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ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

A Play

by Tom Stoppard

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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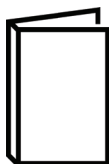
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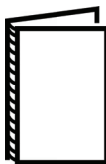


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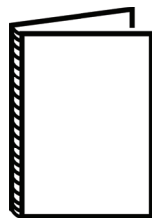
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Stoppard's most recent play, *The Hard Problem*, opened at the National Theatre in 2015. He wrote his first play, *Enter a Free Man*, whilst working as a journalist in Bristol. His plays include *Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead*, *The Real Inspector Hound*, *After Magritte*, *Jumpers*, *Travesties*, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (a play for actors and orchestra written with André Previn), *Night and Day*, *The Real Thing*, *Hapgood*, *Arcadia*, *Indian Ink*, *The Invention Of Love*, *The Coast Of Utopia*, *Rock'n'Roll*, *Dogg's Our Pett*, *New-Found Land*, *Dogg's Hamlet* and *Cahoot's Macbeth*. Adaptations include *Tango*, *Undiscovered Country*, *On The Razzle*, *Rough Crossing* and *Dalliance*. Translations include *The Seagull*, *Henry IV*, *Ivanov*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *The House Of Bernarda Alba* and *Largo Desolato*. He has written eight Evening Standard award-winning plays and five of his plays have won Tony awards.

Radio plays include *Darkside* (set to Pink Floyd's album, *The Dark Side of the Moon*), *On 'Dover Beach'*, *If You're Glad, I'll Be Frank*, *Albert's Bridge* (Italia Prize Winner), *M Is For Moon Among Other Things*, *The Dissolution Of Dominic Boot*, *Where Are They Now?*, *Artist Descending A Staircase*, *The Dog It Was That Died* and *In The Native State*.

Television adaptations include *Parades End* (BBC/HBO), *A Walk On The Water* (from *Enter A Free Man*), *Three Men In A Boat* and *The Dog It Was That Died*. Original television screenplays include *Another Moon Called Earth*, *A Separate Peace*, *Neutral Ground*, *Teeth* and *Professional Foul*, which won awards from BAFTA, the Broadcasting Press Guild and Squaring The Circle. He adapted his television dramatisation of Jerome K Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* for BBC Radio.

Screenplays include *Anna Karenina*, *Despair*, *The Romantic Englishwoman*, *The Human Factor*, *Brazil*, *Empire Of The Sun*, *The Russia House*, *Billy Bathgate*, *Poodle Springs*, and *Shakespeare In Love* (with Marc Norman), which won him an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay, a Golden Globe and the Broadcast Film Critics and American Guild Awards for Best Screenplay 1998. He directed and wrote the screenplay for the film of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, which won the Prix d'Or at the Venice Film Festival 1990 for Best Film.

Tom Stoppard is a CBE and was knighted in 1997.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This play-text is perhaps unusual in that it incorporates a good many speeches and passages enclosed in square brackets, and the material thus bracketed consists of optional cuts. There is no definitive text of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: the New York production differed in many small textual ways from the London production, and the text performed for the American tour differs from both. I doubt that the same text has been performed in two different places anywhere in the world. This seems to me only sensible. A joke that is funny in London might be meaningless in Milan (or New Orleans), and there is no virtue in preserving it just because it was in the original script. Again, an expensive and visually exciting production using thirty-six actors might hold up well over three hours, while a very simple and small production might well work better in a version lasting two. So, on the one hand, I would like each director to control the length and complication of each production (as is usual), and, on the other hand, I would like to define the area in which he has a free hand with the text. Of course, a director who feels he needs every word of the script even though he might be working with only a dozen actors in rehearsal clothes, and no set, also has my full support. Other directors are welcome to use any or all of the cuts.

One of these cuts needs a little explanation. An entire scene, enclosed in *double* square brackets, did not exist when the play received its very first production at the Edinburgh Festival; it was written for the first London production. There has been at least one subsequent production without that scene, and other productions have used the scene in a shortened form, which, as elsewhere, is indicated by single brackets inside the scene.

The relevant pages are 68 to 71.

There are things to be said for and against the inclusion of this “new” scene, but of course the arguments mainly depend on the individual production, and here in this major decision as in the minor ones, I think it is desirable for the director to have the option. But I will say that the scene occurs at a kind of critical point—it follows a “false ending” to the Second Act, and I have seen one or two productions where without an exact control in the pacing of the act, the audience has been half lost and has had to be won back before the act’s real end.

Finally, I'd like to permit myself a general observation. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, whatever else it is, is a comedy. My intention was comic, and if the play had not turned out funny I would have considered that I had failed. Quite a lot of solemn and scholarly stuff has been written about it, which is fine and flattering, but it is worth bearing in mind that among the productions staged all over the world, two were comparative failures, and both of these took the play very seriously indeed.

Tom Stoppard

CHARACTER LIST

Rosencrantz
Guildenstern
The Player
Player King
Alfred
Poisoner
1st Spy
2nd Spy
Claudius
Gertrude
Ophelia
Hamlet
Polonius
1st Soldier
Ambassador
2nd Soldier
Ambassador
Horatio
Courtier
Fortinbras
Laertes
1st Page
2nd Page
Musician (Oboe)
Musician (Flute)
Musician (Drummer)
1st Courtier
2nd Courtier
3rd Courtier
4th Courtier
5th Courtier
Lady in Waiting x2
Court Lady x3

ACT I

Two Elizabethans passing the time in a place without much visible character. They are well-dressed. Each of them has a leather money bag. GUILDENSTERN's bag is nearly empty. ROSENCRANTZ's bag is nearly full. The reason being: they are betting on the toss of a coin, in the following manner: GUILDENSTERN takes a coin out of his bag, spins it. ROSENCRANTZ catches it, studies it, announces it as "heads" (as it happens) and puts it into his own bag. Then they repeat the process. They have apparently been doing this for some time. The run of "heads" is impossible, yet ROSENCRANTZ betrays no surprise at all—he feels none. However, he is nice enough to feel a little embarrassed at taking so much money off his friend. Let that be his character note. GUILDENSTERN is well alive to the oddity of it. He is not worried about the money, but he is worried by the implications; aware but not going to panic about it—his character note. GUILDENSTERN spins. ROSENCRANTZ studies coin.

ROSENCRANTZ Heads. (*He puts it in his bag. The process is repeated*) Heads. (*Again*) Heads (*Again*) Heads. (*Again*) Heads.

GUILDENSTERN (*flipping a coin*) There is an art to the building up of suspense.

ROSENCRANTZ Heads.

GUILDENSTERN (*flipping another*) Though it can be done by luck alone.

ROSENCRANTZ Heads.

GUILDENSTERN If that's the word I'm after.

ROSENCRANTZ (*raises his head at GUILDENSTERN*) Seventy-six—love. (*GUILDENSTERN gets up but has nowhere to go. He spins another coin over his shoulder without looking at it, his attention being directed at his environment or lack of it*) Heads.

GUILDENSTERN A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability. (*He flips a coin over his shoulder as he goes to look upstage*)

ROSENCRANTZ Heads.

GUILDENSTERN *examining the confines of the stage, flips over two more coins as he does so, one by one of course.*

ROSENCRANTZ *announces each of them as "heads".*

GUILDENSTERN (*musings*) The law of probability, it has been oddly asserted, is something to do with the proposition that if six monkeys— (*He has surprised himself*) if six monkeys were...

ROSENCRANTZ Game?

GUILDENSTERN Were they?

ROSENCRANTZ Are you?

GUILDENSTERN (*understanding*) Game. (*Flips a coin*) The law of averages, if I have got this right, means that if six monkeys were thrown up in the air for long enough they would land on their tails about as often as they would land on their—

ROSENCRANTZ Heads (*he picks up the coin*)

GUILDENSTERN Which even at first glance does not strike one as a particularly rewarding speculation, in either sense, even without the monkeys. I mean you wouldn't *bet* on it. I mean I would, but *you* wouldn't... (*As he flips a coin*)

ROSENCRANTZ Heads.

GUILDENSTERN Would you? (*Flips a coin*)

ROSENCRANTZ Heads. (*Repeat*) Heads. (*He looks up at GUILDENSTERN—embarrassed laugh*) Getting a bit of a bore, isn't it?

GUILDENSTERN (*coldly*) A bore?

ROSENCRANTZ Well...

GUILDENSTERN What about the suspense?

ROSENCRANTZ (*innocently*) What suspense?

Small pause.

GUILDENSTERN It must be the law of diminishing returns—I feel the spell about to be broken. (*Energizing himself somewhat. He takes out a coin, spins it high, catches it, turns it over on to the back of his other hand, studies the coin—and tosses it to ROSENCRANTZ. His energy deflates and he sits*) Well, it was an even chance—if my calculations are correct.

ROSENCRANTZ Eighty-five in a row—beaten the record!

GUILDENSTERN Don't be absurd.

ROSENCRANTZ Easily!

GUILDENSTERN (*angry*) Is that *it*, then? Is that all?

ROSENCRANTZ What?

GUILDENSTERN A new record? Is that as far as you are prepared to go?

ROSENCRANTZ Well...

GUILDENSTERN No questions? Not even a pause?

[ROSENCRANTZ You spun them yourself.

GUILDENSTERN Not a flicker of doubt?

ROSENCRANTZ (*aggrieved, aggressive*) Well, I won—didn't I?

GUILDENSTERN (*approaches him—quieter*) And if you'd lost? If they'd come down against you, eighty-five times, one after another, just like that?

ROSENCRANTZ (*dumbly*) Eighty-five in a row? *Tails?*

GUILDENSTERN Yes! What would you think?

ROSENCRANTZ (*doubtfully*) Well... (*Jocularly*) Well, I'd have a good look at your coins for a start!

GUILDENSTERN (*retiring*) I'm relieved. At least we can still count on self-interest as a predictable factor—I suppose it's the last to go. Your capacity for trust made me wonder if perhaps—you, alone— (*He turns on him suddenly, reaches out a hand*) Touch. (ROSENCRANTZ *clasps his hand*. GUILDENSTERN *pulls him up to him*. *More intensely*) We have been spinning coins together since— (*He releases him almost as violently*) This is not the first time we have spun coins!

ROSENCRANTZ Oh, no—we've been spinning coins for as long as I remember.

GUILDENSTERN How long is that?

ROSENCRANTZ I forget. Mind you—eighty-five times!

GUILDENSTERN Yes?]

ROSENCRANTZ It'll take some beating, I imagine.

GUILDENSTERN Is *that* what you imagine? Is that it? No *fear?*

ROSENCRANTZ Fear?

GUILDENSTERN (*in fury—flings a coin on the ground*) *Fear!*
[The crack that might flood your brain with light!]

ROSENCRANTZ Heads... (*He puts it in his bag*. GUILDENSTERN *sits despondently*. *He takes a coin, spins it, lets it fall between his feet*. *He looks at it, picks it up, throws it to ROSENCRANTZ, who puts it in his bag*. GUILDENSTERN *takes another coin, spins it, catches it, turns it over on to his other hand, looks at it, and throws it to ROSENCRANTZ, who puts it in his bag*. GUILDENSTERN *takes a third coin, spins it, catches it in his right hand, turns it over onto his left wrist, lobes it in the air, catches it with his left hand, raises his left leg, throws the coin up under it, catches it and turns it over on the top*

of his head, where it sits. ROSENCRANTZ comes, looks at it, puts it in his bag) I'm afraid—

GUILDENSTERN So am I.

ROSENCRANTZ I'm afraid it isn't your day.

GUILDENSTERN I'm afraid it is.

Small pause.

ROSENCRANTZ Eighty-nine.

GUILDENSTERN It must be indicative of something, besides the redistribution of wealth. (*He muses*) List of possible explanations. One: I'm willing it. Inside where nothing shows, I am the essence of a man spinning doubleheaded coins, and betting against himself in private atonement for an unremembered past. (*He spins a coin at ROSENCRANTZ*)

ROSENCRANTZ Heads.

GUILDENSTERN Two: time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times... (*He flips a coin, looks at it, tosses it to ROSENCRANTZ*) On the whole, doubtful. Three: divine intervention, that is to say, a good turn from above concerning him, cf. children of Israel, or retribution from above concerning me, cf. Lot's wife. Four: a spectacular vindication of the principle that each individual coin spun individually— (*He spins one*) is as likely to come down heads as tails and therefore should cause no surprise each individual time it does. (*It does. He tosses it to ROSENCRANTZ*)

ROSENCRANTZ I've never known anything like it!

GUILDENSTERN And a syllogism: One, he has never known anything like it. Two, he has never known anything to write home about. Three, it is nothing to write home about... Home... What's the first thing you remember?

ROSENCRANTZ Oh, let's see— The first thing that comes into my head, you mean?

GUILDENSTERN No—the first thing you remember.

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

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

ROSENCRANTZ Oh I see. (*Pause*) I've forgotten the question.

GUILDENSTERN (*he leaps up and paces*) Are you happy?

ROSENCRANTZ What?

GUILDENSTERN Content? At ease?

ROSENCRANTZ I suppose so.

GUILDENSTERN What are you going to do now?

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

GUILDENSTERN I have no desires. None. (*He stops pacing, dead*) There was a messenger—that's right. We were sent for. (*He wheels at ROSENCRANTZ and raps out*) Syllogism the second: One, probability is a factor which operates within natural forces. Two, probability is not operating as a factor. Three, we are now within un-, sub- or supernatural forces. Discuss. (*ROSENCRANTZ is suitably startled. Acidly*) Not too heatedly.

ROSENCRANTZ I'm sorry I— What's the matter with you?

GUILDENSTERN The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defence against the pure emotion of fear. Keep tight hold and continue while there's time. Now—counter to the previous syllogism: tricky one, follow me carefully, it may prove a comfort. If we postulate, and we just have, that within un-, sub- or supernatural forces *the probability is* that the law of probability will not operate as a factor, then we must accept that the probability of the *first* part will not operate as a factor, in which case the law of probability *will* operate as a factor within un-, sub- or supernatural forces. And since it obviously hasn't been doing

so, we can take it that we are not held within un-, sub- or supernatural forces after all; in all probability, that is. Which is a great relief to me personally. (*Small pause*) Which is all very well, except that— (*He continues with tight hysteria, under control*) [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, I hope that doesn't sound surprising because its very unsurprisingness is something I am trying to keep hold of. The equanimity of your average tosser of coins depends upon a law, or rather a tendency, or let us say a probability, or at any rate a mathematically calculable chance, which ensures that he will not upset himself by losing too much nor upset his opponent by winning too often. This made for a kind of harmony and a kind of confidence. It related the fortuitous and the ordained into a reassuring union which we recognized as nature. 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...

ROSENCRANTZ (*cutting his fingernails*) Another curious scientific phenomenon is the fact that the fingernails grow after death, as does the beard.

GUILDENSTERN What?

ROSENCRANTZ (*loud*) Beard!

GUILDENSTERN But you're not dead.

ROSENCRANTZ (*irritated*) I didn't say they *started* to grow after death! (*Pause, calmer*) The fingernails also grow before birth, though *not* the beard.

GUILDENSTERN What?

ROSENCRANTZ (*shouts*) Beard! What's the matter with you?
(*Reflectively*) The toenails, on the other hand, never grow at all.

GUILDENSTERN (*bemused*) The toenails on the other *hand* never grow at all?

ROSENCRANTZ Do they? It's a funny thing—I cut my fingernails all the time, and every time I think to cut them, they need cutting. Now, for instance. And yet, I never, to the best of my knowledge, cut my toenails. They ought to be curled under my feet by now, but it doesn't happen. I never think about them. Perhaps I cut them absent-mindedly, when I'm thinking of something else.

GUILDENSTERN (*tensed up by this rambling*) Do you remember the first thing that happened today?

ROSENCRANTZ (*promptly*) I woke up, I suppose. (*Triggered*) Oh—I've got it now—that man, a foreigner, he woke us up—

GUILDENSTERN A messenger. (*He relaxes, sits*)

ROSENCRANTZ That's it—pale sky before dawn, a man standing on his saddle to bang on the shutters—shouts— What's all the row about?! Clear off! But then he called our names. You remember that—this man woke us up.

GUILDENSTERN Yes.

ROSENCRANTZ We were sent for.

GUILDENSTERN Yes.

ROSENCRANTZ That's why we're here. (*He looks round, seems doubtful, then the explanation*) Travelling.

[**GUILDENSTERN** Yes.

ROSENCRANTZ (*dramatically*) It was urgent—a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons, his very words: official business and no questions asked—lights in the stable-yard, saddle up and off headlong and hotfoot across the land,

our guides outstripped in breakneck pursuit of our duty!
Fearful lest we come too late!!

Small pause.

GUILDENSTERN Too late for what?

ROSENCRANTZ How do I know? We haven't got there yet.

GUILDENSTERN Then what are we doing here, I ask myself.

ROSENCRANTZ You might well ask.

GUILDENSTERN We better get on.

ROSENCRANTZ You might well think.

GUILDENSTERN We better get on.

ROSENCRANTZ (*actively*) Right! (*Pause*) On where?

GUILDENSTERN Forward.

ROSENCRANTZ (*forward to footlights*) Ah. (*Hesitates*) Which way do we— (*He turns round*) Which way did we—?]

GUILDENSTERN Practically starting from scratch. An awakening, a 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.

ROSENCRANTZ (*alert, listening*) I say—! I say—

GUILDENSTERN Yes?

ROSENCRANTZ I can hear—I thought I heard—music.

GUILDENSTERN (*he raises himself*) Yes?

ROSENCRANTZ Like a band. (*He looks around, laughs embarrassedly, expiating himself*) It sounded like—a band. Drums.

GUILDENSTERN Yes.

ROSENCRANTZ (*relaxes*) It couldn't have been real.

GUILDENSTERN “The colours red, blue and green are real. The colour yellow is a mystical experience shared by everybody”—demolish.

ROSENCRANTZ (*at edge of stage*) It must have been thunder. Like drums...

By the end of the next speech, the band is faintly audible.

GUILDENSTERN A man breaking his journey between one place and another at a third place of no name, character, population or significance, sees a unicorn cross his path and disappear. That in itself is startling, but there are precedents for mystical encounters of various kinds, or to be less extreme, a choice of persuasions to put it down to fancy; until—“My God,” says a second man, “I must be dreaming, I thought I saw a unicorn.” At which point, a dimension is added that makes the experience as alarming as it will ever be. A third witness, you understand, adds no further dimension but only spreads it thinner, and a fourth thinner still, and the more witnesses there are the thinner it gets and the more reasonable it becomes until it is as thin as reality, the name we give to the common experience... “Look, look!” recites the crowd. “A horse with an arrow in its forehead! It must have been mistaken for a deer.”

ROSENCRANTZ (*eagerly*) I knew all along it was a band.

GUILDENSTERN (*tiredly*) He knew all along it was a band.

ROSENCRANTZ Here they come!

GUILDENSTERN (*at the last moment before they enter—wistfully*) I’m sorry it wasn’t a unicorn. It would have been nice to have unicorns.

The Tragedians are six in number, including a small boy (ALFRED). Two pull and push a cart piled with props and belongings. There is also a Drummer, a Horn-PLAYER and a Flautist. The Spokesman (“the PLAYER”) has no instrument. He brings up the rear and is the first to notice them.

PLAYER Halt! (*The Group turns and halts. Joyously*) An audience! (**ROSENCRANTZ** and **GUILDENSTERN** *half rise*) Don't move! (*They sink back. He regards them fondly*) Perfect! A lucky thing we came along.

[**ROSENCRANTZ** For us?

PLAYER Let us hope so. But to meet two gentlemen on the road—we would not hope to meet them off it.

ROSENCRANTZ No?

PLAYER Well met, in fact, and just in time.]

ROSENCRANTZ Why's that?

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. That's a thought, isn't it? (*He laughs generously*) We'd be back where we started—improvising.

ROSENCRANTZ 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. (*They all flourish and bow, raggedly*) Tragedians, at your command.

ROSENCRANTZ and **GUILDENSTERN** *have got to their feet.*

ROSENCRANTZ My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz. (**GUILDENSTERN** *confers briefly with him. Without embarrassment*) I'm sorry—*his* name's Guildenstern, and *I'm* Rosencrantz.

PLAYER A pleasure. We've played to bigger, of course, but quality counts for something. I recognized you at once—

ROSENCRANTZ And who are we?

PLAYER —as fellow artists.

ROSENCRANTZ I thought we were gentlemen.

PLAYER For some of us it is performance, for others, patronage. They are two sides of the same coin, or, let us say, being as there are so many of us, the same side of two coins. (*Bows again*)

ROSENCRANTZ What is your line?

PLAYER Tragedy, sir. Deaths and disclosures, universal and particular, denouements both unexpected and inexorable, transvestite melodrama on all levels including the suggestive. We transport you into a world of intrigue and illusion—clowns, if you like, murderers—we can do you ghosts and battles, on the skirmish level, heroes, villains, tormented lovers—set pieces in the poetic vein; we can do you rapiers or rape or both, by all means, faithless wives and ravished virgins—*flagrante delicto* at a price, but that comes under realism for which there are special terms. Getting warm, am I?

ROSENCRANTZ (*doubtfully*) Well, I don't know...

PLAYER It costs little to watch, and little more if you happen to get caught up in the action, if that's your taste and times being what they are.

ROSENCRANTZ What are they?

PLAYER Indifferent.

ROSENCRANTZ Bad?

PLAYER Wicked. Now what precisely is your pleasure? (*He turns to the Tragedians*) Gentlemen, disport yourselves. (*The Tragedians shuffle into some kind of line*) There! See anything you like?

ROSENCRANTZ (*doubtfully, innocent*) What do they do?

PLAYER Let your imagination run riot. They are beyond surprise.

ROSENCRANTZ And how much?

PLAYER To take part?

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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