the walls are literally now beginning to close in on them. The three entrances at the back provide passageway to other parts of the castle, and the stairs on the sides allow for more than one exit from each side. Thus, the seven entrances and exits provide a variety of possibilities for traffic patterns, since several characters enter and exit on this set. This setting is also slightly more abstracted than the first, following the arc of the play from more to less realistic. Both have a groundcloth, which is a convention, but other than that the tree from the first set looks very much like something you might actually see outside, whereas six arches indicating an entire castle clearly require some suspension of disbelief.

The final setting is the most realistic and the most surreal simultaneously, much like the ending of the play, where Ros & Guil finally figure out at least what is going on but then end up dying for no real reason. Similarly, the boat is built fairly realistically, but only approximately one third of it is depicted on stage, which might be disturbing for some since a boat needs to be intact to still be functioning as a boat and not just a death trap.

In addition to the main components of the set, the transitions, projections, and flying objects are all crucial pieces of the overall design concept, which is to emphasize a world that does not make sense and over which Ros and Guil have no control. The

element with the single biggest contribution to the concept would be the flying objects. The idea here is that Ros and Guil are inundated not only with language and events they do not understand but also with a barrage of flying objects that make no sense and have no explanation, but are a visual representation of the emotional and intellectual assault on the characters. Martin Esslin points out that

The Theatre of the Absurd [...] tends toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. The element of language still plays an important part in this conception, but what *happens* on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the *words* spoken by the characters. In Ionesco's *The Chairs*, for example, the poetic content of a powerfully poetic play does not lie in the banal words that are uttered but in the fact that they are spoken to an ever-growing number of empty chairs. (26)

I wanted to provide *Ros & Guil* with this same kind of visual metaphor. While they are talking about the toss of a coin, an inconsequential conversation by itself, their aerial and ground assault by items such as a bicycle, oversize buttons, Christmas tree lights, and giant dimensional leaves is a better representation of the emotional content of the play than the dialogue is at any give moment. Roger Ebert, in explaining why he believed the movie production of the play was such a failure, says that the film failed to capture the ways in which, in the play, “the tension between what was center stage and what was offstage was the subject of the entire evening.” The flying objects further underline this fact because they draw attention to the idea that things are happening somewhere else. The objects come from somewhere, and demonstrate that whoever is pulling the strings –

literally and metaphorically – is so far removed from Ros and Guil that we cannot even see that “puppeteer,” although the consequences of his actions are clear. The flying objects are critical to the concept, and for me, really sell the idea of having simple, straightforward sets, because this draws even more attention to the juxtaposed, seemingly unmotivated items.

The portals are also an important part of the set design. Words and language play such an important part in the script, so that the characters are constantly demonstrating that “we are tied down to a language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style” (77). This is one of my favorite quotes from the play because it sums up so tidily one of the main themes, which is that language is, in many ways, hopelessly inadequate for communicating. Since the play is framed in words in a metaphorical sense, I again wanted to make this visual, so I framed the play in words in a literal sense as well. The portals and the raked platform are the only things that remain the same in all three sets, because the language remains the same throughout the play. The collage style represents the hodge podge, sometimes randomness of what is being onstage, and the lack of storyline is a depiction of the limits and often nonsensicalness of language.

The projections function in much the same way. Since the play is already so metatheatrical, I wanted to punctuate this by showing certain lines of text and images on the screen, to highlight the important parts and to remind the audience periodically of the ways that the play, like the projections, is very self referencing. I wanted to have the slides often enough that the audience got used to them, and they did not pull them out of the action every time, but also infrequently enough that they paid attention to them. I chose the specific moments by going through the script and selecting words and ideas

that were especially important, such as the previously mentioned quote about the limits of language. I also chose lines that could be represented well visually, such as the slide with the words “actors” and “people” on the opposite side of a yin and yang symbol to represent the line, “We’re *actors* – we’re the opposite of people!” (63), or represented with just a few words, such as Hindu Buddhist lion-tamer, which represents the highlights of a joke that Rosencrantz never finishes. Other slides summarize the action, such as the succession of the phrase “Heads” during the coin tossing bits.

Finally, the way that the stage would transition between the sets is an important scenic device. Since Ros and Guil are not in control, and only actually exit the stage once, despite many mentions of perhaps doing so, the set needs to change around them. For example, the set changes from the forest to the castle without a break in the action and in the space of one line, indicated by Stoppard to happen with a light shift. In my production, the scrim would suddenly fly out, the tree would be pushed back, and the groundcloth forcibly removed from underneath Ros and Guil’s feet. Then, the arches would all be brought on from the back, and each one successively pulled forward until it was in place, with the largest one being tilted down and under the false proscenium. The three small arches at the back would be rolled on already attached to the platform with the steps. Last, just after Ros and Guil had tentatively stepped back onto the platform after being shoved off of it by a court member to remove the previous groundcloth, they would be forcibly moved again in order to make way for the new groundcloth, and the scrim would fly back in. The set changes would be done by members of the royal court, since it is the royalty who are in direct control of Ros and Guil’s destiny. The transition to the final set takes place during an intermission, but should happen in view of the

audience, perhaps with Ros and Guil looking on, bewildered, just offstage but in view of the audience. Again, the scrim would fly out, the arches and groundcloth taken off, and then the ship unit rolled onstage by members of the court. The scrim would then be flown back in.

Costume Design

The second area that I worked on was costumes. I struggled with these for a long time, not sure what choice would best serve the production. My initial idea was simply to design Elizabethan period costumes, since this seemed the safest route. I thought this might also be a good idea since my set was relatively high concept. If the costumes were more straightforward, the audience might have a better chance of understanding where I was going with the design choices. However, I realized that this was just the default answer, and that that design for costumes was not based out of making a choice about the play, but rather based on the fact that I had to design them.

The break through for my costume design came after at least two weeks of thinking about the problem, and not coming up with anything. Finally, I had an idea that I really liked. It occurred to me that one of the most straightforward ways to make something relevant for a modern audience is to use design to make it relatable to them. I decided to do this with the costumes by putting Ros and Guil in modern clothing. However, I knew that I could not put all the characters in modern clothing due to project requirements. I decided instead to make Ros and Guil the center pieces, and to put everyone else in a costume that would reveal the underlying nature of his or her

character. I wanted the costumes to say more about the characters than simply being clothing, and instead convey the purpose and characteristics of the characters. So, the court became a cast of religious figures, the named characters from Shakespeare were dressed in Elizabethan clothing, and the Players were designed as an assortment of entertainers associated with sex and violence. .

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dressed in modern clothing, as members of today's hipster upper middle class might dress, wearing designer jeans and ties. Guildenstern is a tad more successful at looking "put together"; in contrast, Rosencrantz is wearing a bowtie even though these are normally associated with older men, as if he "missed the memo" about that, just like he missed the memo about everything else. They are the only two characters in the play who are dressed in blue, except Hamlet, their friend, who is in a very greenish blue. They are also dressed somewhat similarly in color and pattern, so that the audience might indeed have almost as much trouble keeping them straight as everyone in the play, including they themselves, does. They are wearing Converse shoes, an iconic symbol that to our generation can mean any number of things, but represents the idea that the wearer is at least coherent enough to recognize these as the "universal fashion symbol" of our day.

In deciding to make the court attendants into various kinds of religious figures, I was trying to make a visual connection with my idea that the relevance for a modern audience might be how the world no longer makes sense the way we thought it did, because our grandparents' religion is no longer sufficient for navigating in the contemporary world. For this reason, I wanted to make the court visual representations of religion, because these characters are in control, order the world (and the world of the

play) so that Ros and Guil have no control over it, and represent what oppresses and even destroys Ros and Guil. I chose to put the court in varying arrays of religious wear, and made a few of the named characters into specific figures. Most of the court are clergy members from the largest three monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. I wanted to give the impression that when the court enters, unexpectedly, Ros and Guil are suddenly confronted by a parade of religion. I chose these three main religions because they are monotheistic, meaning that they believe that theirs is the only way, which can make some of these religions' members judgmental, overbearing and intimidating. I wanted Ros and Guil to be literally jockeying for space onstage with a brief history of some of the world's major religions. This highlights the idea that this didactic way of religious thinking, represented by the court, is no longer working for some people in my generation, and perhaps also for Ros and Guil; instead, the court and the religious mindset it represents is manipulating Ros and Guil and forcing them to do things they do not want to do. All of the court members are dressed in the colors that would be required by their position or sect, but whenever possible I tried to keep the group in earth tones, so that they would not stand out as individuals but rather function as a mass, representing the whole of the religious thought and fervor that is bearing down on Ros and Guil.

For the few named court members who are not major characters in the plot, I matched up their personalities with the stereotypes associated with their costumes. Thus, Fortinbras, who wants to avenge his father with violence, is a conquistador, who represents a group of people that forced their religion and ideas on people through violence, while simultaneously taking their possessions from them and killing them. This

is exactly what Fortinbras is trying to do, although he is perhaps somewhat justified in his anger. Horatio, who provides the voice of reason and wise words throughout *Hamlet*, and at the end of *Ros & Guil*, is a Hindu Guru, who many people associate with being very wise and worth listening to. Laertes, who ultimately kills Hamlet, is a Christian Crusader from the middle ages, representing people who spread their religion and maintain power through violent action. Finally, The Ambassador, whose job is to travel around and try to persuade people of various things, is a Baptist Preacher, known for their traveling tent meetings where they aggressively sought converts.

The Player's line "I can do you blood and love without the rhetoric, and I can do you blood and rhetoric without the love, and I can do you all three concurrent or consecutive, but I can't do you love and rhetoric without the blood. Blood is compulsory – they're all blood, you see" really informed my choice of the Players' costumes (33). They are a traveling troupe performing to the lowest common denominator of society with blood, love and rhetoric. This might also be translated as violence, sex, sensationalism, spectacle tragedy, and comedy. I chose figures who have gained mass appeal in popular culture for a variety of reasons. The Player is the leader of this ragtag group of "starving artists," so I put him in the costume of the main character from the movie *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, because that character is also shameless, has a personality that fills the stage, and in charge of an odd assortment of characters. Pirates have become very popular lately due to the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, thus appealing through both sex and violence. Alfred is dressed as a drag queen, because he is constantly forced to play the female parts even though he is a male. Ninjas are seen as the ultimate smooth operating character, capable of inflicting great damage without even

being detected, again owing to the popularity of such movies as *Kill Bill*, *The Last Samurai*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which all deal with martial arts, the basis of ninja combat. They have perhaps replaced James Bond for the current generation as the clichéd ultimate smooth, efficient, sexy character. Vampires have become wildly popular recently due to such movies and TV shows as *Twilight*, *True Blood*, and Anne Rice's vampire novels. They are seen as dangerous and sexy. Vikings are very stereotypically aggressive and physically capable, someone you would not want to run into in a dark alley at night. Hulk Hogan represents both himself, and the entire world of professional wrestling, which appeals to audiences with a cheesy serial "plot," sex appeal, and more violence than should fit into any hour of television, all to appeal to the largest number of people possible, just like the players. Hulk Hogan's costume is perhaps the single most recognizable outfit from this entire organization. The cheerleader and hooker are both full of sex appeal, pandering to the lowest common denominator of the audience. Almost all of the players are dressed in bright, flashy colors, to make themselves as visually appealing as possible.

The named members of the royal household are Hamlet, Ophelia, King Claudius, Queen Gertrude, and Polonius. I chose to keep them in period Elizabethan costume so that the audience could immediately identify them as those specific characters from *Hamlet*, and so that the audience would not spend the entire time trying to figure out why they were dressed as something else. Although we do not have royalty in this country, we do have powerful leaders, and the visual image of royalty is still readily associated with the idea of "The Man," who is seen as pulling the strings, jerking the little guy around and manipulating things for "his" own gain. So, I felt that the image of

royalty served my purpose of identifying the King and Queen as being the people who are really in charge, manipulating Ros and Guil behind the scenes. I also put the court in shades of purple and rose, which instantly identify them as royalty, since during this period only royalty was allowed to wear these colors, due to sumptuary laws (“Enforcing Statutes”). Since then, people have always associated purple with royalty.

Lighting Design

My concept for the lights for this show was that the three sets needed to be able to have different moods, so I needed to use colors that could be adjusted to bring out the warm and cool tones of each set. I also wanted to be able to support the overall theatricality of the production, and to make things seem less and less realistic as we move further into the timeline of the play. I chose more saturated front light than I normally would, because this play is so far outside the realm of the real world that I wanted to be able to have strong color choices, even for the front light. I used R63, Pale Blue, and R03, Dark Bastard Amber, for front light. Both of these colors have at least 50% transmission, so they are not overly saturated, but I wanted to be able to make each scene significantly warmer or cooler than the previous, so I went with richer colors. I also have a front fill wash of R54, Special Lavender, which is much more white and is a good general purpose blending light. The side lights are R17, Light Flame, and R67, Light Sky Blue. Both of these colors will blend well with the front lights, and I put each color on each side for each area, so that when I turn up the warm fronts, I can turn up the cool sides for modeling. I have two top washes of R93, Blue Green, and L341, Plum. Both of

these colors worked well on the model and look good with either warm or cool lights. The back lights have scrollers so that I can change the color in each scene. The moving lights will be used for specials and for gobo washes all over the stage.

I found that doing my lighting storyboard by photographing the models with actual lights and gels shining on them greatly influenced my color choices. I knew which positions I wanted, and tried to mimic those in the storyboard as much as possible, but experimenting with different gels on the lights I was using let me know what options I needed to have in order to make each set work. One of the challenges was having a plot and colors that worked for three sets, each of which is significantly different in color and texture than the others. This is part of the reason I chose more saturated colors, so that I could really change the look of each set, instead of just playing it safe and picking neutral, low saturated colors. I also want the lights to become less and less realistic, and more and more surreal as the play moves along. Having the option of very saturated washes will help provide that.

Conclusion

Overall, I am happy with the project. I feel that the choices I made are for the most part good ones, and that if this were actually produced the fictional director and I could come to an agreement with my choices and that the audience would enjoy the production. I think that potential issues might include the audience “not getting it,” or being distracted by the fairly obvious and omnipresent design choices. The concept of the clergy as court members, specifically, might confuse people and would perhaps need

to be explained in a program or dramaturgical note. People also might wonder why Ros and Guil are in modern dress, while the players and clergy are in a variety of periods, and the court is in Elizabethan dress. It is also possible that the portals, flying objects, and projections would simply be distracting to an audience. I struggled with finding the balance between choices and devices that are just present enough to be noticed, but not so overwhelming as to be distracting – but things like that can be hard to judge until the set is actually built and someone sits in the space and really looks at it.

As far as design quality, I am fairly happy with my overall ideas and the way I executed my choices. My costumes renderings could always use improvement, although I can see the great strides I have made since my first year. The choices for the royalty are perhaps too safe, and might not convey enough about the characters. I am very happy with the scenic models, although they could always be neater. I thought about giving the ship model more detail, but that would have made it more realistic than the other sets, which is the opposite from the arc of the play, so I decided not to. It is possible that this choice might give the last set an unfinished look, which might confuse audiences. Lights are so hard to judge on paper, without seeing cues, looks and timing. However, I think that my plot is a good basis for a production design. I might not have enough instruments to accomplish what I want to, which is a potential shortcoming of the plot. Overall, I am happy with my design choices, but would worry about an audience understanding them. I am also happy with the execution, but there is also always room for improvement in those areas.

I think Martin Esslin said it best when he said that

Libraries have been filled with attempts to reduce the meaning of a play like *Hamlet* to a few short and simple lines, yet the play itself remains the clearest and most concise statement of its meaning and message, precisely because of its uncertainties and irreducible ambiguities are an essential element of its total impact. (44–5).

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead is a hard play, and I think the most a designer can do is hope to contribute to whatever they perceive the underlying message, if there is one at all, to be. I hope that, in my own way, I have helped Tom Stoppard to point out the senselessness of things and the frustration of seeking meaning in a world where there might be none to be found.

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