Tom Stoppard

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

Summary

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are two Elizabethan gentlemen, traveling in a featureless landscape. They are spinning coins together, and Rosencrantz keeps winning over and over again, each time calling ‘heads.’ The number of times the coin lands on heads is no surprise to Rosencrantz, who is simply excited about his ‘new record.’ He also feels a bit bad about taking so much money from his friend.

Guildenstern, on the other hand, is shocked at the improbable results of the coin spins. He wonders what it means about the nature of the universe—does probability really exist? Are they living in some kind of alternate world? Guildenstern is irritated that Rosencrantz isn’t interested in his musings; he thinks it is very important to understand phenomena such as this.

Rosencrantz has his own curiosities, but they are less serious: he wonders why his toenails never seem to grow, for example. They try to remember what they are doing traveling, and finally recall that they were awakened that morning by a man summoning them to the King. They don’t know what he wants, but they know it is urgent.

Then suddenly they hear a band, and a group of actors appears, led by the Player (the lead actor.) The Player tries to interest Rosencrantz in a “show,” making it clear that what he is really selling is pornography. Rosencrantz doesn’t understand this, and the actors are about to leave, when Guildenstern steps forward. He asks for elaboration, and the Player tries to appeal to him in a sleazy way. Guildenstern backs off, disgusted. He asks them if they know any plays, and the actors reluctantly take positions. The Player stays where he is for a long time, uncomfortable, then finally goes off.

The scene changes, and Ophelia (a young woman in love with Hamlet), followed by Hamlet (the Prince), runs in front of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Claudius and Gertrude, King and Queen of Denmark, approach Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, telling them that Hamlet has been acting strange lately. Hopefully they, who were Hamlet’s childhood friends, can find out what is wrong, and perhaps do something fun with him to cheer him up. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern agree heartily, but as soon as everyone leaves, they get very disturbed. They want to go home, they don’t know what they’re supposed to do for Hamlet, and they’re afraid. Also, everyone keeps confusing their names, including them. Guildenstern convinces Rosencrantz to stick around and try to relax: they will help Hamlet, and when they are done they will get to leave, well rewarded.
They play a game, “Questions,” to help them practice talking to Hamlet. The game consists of never making a statement: they have a conversation entirely composed of questions. They realize that neither one of them can remember which name belongs to who. They then play a game where Guildenstern pretends to be Hamlet and Rosencrantz represents both of them, so that they can practice questioning him further.

At this point, through their conversation, they summarize the plot of Hamlet. The King of Denmark dies; Hamlet was his only son. Hamlet is of age, but his Uncle Claudius quickly marries his mother and becomes King instead of Hamlet. Claudius murdered Hamlet’s father, and Hamlet has been visited by his father’s angry ghost, but Rosencrantz and Guildenstern don’t know this. They understand that Hamlet would be upset by his father’s death, his mother’s quick remarriage, and the fact that he didn’t get to become King, but since they don’t know about the murder (though Hamlet does), they don’t understand why he’s acting as crazy as he is. And he certainly is acting crazy—they overhear him talking to Polonius, the King’s advisor, and it is complete nonsense. Still, Hamlet seems happy to see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Though we do not hear their conversation, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz’s conversation afterward indicates that it did not go well. Hamlet tricked them repeatedly, found out that they were there because the King sent for them, teased them with nonsense, and revealed nothing of his own troubles. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to make sense out of his obvious nonsense, in vain. Their conversation turns to random thoughts about the nature of existence. Guildenstern is disturbed that they seem unable to learn from their mistakes, or even, indeed, to remember their pasts. Rosencrantz demonstrates free speech by yelling “Fire” into the audience—and commenting that nobody has moved. Hamlet, Polonius and the Tragedians come in, and Hamlet asks the Player if he knows the play “The Murder of Gonzago.” The Player agrees to perform that play tomorrow night, with some lines added by Hamlet.

The Player approaches Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, very angry that they left him and his actors alone in the middle of their performance. He claims that the only reason an actor has to live is that someone might be watching them, so that when they discovered, halfway through the play, that no one was, it was an enormous shock to them. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no reaction; they only hope aloud that seeing a play will be good for Hamlet.

The Player maintains that he knows his way around the castle, and does not fear vague consequences the way Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do. He advises them to act natural, not worry so much. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern explain Hamlet’s situation to him, but the biggest hole in their story is evident immediately: they don’t know why Hamlet is acting so strangely. The Player has heard that Hamlet is in love with Ophelia, Polonius’s daughter. Guildenstern tries to get control of the situation, but cannot establish authority.
The Player leaves, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern talk about death: what does it feel like? Is it like being asleep? It’s depressing to think about, even though it shouldn’t be because you’re not conscious of it once you’re dead. Gertrude and Claudius come in, asking how the meeting with Hamlet went. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz bluff, telling them it went very well. Rosencrantz gets upset that everything seems to happen to them at the whim of someone else.

They catch sight of Hamlet, who is in the midst of deciding whether or not to commit suicide. Rosencrantz tries to approach him, realizing this would be a good time to get him to talk openly, but cannot quite bring himself to speak. Hamlet leaves, and Guildenstern makes fun of Rosencrantz for even trying to assert himself. Rosencrantz tries some half-hearted games as another way to make his presence felt, but finally gives up.¹