

Laughing into the Void:

Metatheatre, Passivity, Free Will, and Comedy in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern Are Dead*

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I. Introduction

In this work I intend to highlight two aspects of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* that I feel have been somewhat overlooked by the critical consensus. Much criticism of *Rosguil*¹ has focused on the various debts Stoppard owes Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, T.S. Eliot, and countless others; this topic has already been covered with so much skill that I feel it would be repetitive for me to cover it again.² I also lack the necessary familiarity with Beckett, et. al to make any sort of judgment on *Rosguil* based on an understanding of those authors. Additionally, some excellent criticism of *Rosguil* has focused on the play's faithfulness to its Shakespearean source material; again I feel I lack the requisite expertise in Shakespeare to do justice to such a weighty subject. What I hope to accomplish in this thesis, then, is to bring to light two threads within the play itself that I feel join together to form the play's view of predestination and free will.

The first of these threads is the play's exceptional metatheatricality.³ Stoppard starts from a prima facie metatheatrical concept; he sets *Rosguil* within the world of *Hamlet*, a play that he would clearly have expected audiences to know. Thus, *Rosguil* is constantly reminding the audience of its status as a play simply by existing; every time a character's name is mentioned or a character from *Hamlet*⁴ walks onstage, the audience

¹ As writing out *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* repeatedly would be tedious, an abbreviation for the title of the play is necessary; Stoppard himself uses *Rosguil* when discussing the play (Nadel 152).

² Far too many critics to name have discussed *Rosguil*'s relationships with *Waiting for Godot* and *Six Characters In Search of An Author*. For an excellent discussion of the similarities of theme between *Rosguil* and "The Love Song of J. Prufrock," see Tim Brassell's *Tom Stoppard: An Assessment* (66).

³ For the purposes of this essay, I will define "metatheatre" as any occasion where the play prompts the audience to confront its status as a play.

⁴ Such an expression may seem odd given that nearly every character within *Rosguil* has an analogue within *Hamlet*. However, Stoppard's Ros, Guil, and the Player are substantially different from the Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Player King of *Hamlet*, and as such I do not consider them to be "characters from *Hamlet*." The characters within *Rosguil* who only speak the words Shakespeare wrote

simultaneously is reminded of that character's status as a character within *Rosguil* and as a character within *Hamlet*. The constant evocation of *Hamlet* within *Rosguil* highlights its status as a play in and of itself, and thus Stoppard's concept for *Rosguil* takes metatheatricality as a starting point. Additionally, however, Stoppard peppers his play with excerpts from *Hamlet*, featuring characters such as Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius who only speak Shakespearean dialogue (indeed, direct quotations from *Hamlet*) throughout the entirety of the play. Such selections from *Hamlet* have a jarring effect; indeed, whenever a scene from *Hamlet* plays on stage during *Rosguil*, the audience is consciously reminded of both *Rosguil*'s source material and its status as a play. However, the jarring effect is mitigated by a kind of intellectual flattery; whenever a Shakespearean scene appears onstage an audience member experiences a thrill of recognition and then a subsequent feeling of self-satisfaction that they recognize the source of the material. To emphasize the suddenness of the switches from *Rosguil* to *Hamlet*, Stoppard often has Ros and Guil⁵ switch from normal, colloquial English to Shakespearean English as soon as characters appear onstage; one notable example of this abrupt switch of diction can be found during the first of what I call "invasions from *Hamlet*,"⁶ where Ros and Guil go from declaring of a coin, "It was tails," to telling Claudius and Gertrude, "Both your majesties/Might, by the sovereign power you have of us,/Put your dread pleasures more

for them—namely Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet, Ophelia, and Polonius—are the "characters from *Hamlet*."

⁵ One potential issue when discussing two plays with identically-named characters is confusion; it could be difficult for readers to tell the difference between the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of *Hamlet* and the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of *Rosguil*. For clarity's sake (as well as brevity), I have abbreviated the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of *Rosguil* to "Ros" and "Guil;" this is how Stoppard assigns lines to them as well. There is little of this confusion for the characters from *Hamlet*, as they say and do the same things within both plays; however, when differences do need to be noted, exactly which character from which play I am referring to will be made clear by context.

⁶ Put simply, the invasions from *Hamlet* are those occasions when Stoppard allows the action of *Hamlet* to come onstage within *Rosguil*. In these scenes, the dialogue is written entirely by Shakespeare, while Stoppard adds certain stage directions to those already present within *Hamlet*.

into command/Than to entreaty”⁷ (34, 36, 2.2.26-29). The constant reminders of *Rosguil*'s relationship to *Hamlet* prompt the audience to remember that what they are witnessing is a play, and thus by nature artificial. Importantly, as shall be explained, it reminds the audience that what they see onstage has been written; it prompts the audience to remember that the people onstage are characters in a drama, and thus do not have free will.

In addition to the deliberately metatheatrical premise of *Rosguil* and the constant invasions by characters from *Hamlet* (who, nevertheless, do not speak overtly metatheatrical dialogue), Stoppard also permeates his play with explicitly metatheatrical lines from the three characters he himself writes—Ros, Guil, and the Player. Ros and Guil's metatheatrical dialogue generally consists of conversations between one another that could also be interpreted metatheatrically; indeed, Guil's first lines of the entire play are simultaneously a comment on the events within the play and a comment on the play itself. After Ros has flipped a coin five straight times, and announced it as “heads” five straight times, Guil remarks, “There is an art to the building up of suspense” (11-12). The obvious interpretation of this remark is that Guil is commenting on the sequence of heads; the suspense builds up because he constantly anticipates the streak being broken (as we later discover, the coin at this point has landed heads not five but seventy-five times in a row). However, Guil's comment also assumes the audience's perspective on the play; his comment could also speak for an audience member, or even more so for a critic, who is remarking on Stoppard's own building up of suspense within *Rosguil* itself.

⁷ These quotations, and all subsequent quotations from both *Rosguil* and *Hamlet*, are taken from the editions listed in the Bibliography. For brevity's sake, subsequent citations from *Rosguil* and *Hamlet* will list either the page number or the act/scene/line information, respectively.

Most of Ros and Guil's metatheatrical remarks are of this nature; they comment on the action within the play both from their perspective and from that of the audience.

However, Ros and Guil occasionally seem aware of the audience; such an awareness, again, reminds the audience that they are watching a play. Ros and Guil's final contribution to the metatheatrical air within *Rosguil* concerns their repeated attempts to exit the stage. Ros and Guil remain onstage for the entirety of the play; they open and close each act onstage, and when a change of scenery is necessary during an act, the lighting simply changes, as in Act 1, where Ros and Guil's progress from journeying to Elsinore to being in Elsinore is communicated simply by "*a lighting change sufficient to alter the exterior mood into interior*" (34). Additionally, Ros and Guil both make several attempts to exit the stage; at various points, Guil searches around the edges of the stage for an exit, while Ros actually attempts an exit at several points only to be thwarted by various characters entering from the wings. Again, such blatant reminders to the audience that Ros and Guil are characters on stage, and cannot exit, lend an air of metatheatricity to the play. Through both *Rosguil*'s premise and the characters of Ros and Guil, Stoppard never allows the audience to forget that they are in fact watching a play, something essentially artificial and determined.

The Player, however, is Stoppard's most explicitly metatheatrical creation; he spends almost the entirety of his time onstage hinting that he knows and understands that he and the others on stage are in fact characters within a play. As Robert Egan (who acted the Player onstage in a 1977 production of *Rosguil*) states, "In the course of my own performance, I found that Stoppard repeatedly provides the Player with...moments, when character and performer intersect in common testimony to the nature of the theatrical

experience” (62). The mere existence of the Player, again, reminds the audience that they are watching a dramatic performance; the presence of an actor as a character onstage inevitably prompts the audience to realize that every character onstage is played by an actor. However, the Player enhances his metatheatrical presence via his dialogue; again, Stoppard uses the Player’s first line to establish a metatheatrical character for the Player that will persist throughout the play. As Ros and Guil are idly passing the time by flipping a coin, they hear music; eventually, a group of Tragedians appear, and their chief, the Player, exclaims “*Joyously* An audience!” (21) This remark could refer simply to Ros and Guil, or it could refer to the entire theatrical audience; depending on how the actor playing the Player performs this line, the Player’s initial remark could be addressed to Ros and Guil, the audience, or both. Whatever the delivery, the line immediately establishes for the Player a simultaneously metatheatrical and intensely aware character. Many of the Player’s later lines indicate to the audience that he is conscious of his status as a character within a performance. During the dumbshow performed by the Tragedians during the second act, Guil asks the Player who decides the fates of characters within a tragedy, and the Player responds, “*Decides? It is written.*” (80) On one level, of course, the Player’s statement could be taken as a simple statement of fact; the characters within a tragedy do not decide their fates, as the author of said tragedy has already written their destinies for them. Clearly, however, the Player’s statement is also meant to convey an awareness of his status as a character within a play; Guil is asking not just about the fate of the characters in the tragedy but about his own fate, and the Player responds by telling Guil that it is his fate which is written and unchangeable. Indeed, the Player’s role here seems to be that of a master of ceremonies,

ensuring that everything within *Rosguil* happens as it is intended; prior to telling Guil that his fate is determined, he takes on an air of unmistakable menace by “switching off his smile” (80).

Throughout *Rosguil*, the Player seems to share the perspective of an audience member; he is aware of the play, aware of the determined fates of the characters within the play, and aware that events must be brought to their proper conclusion. Thus, it is fitting that when Ros and Guil discover that Hamlet has switched letters in the third act, it is the Player and the Tragedians who confront them, and the Player who delivers the chilling death sentence: “You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That’s enough” (122). Guil and Ros question their fates, and the Player responds (again) with a metatheatrical line; they are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and within the framework of the play written by Tom Stoppard, that is enough. The initial premise of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the appearance of characters from *Hamlet* within *Rosguil*, and the actions and words of Ros, Guil, and the Player combine to remind the audience constantly of *Rosguil*’s essentially artificial nature. Such constant acknowledgement of its own unreality may seem a strange thing for *Rosguil* to emphasize; however, when the play’s metatheatricality is combined with Ros and Guil’s inherent passivity it presents a complete vision of life in a determined universe.

Ros and Guil’s defining characteristic within *Rosguil* is their propensity for inaction. They spend the vast majority of their time as observers, passively watching what occurs at Elsinore while trying as much as possible to avoid acting. Indeed, Ros and Guil are introduced via inaction. When the play opens, Ros and Guil are meant to be traveling to Elsinore; however, the audience is given no indication that Ros and Guil are

in fact traveling. Instead, they are “*passing the time*” by flipping a coin (11). They continue not to travel—not to act—until, as has already been discussed earlier, the lighting suddenly changes, and Ros and Guil find themselves in Elsinore (34). Ros and Guil’s reason for traveling to Elsinore also gives them reason to deny any active part in their existences. When discussing the impetus for their travel to Elsinore, Ros and Guil repeatedly state, “We were sent for;” indeed, Ros goes so far as to say, “We were sent for... That’s why we’re here” (19). Stoppard’s use of the passive voice here cannot be anything but deliberate; Ros and Guil’s passivity is exemplified by their statement that they were “sent for,” told to come, without any say in the matter. Additionally, the act of being sent for seems to result in the creation of Ros and Guil; prior to being sent for, they had no past and thus no existence. Ros and Guil are, in essence, called into existence; they do not choose to exist themselves but instead are created by someone ordering them to do something. Of course such a call into existence is the nature of being a character in fiction; however, Ros and Guil’s explicit acknowledgement of their status as mere vehicles for Stoppard’s writing is unusual. Once Ros and Guil are in Elsinore, Claudius orders them to “glean/Whether aught to us unknown afflicts [Hamlet]” (36, 2.2.16-17). Claudius’s order is direct—find out what afflicts Hamlet—and Ros and Guil respond by doing nothing; they sit and wait for Hamlet to come to them. To emphasize Ros and Guil’s inaction, Stoppard omits the portion of Shakespeare where Ros and Guil actually attempt to glean what afflicts Hamlet; this omission occurs during the break between Act 1 and Act 2. Tim Brassell notes that such an omission also has another effect; by omitting the portion of *Hamlet* where Ros and Guil betray their friend, Stoppard renders them far more sympathetic protagonists (43-44).

Within Act 2 itself, Stoppard uses the extreme contrast between the characters from *Hamlet* and Ros and Guil to emphasize Ros and Guil's inherent passivity. The first and most obvious contrast between the characters from *Hamlet* and Ros and Guil is that the characters from *Hamlet* must enter and exit the stage in order to interact with Ros and Guil. Ros and Guil never exit the stage, despite occasional attempts to do so, while the characters from *Hamlet* enter and exit the stage with steadily increasing frequency throughout the second act. The act of coming onstage is in itself an action; it requires that the entering character be in motion. Ros and Guil are devoid of purposeful motion; they mill about aimlessly, and the second act primarily consists of their talking until they are interrupted by an invasion from *Hamlet*. Another way Stoppard conveys Ros and Guil's essential passivity is via the pair's actions on stage when in the presence of a character from *Hamlet*. Stoppard characterizes Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet, Ophelia, and Polonius by motion; to cite just one example, Claudius and Gertrude "*enter...in some desperation,*" Claudius delivers his lines while "*hurrying out,*" and then they leave (86). During the entirety of Claudius's presence on stage, Ros and Guil "*remain quite still*" (86). The marked contrast between Ros and Guil and Claudius and Gertrude exemplifies Ros and Guil's tendency towards inaction; the characters from *Hamlet* spend their existences within *Rosguil* in motion, while Ros and Guil move without purpose. The scene above also establishes Ros and Guil's passivity for another reason; it represents the only occurrence in the play where Ros and Guil are given a direct order to do a direct action, as Claudius orders them to "go seek [Hamlet] out."⁸ (86, 4.1.36) The scene

⁸ Laurence Olivier insisted that Stoppard include this scene when *Rosguil* premiered at the National Theatre in London in 1967, as he felt that the one scene within *Hamlet* where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are given a direct order should be included (Stoppard Interview with Gordon, 20-21).

emphasizes Ros and Guil's essential passivity; given a direct order by Claudius to find Hamlet, they respond by again doing nothing. They are only saved because Hamlet eventually comes to them. Throughout the second act Ros and Guil are buffeted by characters from *Hamlet* entering and exiting the stage, ordering them around, and generally making their lives more difficult and more complicated; in response to such tumult, they do absolutely nothing.

Act 3 opens with Ros and Guil on a boat—a fact soon imbued with meaning by dialogue between the two. Guil informs Ros, “I’m very fond of boats myself. I like the way they’re—contained. You don’t have to worry about which way to go, or whether to go at all—the question doesn’t arise” (100). Ros and Guil imagine existence as being on a boat; essentially, they envision themselves having limited freedom (to move around on the boat) while being part of an unceasing and omnipotent current. The limited freedom they see is our freedom to do what we want during life, while the endless current that we are unable to fight against is death. They envision life as being essentially out of their control; they move towards death with no power to change their path. Ros proclaims his desire to step outside the path laid out for him by jumping out of the boat, but discovers he is truly powerless when he realizes that it could be part of “their” plan for him to jump to his death. Every action, then, could simply be prescribed for Ros by forces outside him; in this sense, action is pointless. Finally, Ros and Guil discover why they are on the boat—to deliver a letter to the English king that orders Hamlet’s execution. Here again Ros and Guil display their propensity for passivity—they refuse to act to save Hamlet’s life, and instead forgo both logic and justice in an effort to avoid action. Once the Players appear on board the boat, and Hamlet switches the letter ordering his death for one

ordering Ros and Guil's, their fate is sealed; when Ros and Guil discover that the letter now commands their demise, they do nothing to save themselves. They will not act to save anyone's life, including their own.

Ultimately Ros and Guil's characters are defined not by what they choose to do but by what they choose to forgo. They divest themselves of all ability to act independently; by the end of the play, they are utterly unable to live without being told what to do. When they vanish into nothingness at the end of the play it is merely a reflection of a physical state mirroring a mental one. Ros and Guil are not willing to act independently; they are only willing to do what they are told, and are helpless without instructions. On a fundamental level, they do not have an independent existence. The central question within the play, then, is to what extent Ros and Guil's inaction and eventual demise is predestined, and to what extent it arises out of their own free will. I think Stoppard makes it clear that Ros and Guil's fate is predestined; however, the predestination is not accounted for entirely by the script of *Hamlet*. They vanish at the end of *Rosguil*, instead of proceeding on to England and there being executed as in *Hamlet*. Their fate—to vanish without a trace, without leaving any impact on the world—is ingrained in their character; their innate passivity causes their demise. John Fleming writes, "Passivity and fate are the downfall of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern," but Stoppard ultimately leaves ambiguous exactly what role passivity and exactly what role fate have to play in Ros and Guil's end (59).

II. Metatheatre

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is an exceptionally metatheatrical work. It constantly draws attention to its status as something unreal, reminding the audience consistently that what is taking place on stage is not happening in real life and indeed could never happen in real life. Stoppard slyly draws attention to this unreality through several typical theatrical tropes, and he uses this drawing of attention to subvert the audience's expectations for the play and to force it to confront the typical assumptions one makes when one attends the theatre.

Rosguil itself is based on an inherently metatheatrical premise. The play itself is derived from another *Hamlet*; indeed, Robert Brustein judged it to be a "theatrical parasite, with *Hamlet* as its "host" (Berlin 44). I disagree with this term; Stoppard's play does depend on *Hamlet*, but using the term "parasite" implies that *Rosguil* has nothing meaningful to contribute to *Hamlet*, and indeed is actively harmful to Shakespeare's play. Whatever else can be said about *Rosguil*, it certainly has not had a pernicious influence upon *Hamlet*. The primary way *Rosguil* draws attention to itself as a play is through its appropriation of *Hamlet*; however, *Rosguil* subverts the audience's sensibilities in far subtler ways than just the shock of recognition when familiar characters like Hamlet and Polonius appear onstage. In *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are toadies; they appear to have little capability for independent thought, and they are brought on stage seemingly only to symbolize the corruption inherent within Claudius's court. Their comeuppance, when it arrives, seems to be an appropriate fate for two sycophantic characters who betray their old friend. Perversely, then, the appearance of Ros and Guil onstage at the beginning of *Rosguil*, and their subsequent conversations, would be most

shocking to a person who was intimately familiar with *Hamlet*. The Ros and Guil of *Rosguil* do not remotely resemble the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from *Hamlet*. Stoppard's Ros and Guil are far smarter, far more self-aware, and far more dramatically interesting than their Shakespearean counterparts. Indeed, Ros and Guil are smart enough and self-aware enough to just comprehend that they are caught up in events beyond their comprehension. For someone who knows *Hamlet* well, the sight of these previously peripheral and idiotic characters exploring the deep questions of existence must be shocking. Someone only superficially familiar with *Hamlet* could have assumed that the portrayal of Ros and Guil is relatively close to the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from *Hamlet*; however, the true *Hamlet* reader would know better. Indeed, the premise of the play consciously invites comparison with its Shakespearean predecessor.

When one sees or reads *Rosguil* for the first time, one is engaged in a constant process of balancing Ros and Guil with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. For someone who is familiar with *Hamlet*, the massive difference between Ros and Guil and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reminds us that we are watching a play; real people, one expects, would be at least somewhat consistent in their defining characteristics, but Ros and Guil are so far from the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of *Hamlet* that they necessarily prompt recognition of the fictional status as *Rosguil*. One critic writes, "From the beginning, Stoppard asserts strongly that these men on stage are actors playing characters, distinct in their characters and worlds from us, that the play is a conscious creation, an illusion," and this assertion of Stoppard's relies partly on the constant comparison between *Hamlet* and *Rosguil* (Keyssar-Franke 89). One sees or reads *Rosguil* for the first time with the assumption that it is a play based on *Hamlet*—another play. This in and of itself is a

metatheatrical assumption. However, the play furthers this sense of metatheatricality through its constant bludgeoning of the audience with the differences between Ros and Guil and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. *Rosguil*'s airs of metatheatricality are not solely limited to a constant juxtaposition of Ros and Guil with their predecessors; additionally, the play uses both theatrical devices and the recurrence of scenes and lines from *Hamlet* in an attempt to unsettle the audience and disturb their suspension of disbelief.

The metatheatricality already inherent in the premise of *Rosguil* is also made readily apparent by both the use of various theatrical devices and the dialogue referring to the same. One such piece of dialogue opens the play. Ros and Guil appear in a blank, featureless setting, flipping coins; Guil flips the coin, Ros examines it and then calls out heads, repeatedly. After five repetitions of this same action, Guil remarks, "There is an art to the building up of suspense" (12). Guil's remark comments on both the action within the play and the theatre itself. Within the play, both characters are kept in a state of suspense by the action of coin-flipping; both wonder whether the seemingly impossible run of heads will continue. The metatheatrical component, however, refers to the audience; Stoppard is commenting, through Guil, on his own building up of suspense. The audience wonders whether the coin will land heads or tails the same way Ros and Guil do. Indeed, Guil's usage of the term "art" seems almost self-congratulatory—Stoppard complimenting himself on his ability to keep the audience on the edge of their seats or to get a laugh. Yet a deeper look forces the audience to confront an apparent theatrical contradiction. Audience members are kept in suspense by the action of coin-flipping, and more specifically by whether the coin will land heads or tails; however, the actual result of the coin flip does not matter. Even assuming the actors on stage are

flipping coins with recognizable heads or tails, the script is written so that the coin will come up heads every time. What side the coin actually lands on is immaterial—the actor will always announce it as heads. The audience is being kept in suspense by an event whose result is preordained. Thomas Whitaker also points out another interesting effect of this opening. He states:

The courtiers themselves are rather like two sides of some double-headed coin, and nothing they have said thus far tells us who is who. Our programmes, of course, list John Stride as Rosencrantz and Edward Petherbridge as Guildenstern in the National Theatre Company's production of the new play...and some of us are quite sure that the lankier and more eloquent courtier in red must be Petherbridge and therefore Guildenstern—but others are not...The characters are of no help at all (38).

For the first production of *Rosguil*, Ros and Guil were played by relative unknowns; since, as Whitaker correctly points out, Ros and Guil do nothing initially to identify themselves within *Rosguil*, Ros and Guil must have seemed initially interchangeable to the audience. If one were to choose between Ros and Guil, it would be the equivalent of choosing heads or tails on a double-headed coin—entirely pointless.

The metatheatricality presented in the very beginning of the play remains throughout the play's entire opening. After several more coins come down heads, Guil gets up and remarks, "A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability," while he examines "*the confines of the stage*" (12). This bit of metatheatricality combines Guil's assertion about the laws of probability with an attempt to discover the boundaries of the surrounding area. A reexamination of faith involves finding the boundaries of the mind, or of the soul; at the

same time as he reexamines his faith, Guil also attempts to push against the physical boundaries of the stage. This juxtaposition of physical location with mental searching showcases Guil's inability to break free of his mental confines; he cannot break free of his belief in the law of probability, just as he cannot escape the borders of the stage.

Next, Guil goes into a discourse on monkeys:

Guil: 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...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—

Ros: Heads. (*He picks up the coin.*) (13)

Guil's concern with monkeys is a reference to the famous probabilistic proposition that "If a group of monkeys typed long enough on typewriters, eventually they would produce the complete works of Shakespeare"⁹—the idea being that even letters struck randomly, if they are struck for a long enough time, will eventually cohere by purely probabilistic means not just into something readable but into a masterpiece. Guil juxtaposes his scenario—the coin landing heads repeatedly—with this famous thought experiment, coming up with monkeys being thrown in the air and landing on either their heads or their tails. Guil's statements about monkeys serve both metatheatrical and dramatic purposes. Guildenstern is a character in Shakespeare's oeuvre, so when Guil makes a statement referring to the complete works of Shakespeare he is in effect referring to himself. This metatheatrical reference again jars the audience;

⁹ This proposition is a portion of what is known as the "infinite monkey theorem;" for a further explanation, see Richard Isaac's *The Pleasures of Probability* (48-50).

Guil is effectively referencing his own making—if enough monkeys were to type for long enough, eventually they would create him. The statement also questions both the usefulness and the limits of probability. It is useful for one to know that any given coin, tossed in the air, is about as likely to land heads or tails. However, it is almost completely useless for the average person to know that, given enough time, monkeys typing random letters will eventually produce the entire works of Shakespeare. Speaking in terms of probability, the monkeys would eventually produce Shakespeare, but the chances of its actually occurring are so slight as to be inconsiderable. In Guil's confusion, however, he switches monkeys for coins and ends up concluding that, "if I have got this right...if six monkeys were thrown up in the air long enough they would land on their tails about as often as they would land on their--," at which point Ros interrupts him to call the coin toss "heads" (13). Stoppard's interchanging here of both the serious and the ridiculous undermines even further the laws of probability that have clearly been bent in the world of *Rosguil*. Stoppard mocks the absurdity of the monkeys-typing-Shakespeare proposition, but he also mocks probability in general; people make many decisions by probabilistic evaluation, but Stoppard shows how one exceedingly improbable event can cause Guil to question not just the laws of probability but also his speech and even his very existence. The seemingly impossible series of events directly leads to Guil's searching of both the bounds of his mind and of the stage—as he is a theatrical character, his search represents a questioning not only of his mental state but his physical reality. This extremely unlikely event also causes him to lose his grip on language and aphorism; he mixes monkeys and coins to create something completely absurd.

After the monkey discussion, Ros and Guil return to commenting specifically on the streak of heads. After three more flips coming up heads, Ros comments to Guil:

Ros: Getting a bit of a bore, isn't it?

Guil (*coldly*): A bore?

Ros: Well...

Guil: What about the suspense?

Ros (*innocently*): What suspense? (13)

Here, Stoppard pokes fun at himself, stating that the coin flip has lost all suspense for Ros and Guil and (perhaps) the audience. The coin flipping has now taken on the characteristic of ritual—Ros or Guil flips, and Ros calls “heads,” every single time. Guil points this out, commenting metatheatrically that the increasing lack of suspense “must be the law of diminishing returns” (13). Guil comments on both his feelings and the audience’s, which are in this case one and the same. Guil and the audience both feel that it is now inevitable that the coin will land heads up, and that the coin flip becomes less suspenseful every time the coin comes up heads again. Energized, however, he declares, “I feel the spell is about to be broken” before flipping the coin again, only to once again be disappointed when the coin lands heads. His comment on this turn of events is “Well, it was an even chance...if my calculations are correct” (13). The weight of improbability has so overborne Guil that he cannot even calculate whether a coin has an even chance of landing heads or tails. The audience feels similarly, and Guil once again describes their feelings as well as his own when he questions his calculations. In the very first portion of the play, Stoppard has shown the audience that they should expect the unexpected, and has so manipulated the events that the extraordinarily improbable (the odds of a coin landing heads up eighty-five times in a row is astronomically low) has become not just

expected but utterly commonplace. And this switching of the fantastical for the commonplace forces the audience to acknowledge the lack of reality in what they see, which is the essence of metatheatricality.

III. Sent For

In the first act of *Rosguil*, Ros and Guil's views—towards action, creation, nearly everything—can be summed up in one simple phrase: “we were sent for” (19). In *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's admission that “we were sent for” is a confession; Hamlet senses that they have betrayed him by working for Claudius and eventually forces them to admit that they did not come to Elsinore of their own accord. In *Rosguil*, “we were sent for” becomes first a mantra and then, eventually, the story of Ros and Guil's creation. The first occurrence of the phrase “We were sent for” occurs after Guil asks Ros the question, “What's the first thing you remember?” (16). Ros cannot respond—first he mistakes Guil's meaning, then he cannot remember the question—and the two move on to discuss their relative contentment. Suddenly, Guil answers his own question:

Guil: There was a messenger... That's right. We were sent
for... 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. (17)

The reference to “un-, sub-, or supernatural forces” concerns the game of flipping coins Ros and Guil have been playing, which to this point has resulted in the coins landing heads up 92 straight times, and the juxtaposition of being “sent for” with “un-, sub-, or supernatural forces” is deliberate. Ros and Guil cannot remember anything prior to their being sent for; when combined with the knowledge that Ros and Guil are “*passing the time in a place without any visible character,*” it is reasonable to assume that Ros and Guil either did not exist prior to being sent for or were called into a new plane of existence by the messenger. (11) That new plane of existence, however, does not operate within normal, natural laws; indeed, Guil posits, perhaps correctly, that the reason the

coin has landed heads up so many times in a row is that “time has stopped dead” (16). It is certain that the place they are in has no visible temporal character. Clearly, being sent for—being acted upon—has landed Ros and Guil in a strange and unfamiliar place where normal logic does not apply. Indeed, this lack of logical consistency is showcased by Guil immediately after his positing that they are within “un-, sub-, or supernatural forces,” when he postulates 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. (17)

Guil’s statement serves two purposes for Stoppard; it allows him to get in a humorous shot at philosophers and logicians who think themselves into impossible quandaries while at the same time establishing for the audience that this strange world into which Ros and Guil have been summoned is not a world where logic has too strong a hold. Guil emphasizes this later in dialog with Ros, when he states, “The sun came up as often as it went down, in the long run, and a coin showed heads as often as it showed tails. Then a messenger arrived. We had been sent for” (18).

The strangeness of the world Ros and Guil find themselves in after they have been sent for is reiterated again in Guil’s next lines. “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” (18). The coins landing heads ninety-two times consecutively is exceptionally

illogical, while hearing drums “on the wind of a windless day” is paradoxical: how is one to hear something on the wind when there is no wind? Stoppard uses the old theatre trick of having an actor pretend to hear something so that the audience strains to hear the same thing, but this does not solely have the effect of forcing the audience to pay closer attention. Instead, it forces the audience member to confront a dual paradox; first, one cannot hear anything on the wind of a windless day. Secondly, and more metatheatrically, it is paradoxical for an audience member to strain to hear something that an actor on stage pretends to hear; the action on stage does not exist in reality, and a realistic sound to coincide with an actor’s dissembling will only be present if a playwright or director wishes it to be. To further the unsettling feelings aroused by this statement, the following dialogue does not seem to be fraught with meaning and important to the direction of the play; instead, it consists of Ros explaining to Guil that “the fingernails grow after death, as does the beard” (18). Stoppard forces the audience to confront *Rosguil*’s (and theatre’s) inherent artificiality; straining to hear something “on the wind of a windless day” is the equivalent of straining to hear a theatrical device that does not really exist.

The conversation about fingernails and toenails prompts Ros and Guil to resume their previous conversation about the first thing they remember. Ros finally realizes what happened, saying:

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

Guil: A messenger. (*He relaxes, sits.*)

Ros: 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.

Guil: Yes.

Ros: We were sent for.

Guil: Yes.

Ros: That's why we're here. (19)

This makes even more explicit the connection between being sent for and Ros and Guil's existence. Ros explicitly states, "That's why we're here," when talking about being sent for. It is clear that he and Guil exist only because they have been summoned. Richard Andretta echoes this sentiment in his *Tom Stoppard: An Analytical Study of His Plays*; he states, "Both Ros and Guil have been in some kind of unconscious state, or suspended animation, until the messenger from Claudius arrived and resurrected them" (25). Equally important is the identification of the man who awoke them as a "foreigner." The man who woke Ros and Guil up—who brought them into existence—was a foreigner, a sojourner from another land. In one interpretation, the foreigner comes from the land Ros and Guil find themselves in to awaken them and bring them into this new, foreign world where logic seems to be powerless. By extension, the messenger could then be conflated with Stoppard himself—he wakes Ros and Guil as shades, nameless until he "[calls their] names," and then pulls them into the world from which he has come. Additionally, Stoppard would be a "foreigner" to Ros and Guil; they are (presumably) Danish, while Stoppard himself is English by way of Czechoslovakia and India. Hence, Stoppard pulls Ros and Guil from stasis into the world of *Rosguil*; he is the messenger who summons them to life.

Their being called into existence establishes Ros and Guil's essential characteristics—their passivity, and their lack of understanding of the world around them. Ros's statements as he describes the awakening by the foreign messenger are especially

crucial in understanding the two main characters; he states, “It was urgent—a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons, his very words: official business and no questions asked” (19). This brief sentence functions as a microcosm of Ros and Guil in *Rosguil* very well—they are summoned, told to go somewhere, by someone unknown to them but who has a mantle of authority, and they are told to go wherever they are sent without trying to ascertain why. They can ask questions but they cannot make decisions; they may question all they want but must obey when ordered. Ros and Guil’s strange passivity is ingrained within them from the moment of their birth. Almost the first words they hear are direct orders.

Ros and Guil were brought into Stoppard’s world to carry out commands; first from the messenger, then from Claudius, and finally from a letter. On a more metatheatrical level, they are only meant to take orders from the playwright, and they seem more than vaguely aware that they are not expected to act on their own. They try to sense their place within the play and within the strange world they find themselves in, but it is eternally beyond their grasp—they cannot hope to see things as someone who gives orders does. They accept death at the end of the play not because they want to die, but because passivity is ingrained in them from the moment of their conception. They literally cannot conceive of acting. In that sense, the title *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* reveals one of its true meanings; Ros and Guil are dead even as they start to exist, because their passivity is already embedded into their essential beings. That passivity will lead directly to their demise. From the moment of their creation inaction is embedded into Ros and Guil’s beings, and that tendency towards inaction and passivity stays with them for the rest of the play. When they die, their physical demise simply

mirrors their mental state. They have not impacted the world in the slightest, and they do not even leave a body behind for which someone would be responsible.

IV. The Introduction of the Tragedians

The speech that introduces the Tragedians in *Rosguil* is exceptionally rich with metatheatricality:

Guil: 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...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." (21)

Here Guil describes, in essence, his own situation. He too is passing the time in a place with no "name, character, population or significance," and he too is startled by a seemingly mystical event, though in his case the mystical event is not a single, shocking occurrence but rather the repeated occurrence of something mundane, with coins falling repeatedly heads. He then brings in the unknown witness, who assents to the first man's view of events—in Guil's tale, both men think they see a unicorn, while in Guil's life, both he and Ros see the coin falling heads again and again. For Guil, in order for an event to be true, it has to be witnessed by at least two people. But more insidiously, events have the most power when they are seen by a minimum of witnesses; if enough people see the event, "it is as thin as reality, the name we give the common experience." Thus to Guil,

reality is thin, a pale imitation of the true power of events; indeed, in a larger way it seems that reality distorts events, that a common experience renders events not more powerful but less. Guil says this when he and Ros are the only two characters on stage, but, metatheatrically speaking, the audience are witnesses as well. The audience, along with Ros and Guil, witness the unicorn/coin coming up heads, and thus are part of the “thinning” of the event. The audience, and Ros and Guil, see something that is weird, unexplainable; Guil tries to understand it via traditional methods (probability, syllogism), but cannot, even though it did indisputably happen. He and Ros saw it, and the audience saw it, and, even more importantly, the audience believed it happened; they accepted that the coin would land heads more than eighty times in a row. The number of witnesses in the theatre who accepted the coin as actually being tossed and actually landing heads have contrived to make the events real. Guil’s line of reasoning is radical; he imagines that acts, events, etc. have no intrinsic realness; instead, they are made real or not real by how many people witness them. By extension, then, theatre performances are real, are portraying real events; after all, even the most poorly attended theatre performance is seen by at least one person besides the actor.

The final sentence of Guil’s speech somewhat flips this notion around; the “crowd” states, “Look, look!...A horse with an arrow in its forehead! It must have been mistaken for a deer!” (21) Guil’s story about the man, then, describes one piece of objective reality; a horse with an arrow through its forehead does trot across the path. However, the man in Guil’s story and the man’s companion mistake the wounded horse for a unicorn; this is one level of distortion, one step from the actual reality. However, the crowd also sees the horse, and recognizes it as such, but they assume whoever else saw

the horse must have mistaken it for a deer. The crowd's reaction is a second level of unreality; they perceive the horse as it truly is, but are mistaken about how the first two observers perceived it. Guil's perception of reality can be encapsulated through this story; some people see things falsely and mistake them for other things, like the man and his companion, while others see things truly and cannot understand what others will think of those things, like the crowd. Again, Guil's story is applied most truly when applied to the theatre. Some people—on stage or in the audience—will simply not understand events that occur, either because they lack the information necessary to make a deduction or they lack the intelligence to use the information available. Other people will understand what actually happens, but these people will be unable to perceive what other people think of the event. It is a bleak view of existence, but it is enlivened by humor; the mistakes of the traveler and the crowd are both humorous and bittersweet. It also provides a framework for understanding the rest of the play. Ros and Guil fit fairly obviously into the shoes of the man and his companion who see the supposed unicorn; like the man and his companion, Ros and Guil witness things that seem impossible, that simply cannot be made sense of by them. Such a situation—where the seemingly impossible in fact has a logical explanation—is a favorite of Stoppard's.

In one interview, Stoppard tells Mel Gussow a story about a friend who owns peacocks:

I went to see a man who had peacocks. They tend to run away. He was shaving one morning and he looked out the window and saw a peacock leap over the hedge into the road. Expensive birds, peacocks, so he threw down his razor and ran out and caught his peacock and brought it back home...I didn't write about the man or the peacock but about the

two people who just go by, and boom, they see this man in pyjamas, with bare feet, shaving foam on his face, carrying a peacock. They see this man for five-eighths of a second—and that’s what I write about. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is about *Hamlet* as seen by two people driving past Elsinore. It’s a favorite thing of mine: the idea of an absolutely bizarre image which has a total rationale to it being seen by different people (7).

We, the audience, are put in the position of the man with the peacock; the events of *Rosguil* are comprehensible to us because we have read *Hamlet*, and thus understand what motivates Hamlet to fake insanity or why he condemns Ros and Guil to death. Ros and Guil are put into the position of the people in the car who drive by the man carrying the peacock; the events they witness in *Hamlet* have rational explanations, but they do not have the necessary information to understand the brief snippets of action from Shakespeare’s play. Thus the Ros and Guil-analogues, when they see the “unicorn,” turn to the mystical for an explanation; they do not have the necessary information to recognize the horse as having an arrow in its forehead, so they conclude it is a unicorn. The crowd/audience analogue assumes the wounded horse was mistaken for something more common—a deer, which is a much more ordinary sight than a horse with an arrow through its forehead. As Jim Hunter puts it in one of the *Faber Critical Guides: Tom Stoppard*, “the extraordinary...is mistaken for the humdrum” by the crowd (47). Ros and Guil and their ilk expect the spectacular. We assume the quotidian.

It is no coincidence that immediately after this speech the Tragedians enter. Any time actors playing actors appear in a play it is an obvious example of metatheatricality, but these actors, and especially the chief Player, are more metatheatrical than most. The Player’s first declaration is rapturous; he proclaims, “An audience!” as if Ros and Guil

were the two most important people in the world to him (21). In a sense, his proclamation is entirely correct; the Player's function as an actor is to act, and he would be acting fruitlessly without the presence of an audience. Other people watching allow him to fulfill his role in life. Additionally, there is a metatheatrical joke at work here; the proclamation "an audience" is directed not just at Ros and Guil but also at the audience of *Rosguil*. It almost seems as if the Player is genuinely astonished that an audience has actually chosen to watch *Rosguil*. After a bit more of dialogue with Ros, the Player informs Ros that he and Guil had caught the Tragedians just in time, as "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" (22). The analogy here to Ros and Guil's situation is obvious. The Player implies that the Tragedians, without an audience, would forget everything they know; however, Ros and Guil already have forgotten everything they know. The last thing they can remember is being sent for, and they do not even know their own names, as can be seen in the next bit of dialogue. Ros states, "'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.'" (22) Not only have Ros and Guil forgotten their very identities, they appear unabashed by their inability to remember; Ros delivers his identity switch without any sort of embarrassment. Ros and Guil are "back where [they] started—improvising." The implications of "improvising" are twofold. First, it suggests that Ros and Guil are unaware of what roles they have to play, and must simply make it up as they go along. Ros and Guil's experience, in that sense, is much like ours; they do what simply feels correct at the time, without having any idea of whether their action is correct or not.

Another reading is less facile. The use of “improvising” implies that Ros and Guil are working without a script. In one sense, this is a sly joke at the behavior of Ros and Guil; they are certainly not behaving as the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from *Hamlet* do, and thus from the perspective of Shakespeare’s play are most definitely acting in an unscripted manner. More significantly, it implies that their actions outside of Shakespeare are free; they may end up dead, but what they do prior to their demise is entirely unwritten.

Ros’s intriguing conversation with the Player continues with a discussion of Ros and Guil’s roles within the play and within life:

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

Ros: And who are we?

Player: --as fellow artists.

Ros: 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.*) Don’t clap too loudly—it’s a very old world (23).

The Player states that he recognizes Ros and Guil “as fellow artists.” Again, the Player’s statement works on more than one level. It could be that the Player recognizes Ros and Guil as being fellow characters within the play, and thus as fellow actors; indeed, his statement could be addressed not to Ros and Guil themselves but rather to the actors playing them. However, in a larger sense the Player’s statement is universalizing; Ros and Guil are “artists”—actors—because we are all actors in life, and thus the Player’s statement is a recognition of Ros and Guil as fellow human beings. The Player

could be stating that we are all artists, all actors. Additionally, the Player's statement correctly describes the inherent passivity of Ros and Guil. Actors do not decide—they simply take orders, inactively following a script. So his recognition of Ros and Guil as “fellow artists” also shows his recognition of their passive, inert natures. His feelings on this are also echoed in his next statement—“For some of us it is performance, for others, patronage.” Ros insists that he and Guil are gentlemen, and the Player does not disagree—indeed, he addressed Ros and Guil as “gentlemen” previously (22, 23).

Instead, he merely points out that, whatever we choose to consider ourselves, we are all actors playing a role. The very act of perceiving oneself to be something—gentleman, poet, warrior, whatever—is in itself partially acting; Ros and Guil choose a role and attempt to act it just as everyone else does. The Tragedians act the roles of “actors,” while Ros and Guil act the roles of “gentlemen,” but both groups are acting nonetheless. Next the Player references coins—an obvious nod to the activity Ros and Guil were participating in prior to the arrival of the Tragedians. He describes performance and patronage as “two sides of the same coin, or...the same side of two coins” (23). Again, the Player's statement emphasizes the similarities between Ros and Guil and the Tragedians. On a metatheatrical level, both Ros and Guil and the Tragedians are characters within the play, and thus on that fundamental level are very similar indeed. Moreover, the Player references the audience—“so many of us”—and implies that both the audience and the characters on stage are “the same side of two coins” (23). One coin is the on-stage coin, representing Ros and Guil, the Player, the Tragedians, and all the roles they act within the play. The other coin represents the audience, and represents all the roles that we act within our daily lives. The Player's statement connects the audience

with the actors; yes, the actors are on stage and we are not, but that does not mean that our roles in life are very different.

The next moment with the Player that both acknowledges *Rosguil*'s scripted nature and questions ideas of causality and predestination comes with a discussion of Ros and Guil potentially being "caught up in the action." The first mention of this possibility comes very soon after the Player's discussion of "the same side of different coins," when he says, "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" (23). Here the Player again implies that Ros and Guil are both spectators and actors within the play, and that they will be (and already have been) caught up in the action. Even here, the "action" Ros and Guil would be "caught up in" is scripted; again, the action Ros and Guil could find themselves in only serves to highlight their passivity. If they just follow a script, then they do not truly act. The Player adds to this sentiment by saying the times are "indifferent," implying that even in "times" without any distinguishable character or force Ros and Guil are still likely to "get caught up in the action." After the Player's statement comes a bout of haggling, and one abortive departure by the Tragedians; Guil then attempts to ascertain how the Tragedians found Ros and him:

Guil: It was chance, then?

Player: Chance?

Guil: You found us.

Player: Oh yes.

Guil: You were looking?

Player: Oh no.

Guil: Chance, then.

Player: Or fate.

Guil: Yours or ours?

Player: It could hardly be one without the other.

Guil: Fate, then.

Player: Oh yes. We have no control. (25)

Here the Player expounds upon a central issue within *Rosguil*: the difference (and similarity) between chance and fate. The Tragedians found Ros and Guil without looking for them, which Guil attributes to “chance.” However, the Player points out that it just as easily could have been fate; indeed, it may very well have been both the fate of the Tragedians and of Ros and Guil to encounter each other. In one sense, it is impossible for the encounter not to have been fate; if one takes fate to mean, basically, “the things that are supposed to happen,” then it must have been fate, as otherwise the encounter would not have happened. Metatheatrically, of course it was fate; Ros and Guil are written to meet the Tragedians on the road, and they have no choice. The encounter will come whether they desire it to or not. The Player echoes this as well—saying “we have no control”—which is an idea he will expound on later in the play. Additionally, the Player’s statement that “we have no control” recognizes the inherent predestination and thus the passivity of his, Ros, and Guil’s existence; because the play is scripted, they do not truly act, and have no control. Here Stoppard also makes a clear connection between metatheatricity and inaction; here the Player simultaneously acknowledges his status as an actor and explains that he is essentially an inactive figure, only following a script. Ros and Guil and the Tragedians are characters within a piece of art, and must follow the script; they will meet when the author wills them to, whether they will or no.

Guil asks the Player again “about getting caught up in the action,” and the Player responds by essentially offering Guil the chance to participate in a scripted sexual

encounter with Alfred, but Guil responds by “[*smashing him*] across the face (26),” and saying:

Guil (*shaking with rage and fright*): It could have been—it didn’t have to be *obscene*....It could have been—a bird out of season, dropping bright-feathered on my shoulder....It could have been a tongueless dwarf standing by the road to point the way....I was *prepared*. But it’s this, is it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this—a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes....

Player (*acknowledging the description with a sweep of his hat, bowing sadly*): You should have caught us in better times. We were purists then. (27)

Guil describes what the Player was offering as obscene (interestingly, “obscene” comes from Latin, where it literally means offstage), and it is. But it is important to note what he expected instead—a bird “out of season,” that does not belong, landing on his shoulder, or a dwarf without a tongue standing by the road to tell him where to go. Guil wants the mystical, the unexpected and “portentous;” instead, he gets humdrum prostitution—something that takes place every day but is still obscene. He expects something trans-human and instead encounters the most human of vices—lust. The Player states that “in better times...[they] were purists.” But times are not clearly bad—the Player initially calls the times “indifferent” when Ros asks him how they are, and only responds with “wicked” as a descriptor when “bad” is already proffered by Ros (23). Clearly, the Tragedians never were really purists; they attempt to represent humanity on stage, and “a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes” is much more human than an exotic bird landing on someone’s shoulder or a dwarf standing by the road portentously.

Guil, when encountering the Tragedians, expects something classically tragic; portents, enigmas, and the like, and then expects to be told how to feel by the tragedy. Instead he gets something just as tragic, but much easier to understand—a young boy being sold for sex. But the joke is on Guil here, and by extension on the audience. Guil, when he envisions a tragedy, wants enigmatic signs and dignified, portentous characters. But the very idea of tragedy is that eventually the character's motivations are knowable; eventually, with enough insight, one can understand or at least begin to understand what motivates a Hamlet or a Macbeth. In contrast, one never discovers what motivates the Player to prostitute Alfred or Alfred to consent; all we discover is that Alfred does not like being an actor (32). Ultimately, the Player is much more enigmatic than Guil seems prepared to admit. When presented with a true enigma, something truly unexplainable, Guil can only respond with violence. Guil knew how to respond to the classical tragedies; he knew how to respond to mystical portents because they told him how to feel. But he cannot deal with enigmas; he must be told what to do, and how to feel, which is a theme that will crop up again in the third act.

Ros, of course, is immediately intrigued by the Player's proposal. However, he still seems a little confused by the Tragedians, and the Player attempts to clear things up for him by saying:

Player: We keep to our usual stuff, more or less, only inside out. We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else.
(28)

The Player's perception of his and Tragedians' actions can be interpreted on a number of levels. On one level, it is a sexual allusion—"the usual stuff...only inside out"

refers to Alfred playing the role of a woman even though he is a male, and the idea of doing onstage what should be off refers to the Tragedians' full willingness to perform sexual acts onstage, which of course are normally taboo. In another sense, he references the relationship between *Hamlet* and *Rosguil*; all the action onstage in *Hamlet* takes place offstage *Rosguil*, and vice versa. Thus every exit by a character in *Rosguil* is in some way an entrance into *Hamlet*.

Both Felicia Londré and Richard Andretta spot these two subtexts; in her study, *Tom Stoppard*, Londré states, "The Player's offer to 'do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off' not only carries sexual innuendo, but is a statement of Stoppard's technique in his play's relation to *Hamlet*" (Londré 23, Andretta 27). In the metatheatrical sense, however, the Player is really giving voice to the way in which an omniscient entity would perceive things. As the audience, when we watch Stoppard's play, we can in some sense perceive the ending of the play before we witness it; we know not just the eventual fates of Ros and Guil but also the respective demises of all the main characters from *Hamlet* who make peripheral appearances within *Rosguil*. At the end of the first act, when Hamlet exclaims to Ros and Guil, "Good lads how do you both?" we know what comes next—we know where Hamlet, Ros, and Guil are going, we know what will take place there, and we know what the result will be. (53) The fates of Ros and Guil are both preordained and known to us. When Hamlet, Polonius, Claudius, and the other characters exit the stage in *Rosguil*, they enter into *Hamlet*, and we as an audience know what they are doing while they are within that world—we even know, if we have studied *Hamlet* enough, exactly what they will say. The same viewpoint can be applied to our own lives. A higher entity—one that knows the script of our lives just as we know the

scripts of *Rosguil* and *Hamlet*—would perceive our exits from certain places not as exits entirely but also entrances somewhere else.

The Player's nonchalance when it comes to acting stands in marked contrast to his inability to cope with the seemingly impossible events that occur within *Rosguil*. After a bit more conversation, Guil challenges the Player to flip coins with him, knowing that it will turn up heads every time. The Player becomes more and more concerned by the coin's behavior, until finally he shouts out "No!" (30). The Tragedians have no money, so they cannot give the coins they owe to Guil, and instead they offer a performance of a tragedy. The Player puts everyone in position, but just stands there, confusing Guil:

Guil: Well....aren't you going to change into your costume?

Player: I never change out of it, sir.

Guil: Always in character.

Player: That's it.

Pause.

Guil: Aren't you going to—come on?

Player: I *am* on.

Guil: But if you *are* on, you can't *come* on. *Can* you?

Player: I *start* on.

Guil: But it hasn't *started*. Go on. We'll look out for you.

Player: I'll give you a wave.

He does not move.(33-34)

Again, the Player's actions serve to emphasize the connection between real life (for both the characters in the play and the audience) and acting. The Player is always on, and always in character, because he is always acting, always playing a role. He does not need to change himself to play in a tragedy for two reasons. One, *Rosguil* takes place

within the world of *Hamlet*, which is a tragedy; thus, the Player does not need to come on stage or to change himself at all in order to be within a tragedy. Secondly, as becomes clear later, the Player considers all of life to be a tragedy, and thus does not need to act any differently than he would normally in order to act a tragedy. The joke, again, is on Guil; he complains that the Player must come on, but fails to realize that at the beginning of *Rosguil*, he and Ros start onstage as well. Guil sounds like a fussy theatre critic, in addition to being completely unaware of his own role within *Rosguil*. It is interesting to contrast the Player's total inability to cope with Guil's coin repeatedly landing heads with Guil's inability to cope with the Player not following typical theatrical tropes. The Player cannot deal with the violation of probability, as it seems to him a violation of the laws of nature; to him, it is a fundamental assumption that a flipped coin will land about evenly between heads or tails. Guil, on the other hand, reacts to the coin-flipping with aplomb; indeed, he even uses it to his advantage in fooling the Player into betting with him. The Player's insistence that he "[starts] on," however, confuses Guil; he cannot abide the Player breaking the laws of theatre (characters must, Guil thinks, come on). The Player, in contrast to Guil, takes the violation of traditional theatrical laws in stride. Guil seems to have his laws confused; he abides rather easily the flaunting of a law that should not naturally be broken (probability) while he cannot stand the breaking of theatrical laws that are entirely artificial. The connection between those laws is emphasized even more by the next action within the play; as the Tragedians disappear, the coin turns up tails instead of heads (34).

V. Invasions From *Hamlet*

The first invasion of *Hamlet* into the action of *Rosguil* occurs as a coin finally turns up tails. As the Players take their leave of Ros and Guil, Ros uncovers the coin that he and Ros had been flipping, and finally, after over ninety straight calls of “heads,” Ros reveals that “It was tails” (34). He tosses the coin to Guil, and “*Simultaneously—a lighting change sufficient to alter the exterior mood into interior...And Ophelia runs on in some alarm, holding up her skirts—followed by Hamlet*” (34). The connection here is immediate; Ros and Guil return to reality, time begins again, and both *Hamlet* the play and Hamlet the person arrive onstage. The act of being “sent for” drew Ros and Guil into the strange world where probability had no hold, but now that they have arrived, the cycle has been broken and coins can land tails again. Stoppard’s assertion here seems muddled; the audience does not know why exactly the action from *Hamlet* either prompts the coin landing tails or vice versa. Nevertheless, the connection is indisputable—when the first characters from *Hamlet* appear, the overturning of probability ceases. Richard Corballis recognizes this simultaneity of tails and entry into Elsinore as well; he states “the run of ‘heads’ ceases, and the law of probability reasserts itself, simultaneously with the commencement of the *Hamlet* action” (41). It may seem odd to refer to Hamlet and Ophelia as “characters from *Hamlet*” while not extending the same treatment to Ros, Guil, and the Player; however, actions and words within the play necessitate the distinction. Within *Rosguil*, Hamlet, Ophelia, Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius only speak the words that Shakespeare wrote for them and only perform the actions Shakespeare prescribed; in that sense, they are “characters from *Hamlet*” in a way that Ros, Guil, and the Player, whose words were almost entirely undreamt of by

Shakespeare, are not. The characters from *Hamlet* embody action; Ophelia “*runs*” onto stage and Hamlet “*follows*,” Hamlet “*takes her by the wrist and holds her hard...raises a sigh...lets her go, and with his head over his shoulder turned, he goes out backwards without taking his eyes off her*,” and the Ophelia “*runs off in the opposite direction*” (34-35). Ros and Guil cannot exit the stage, as will become clearer and clearer as the play progresses, and spend most of the time talking about doing things instead of actually acting. The first invasion—the first appearance of characters from *Hamlet*—contains no speech beyond a sigh and features characters entering and exiting the stage within a matter of seconds. As if to emphasize the contrast between Hamlet and Ophelia and Ros and Guil, Stoppard’s stage directions also relate that, during the onstage interaction between Hamlet and Ophelia, “*Ros and Guil have frozen*,” and Ros and Guil do not unfreeze until Hamlet and Ophelia have left the stage (35). The two groups of characters are clearly contrasted—Hamlet and Ophelia move, Ros and Guil do not. The interaction between Hamlet and Ophelia does not take place onstage in *Hamlet*—instead, Ophelia relates it to Claudius—but the actions of the characters still represent an invasion from *Hamlet* into *Rosguil*.

Ros and Guil try to move—presumably before any more characters from *Hamlet* accost them—but they are too late, as Claudius and Gertrude enter for the second invasion, which is the first depiction of something onstage in *Rosguil* that also takes place onstage in *Hamlet*. Again, Claudius and Gertrude’s entrance embodies motion; they must come onstage from the wings and then walk across stage to meet Ros and Guil, who presumably stand stock-still. Stoppard immediately establishes exactly how important Ros and Guil are to Claudius via his greeting; Claudius states, “Welcome, dear

Rosencrantz...(*he raises a hand at Guil while Ros bows—Guil bows late hurriedly*)...and Guildenstern” (35). Stoppard shows that Ros and Guil represent nothing more than pawns to Claudius; like pawns, they are completely interchangeable and do not have distinct identities. Anthony Jenkins credits Stoppard with recognizing Ros and Guil’s interchangeability within Shakespeare; he states, “The confusion between Ros and Guil...makes sense in terms of Shakespeare’s text, since they are non-entities to the King and Queen” (*Critical Essays* 54). Stoppard emphasizes Ros and Guil’s interchangeability by having them swap roles; though Ros initially does his obeisance when he hears his name, Guil bows quickly once they realize that Claudius has confused one of them for the other. Yes, Ros and Guil are giving Claudius the deference due to a king by not correcting him, but they certainly could have amended his confusion without too much rancor. However, Ros and Guil accept their interchangeability by assuming each other’s identities; indeed, they already have difficulty knowing exactly which of them is which, as evidenced by both previous conversation and future discussions (22, 44). Richard Corballis argues that

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern...suddenly get their names right at the very moment Hamlet crosses the stage. But as soon as he disappears the old confusion returns. Coherence is evidently dependent on the presence of some member of the *Hamlet* cast. (41)

Claudius’s words, however, emphasize that coherence is not necessarily synonymous with characters from *Hamlet*; Claudius actually increases the confusion over Ros and Guil’s names and makes the play less coherent. Later, Hamlet himself confuses Ros and Guil; indeed, I would argue that the presence of characters from *Hamlet* tends to make the action less coherent from both the audience’s and Ros and Guil’s respective

points of view. Claudius's next words also emphasize Ros and Guil's role; he tells them, "Moreover that we did much long to see you,/The need we have to use you did provoke/Our hasty sending" (35). Clearly, Claudius's primary reason for sending for Ros and Guil is that he needs them to perform a devious task; his claims that "we did much long to see you" seem designed only to render Ros and Guil more agreeable.

Claudius utters his next lines, "Something have you heard/Of Hamlet's transformation, so call it,/Sith nor th'exterior nor the inward man/Resembles that it was," and Stoppard uses them to further the metatheatricity of *Rosguil* (36). These lines, here, are turned into an extremely clever joke on Stoppard's part. On one level, these lines simply introduce Ros and Guil to the situation at Elsinore; Hamlet has seemingly gone mad, and Claudius wants Ros and Guil to discover what ails the Prince. However, one can also read the lines as dealing not with the transformation of Hamlet the character but the transformation of *Hamlet* the play. Stoppard uses Shakespeare's own words to doubly comment on his transformation of *Hamlet* into *Rosguil*; Claudius speaks not just to Ros and Guil but to the audience as well. Undoubtedly, the audience would have "heard" something about how *Rosguil* plays with and indeed transforms *Hamlet*; however, neither "th'exterior nor the inward [play]" resembles its source material. Claudius then explains to Ros and Guil exactly what he asks of them; namely, he urges them to find out what ails Hamlet so that it may be remedied. Gertrude is next to speak, and delivers her first line, "Good...gentlemen" with "*fractional suspense*" in between the "good" and the "gentlemen," to which Ros and Guil "*both bow*" (36). Gertrude too does not know who is Ros and who is Guil, so she chooses to refer to them plurally. Instead, she refers to them

as “gentlemen”, lumping them together and forcing them to forfeit their individual identities.

After more remonstrances from Gertrude regarding the necessity and importance of Ros and Guil aiding Hamlet; Ros and Guil respond with their first statements written entirely by Shakespeare:

Ros: Both your majesties
 Might, by the sovereign power you have of us,
 Put your dread pleasures more into command
 Than to entreaty.
 Guil: But we both obey,
 And here give up ourselves in the full bent
 To lay our service freely at your feet,
 To be commanded. (36)

Stoppard’s choice of these lines from Shakespeare crystallizes the perspective Ros and Guil have on their existences. First Ros speaks, and he point out that he and Guil do not really have any agency in this circumstance; if they refused Claudius, Claudius would simply compel them to obey his orders. But Guil takes Ros’s recognition of reality a step further; he specifically states that he and Ros “give up ourselves in the full bent/To lay our service freely at your feet/To be commanded.” In other words, they forfeit all agency; they will do exactly as Claudius and Gertrude command. Shakespeare uses Guil’s statement to demonstrate how craven his Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are; they agree immediately to betray a friend by working for his worst enemy. Yet for Stoppard this scene means more; it deliberately recalls Ros and Guil’s creation. Ros and Guil were created by being sent for. A messenger pounded on a window and told them to come; prior to that, they did not exist. Their creation establishes their essential inactivity—they

are told what to do, instead of choosing—and that inactivity is mirrored in their responses to Claudius. They are much happier taking orders instead of acting on their own.

Additionally, Victor Cahn points out in his *Beyond Absurdity: The Plays of Tom Stoppard* “the rhythmic similarity of their speeches emphasizes their lack of individuality” (46). In *Hamlet*, and in this scene in *Rosguil*, even Ros and Guil’s speech patterns are identical; their true interchangeability is revealed in the way they talk.

Having secured Ros and Guil’s obedience, Claudius thanks them, though he does so by referring to Ros and Guil by their correct names, much to their confusion (36). Again, Claudius’s mistaking of Ros and Guil for one another shows his views of them as interchangeable. Clearly, Claudius did not simply think Rosencrantz was actually Guildenstern and vice versa; if he did, he would not have referred to them by their correct names the second time around. He simply does not care. Gertrude corrects Claudius, but she does so by thanking Ros and Guil by the same wrong names Claudius used initially, showing that she too does not exactly know who is Rosencrantz and who is Guildenstern. To the people in power, Ros and Guil’s true identities do not matter; they are interchangeable individuals to be used only for specific purposes, without a thought for their feelings. After Gertrude once again begs Ros and Guil to “visit” Hamlet, “*Two attendants exit backwards, indicating that Ros and Guil should follow*” (37). Clearly, Ros and Guil are meant to leave the stage and go find Hamlet; however, they are not permitted to depart, and their exit is blocked by Polonius. Including Polonius’s speech functions doubly for Stoppard. On one level, it establishes a curious kind of kinship between Ros and Guil and Polonius; both are lesser men who flatter the King, and both are assigned to ascertain the cause of Hamlet’s insanity. However, on another level it

reminds the audience of Ros and Guil's insignificance. Polonius sees the king and immediately begins to flatter him, telling Claudius that "I hold my duty as I hold my soul/Both to my God and to my gracious King," and then saying that "I have found/The very cause of Hamlet's lunacy" (37). Claudius compliments Polonius, calling him "the father of good news," and Polonius is permitted to exit the stage (37). Ros and Guil must remain behind, without identity and without a prayer of completing their assignment.

The third invasion from *Hamlet* comes after Ros and Guil have just attempted (unsuccessfully) to act out a conversation between themselves and Hamlet, and it again reemphasizes Ros and Guil's passivity as compared to characters from *Hamlet*. After Ros sees Hamlet offstage, Hamlet "*enters, backwards, talking, followed by Polonius upstage*" (52). Again, both Hamlet and Polonius here are characterized by motion; Hamlet walks onstage backwards while Polonius follows. Stoppard uses some of the dialogue from this scene in Shakespeare to foreshadow Ros and Guil's eventual fate—Hamlet tells Polonius, "You cannot take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal—except my life, except my life, except my life," though of course it will be Hamlet who will take the lives of Ros and Guil (52). Additionally, for the entire time Hamlet and Polonius are onstage, they move constantly. Hamlet "*crosses to the upstage exit,*" then, as he is "*centered upstage, turns to [Ros and Guil],*" and finally he is "*coming downstage*" before he meets Ros and Guil (52, 53). Polonius enters following Hamlet, then "*[crosses] downstage,*" and then "*goes*" (52, 53). Ros and Guil are not necessarily prohibited from moving while Hamlet and Polonius are onstage; however, Stoppard makes a point of giving Hamlet and Polonius specific instructions for movement while doing no such thing for Ros and Guil. Indeed, the final stage direction of the act says "*[Ros, Guil, and*

Hamlet] all meet midstage, turn upstage to walk, Hamlet in the middle, arm over each shoulder,” before Hamlet says “Good lads how do you both” and the play cuts to a “*Blackout*” (53). Only Ros and Guil’s turning to walk is mentioned; Stoppard gives no indication that Hamlet, Ros, and Guil actually start walking prior to the blackout. In addition, Hamlet, similarly to Claudius and Gertrude, mistakes Ros and Guil for one another. While “*coming downstage with an arm raised to Ros,*” he exclaims “My excellent good friends! How dost thou Guildenstern,” though at least he has the decency to “[*correct*] himself” later. (53) Additionally, Hamlet continues the pattern of Shakespeare’s characters referring to Ros and Guil by plurals; he calls them both “friends” and “lads” (53). The only way characters from Shakespeare can address Ros and Guil correctly is if they address them in the plural. Hamlet making this mistake is far more shocking than Gertrude and Claudius’s mixing Ros and Guil up; Ros and Guil were Hamlet’s friends during youth, even though it appears now that to him they are interchangeable.

The fourth invasion from *Hamlet*, which in many ways is the most puzzling, comes precisely as the second act of *Rosguil* begins. The first act closed with the beginning of Ros and Guil’s attempt to divine the cause of Hamlet’s madness from Hamlet himself; naturally, the second act opens with the end of Ros and Guil’s conversation with Hamlet, during which he discovers they have been sent for. Effectively, the audience is to understand that Hamlet’s conversation with Ros and Guil in Act 2, Scene 2 of *Hamlet* has just occurred, and Ros and Guil have just confessed. Stoppard’s choice to omit the meat of the conversation challenges the audience; it forces them to fill in the gaps between scenes with their own knowledge, while almost seeming

more realistic than simply playing out the entirety of Ros and Guil and Hamlet's dialogue in *Hamlet* onstage. Hamlet and Ros and Guil's talk is a private conversation, and not something we as audience members would normally be privy to; the audience leaves for an intermission and comes back after an amount of time appropriate to Ros and Guil and Hamlet's conversation. What is implied here is that events on stage have a life and existence of their own—just because there is no audience present does not mean the action of *Hamlet* does not continue. Indeed, it seems more as if the audience leaves while the action continues..

In contrast to their apparent inability to move in the first act of *Rosguil*, Act Two begins with “*Hamlet, Ros and Guil talking...on the move*” (55). Ros and Guil's motion here is shocking given their passivity in the first act; however, the only reason they are moving is because Hamlet is moving as well. A situation like this—a character from Shakespeare prompting Ros and Guil to move—occurs several times throughout the second act; it does not detract from Ros and Guil's essential passivity but rather adds to it, as they only move when they are prompted to do so by Shakespeare's characters. The first decipherable lines of the act warn the audience; Hamlet states, “S'blood, there is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out” (55, 2.2.309-310). “More than natural” echoes Guil's claim about “un-sub- or supernatural forces;” again, it functions to alert the audience that the strange happenings in *Rosguil*—coins coming up heads impossible numbers of times, drums being heard on the wind when there is no wind—will continue (17). “If philosophy could find it out” reveals the goal of *Rosguil*; through philosophy (and various other measures), Ros and Guil, and by extension the audience, must discover how or why these strange happenings occur, and how (or if) they

can be understood. The line also functions as a metatheatrical device; “something in this more than natural” could also be Hamlet’s way of acknowledging that his actions are not natural but scripted. As if to underscore Hamlet’s subtext, “*A flourish from the Tragedians’ band*” is heard immediately after he utters his line, to remind the audience that Hamlet’s line refers to acts within the play that are both completely unnatural and scripted (55). Thomas Whitaker also highlights another subtext of this line; in *Tom Stoppard*, he states, “The first intelligible line of Act 2...reminds us of the theatrical playfulness in which we are engaged” (61). Hamlet here seems metatheatrically aware of the different nature of *Rosguil*; for him, *Rosguil* is indeed a performance where “there is something in this more than natural.”

The next notable occurrence within the fourth invasion comes immediately after Polonius enters; Hamlet says “(to Ros): Mark you Guildenstern (*uncertainly to Guil*) and you too, at each ear a hearer. That great baby you see there is not yet out of his swaddling clouts” (55, 2.2.324-326). Again, Hamlet refers to Ros and Guil by each other’s names; I think Hamlet’s mistake is a nod to what transpired during the intermission. When Hamlet discovers Ros and Guil are “sent for,” and thus are working for Claudius, they immediately become easily dispensable to him; he disregards their individual identities because he thinks of them as mere lackeys for a tyrant. The mistake he makes in identifying them stems from the same roots as Claudius’s similar error; he misidentifies them because he simply does not care anymore which is which. Ros and Guil have ceased to be distinctive individuals for him and become instead interchangeable nonentities, already marked for death. Interestingly, after Hamlet’s mistake Stoppard has Hamlet “*take Ros upstage with him*” and then a bit later Ros “*comes downstage to rejoin Guil*”

(55-56). Again, Ros and Guil's motion here breaks with every other time the characters from *Hamlet* are on stage; however, they only move when other people (in this case Hamlet) move them. The invasion concludes with Polonius saying to Hamlet, "The actors are come hither, my lord," and Hamlet responding, "Buzz, buzz" (56, 2.2.336). Again, Stoppard here uses Shakespearean dialogue to make a metatheatrical joke; Polonius's pronouncement that "the actors are here" functions in effect as a message to Hamlet that he should get off the stage and let the actors playing Ros and Guil continue with Stoppard's play. Hamlet's response tells the audience exactly what he thinks of Stoppard's adaptation of Shakespeare.

The fifth invasion from Hamlet is, again, somewhat puzzling; however, Stoppard uses it to highlight Ros and Guil's tendency towards inaction as well as to establish Hamlet as an author. Ros tries to fool Guil by having him guess which hand he holds a coin in, but "*Polonius breaks that up by entering upstage followed by the Tragedians and Hamlet*" (61). Again, within this scene Ros and Guil remain frozen while everyone moves around them; Polonius, Hamlet, and the Tragedians enter in motion, the Player "[crosses] downstage," followed by Hamlet (62). The main action of this invasion concerns Hamlet's preparations for *The Murder of Gonzago*, with his asking the Player "Can you play *The Murder of Gonzago*" and "You could for a need study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines which I would set down and insert in't, could you not?" (61-62, 2.2.479-481) By Hamlet's interaction with the Player in *Rosguil*, Stoppard establishes Hamlet as an author in the same way Shakespeare does, and thus necessarily commingles himself, Shakespeare, and Hamlet. Hamlet, like Stoppard, is a playwright; he rewrites *The Murder of Gonzago* by inserting the "dozen or sixteen lines" (just as *Rosguil* rewrites

Hamlet), and later he writes the replacement letter that leads to Ros and Guil's demise. Stoppard himself also has a very direct role in Ros and Guil's demise; after all, he writes the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which ends with the deaths of Ros and Guil. Within *Rosguil*, Hamlet only acts out what Shakespeare had already written for him in *Hamlet*. Stoppard, on the other hand, decides that Ros and Guil must meet the same fate as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*; he is arguably more responsible for Ros and Guil's deaths than Hamlet or Claudius. The comparison between Hamlet and Stoppard necessitates the inclusion of this particular scene, as it establishes both as playwrights who have control of people's destinies—Hamlet can affect Claudius's fate, and eventually insure Ros and Guil's demise, while Stoppard has control over the fates of Ros and Guil from the beginning.

The sixth invasion from Hamlet comes as Ros tries to assert his power; he calls out, "I forbid anyone to enter," and then, almost immediately, "*a grand procession enters, principally Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia*" (72). The characters from Hamlet completely ignore Ros's attempt to impose some of his own will upon the play; instead, they prove their ability to enter as well as exit the stage with impunity. The procession featuring Claudius, et al. continues marching around for the duration of their time onstage, and first Ros and then Guil get caught up in the procession and begin to march as well. Ros and Guil's actions may seem like active motion; however, it is important to note that neither Ros nor Guil goes into motion of their own accord. Claudius "*takes Ros's elbow as he passes and is immediately deep in conversation*" while Guil "*[returns in time to take it up];*" both characters move only because they are forced

to do so by a more powerful man (72).¹⁰ Ros and Guil lie to Claudius and Gertrude about the relative success of their mission, and do not lie very well; one of Ros's lines is "*a flat lie and he knows it and shows it,*" but the characters from *Hamlet* do not notice Ros's obvious mendacity (72). Ros and Guil have now become so superfluous to the characters from *Hamlet* that their relative success or failure does not matter; Claudius and Gertrude do not call Ros on the lie because they do not care whether Ros is lying or not. They cannot be bothered enough even to attempt to ascertain the truth of what Ros is saying; as he shouts prior to the entrance of the characters from *Hamlet*, "They're taking us for granted!" (72) After Guil and Ros relate that Hamlet wishes a play to be performed, Claudius leads the procession out peremptorily, and his failure to acknowledge his departure from Ros and Guil is rendered even more apparent by his fading words of "Sweet Gertrude, leave us too" (73, 3.1.28). He takes leave of Gertrude, but not of Ros and Guil; he would no more take leave of them than he would a chair.

After Claudius's exit, Ros begins to acknowledge their situation vis-à-vis the characters from *Hamlet*:

Ros (*peevish*): Never a moment's peace! In and out, on and off, they're coming at us from all sides.

Guil: You're never satisfied.

Ros: Catching us on the trot... Why can't we go by them?

Guil: What's the difference? (73)

¹⁰ Interestingly, Stoppard would revisit the concept of a moving procession led by a powerful man in the 1984 film *Brazil*, for which he co-wrote the script with Terry Gilliam; in that film, Sam Lowry (Jonathan Pryce) takes a job with the Information Retrieval Ministry, where his boss is the constantly in-motion Mr. Warrenn (Ian Richardson). Sam is considered to be an irrelevant non-entity by Mr. Warrenn, similarly to how Claudius views Ros and Guil; however, Sam eventually takes action against his oppressive government and joins an underground resistance.

Ros here identifies with the audience while expressing an essential feeling of powerlessness; just like the audience, Ros feels the action of his play is constantly being interrupted. Ros and Guil have their story, which is to be presented in the play *Rosguil*. However, the action of that play keeps getting interrupted by the action from *Hamlet*. Ros and Guil want to be left at peace, to live their own story in a sense, but other people keep barging in. Ros's sentiments connect him with the audience in two ways. First, the audience came to see Ros and Guil's story, not *Hamlet*; thus, the way Claudius and others keep interrupting the play could seem taxing. The repeated intrusions from *Hamlet* are just that—intrusions.

Additionally, there can be no doubt that we often feel the same way Ros does. People move into and out of our lives just as they do Ros's, and we can oftentimes feel beset by others, without any peace. Guil's response to Ros's complaint, then, comes across as almost cynical. Guil acknowledges that Ros is correct, but also points out that such interruptions will never cease—they were created by just such an interruption, with the messenger knocking on the window and disturbing their slumber, and their lives are defined not by themselves but by others. Their story is not their own, and their creation was caused by someone ordering them to do something. They were born into passivity. Ros complains that he and Guil are always the one interrupted, and not the ones doing the interrupting, but Guil simply asks him, "What's the difference?" Again, Guil's statement is fatalistic, almost depressing. Ros and Guil do not do much of the interrupting because they are not powerful, but to Guil it does not matter; he views his and Ros's story as part of a larger story, where the end is death. It does not matter whether we are interrupted or others interrupt us; all our stories are part of the same human story, which always ends in

death. In this sense Ros and Guil are dead, have always been dead, always will be dead; they, like the rest of humanity, are dead from the moment they are born. The only question is when.

As the seventh invasion begins, the characters from *Hamlet* now begin to enter and exit at a frantic pace, as Ros and Guil discuss Hamlet's imminent entrance before "*Hamlet enters upstage and pauses weighing up the pros and cons of making his quietus. Ros and Guil watch him*" (74). Here again the audience sees Ros and Guil's essential inactivity. Hamlet enters the stage—something Ros and Guil can never do—and "*weighs up the pros and cons of making his quietus.*" He is deciding whether to move or not (Also, of course, this is a reference to Hamlet's famed "to be or not to be" soliloquy). Ros and Guil simply watch; there is no suggestion that they have a decision to make. Ros, fed up with all that has transpired, decides that:

Ros: One might well...accost [Hamlet]...Yes, it definitely looks like a chance to me...Something on the lines of a direct informal approach...man to man...straight from the shoulder...Now look here, what's it all about...sort of thing...Yes, this looks like one to be grabbed with both hands, I should say...if I were asked...No point in looking at a gift horse in the whites of its eyes, etcetera. (74)

Ros attempts to take action here; to demand from someone more powerful than he some sort of explanation. However, the audience can see easily his hesitancy and confusion. Every single remark he makes is accompanied by a pause, as is demonstrated by the ellipses, and his use of cliché ("man to man" and "straight from the shoulder") shows that he really has no idea how to speak to Hamlet. Ros asserts that "this looks like one to be grabbed with both hands, I should say," but then reveals his uncertainty over

any sort of affirmative statement toward a character from *Hamlet* by adding two qualifiers, “I should say” and “if I were asked.” Then, to fully underscore his confusion, Ros mixes up the clichés “Never look a gift horse in the mouth” and “Don’t fire until you see the whites of their eyes;” this confusion hearkens back to Guil’s earlier issues with monkeys being flipped and landing on either their heads or their tails (13). Hamlet so intimidates Ros that Ros cannot even keep his clichés—the simplest type of statements to make—straight. Ros’s fear comes out in the next set of stage directions; Ros “*has moved towards Hamlet but his nerve fails. He returns,*” and then states, “We’re just overawed, that’s our problem. When it comes to the point we succumb to their personality” (74-75). Only here does either Ros or Guil attempt to move during an invasion from *Hamlet* without specific guidance by a character from *Hamlet*; naturally, the attempt to move fails and Ros succumbs to inactivity. Ros and Guil are nebbishes; constantly wishing to act while constantly finding themselves far too overawed to act successfully. Ros and Guil’s inability to act is in many ways a comic parody of Hamlet’s similar affliction; within Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet constantly castigates himself for not acting, or debates whether he should act or not. Ros and Guil, similarly do not act; unlike Hamlet, however, they are never compelled to by circumstances. Guil at least recognizes his state; he makes fun of Ros, telling him “Very impressive. Yes, I thought your direct informal approach was going to stop this thing dead in its tracks there. If I might make a suggestion—shut up and sit down. Stop being perverse” (75). Guil turns from playfully poking fun at Ros’s attempts to get a handle on their situation to something much more serious. Ros, by trying to control events in even the smallest manner, is being “perverse.” He goes outside

of his role both in life and in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. He would be better served to “shut up and sit down.”

The eighth invasion comes during the dumbshow (see pages 66-78, where I go discuss this scene further). Immediately after the Poisoner within the dumbshow wins the love of the Player Queen (analogous to Claudius winning the love of Gertrude), we hear “*the wail of a woman in torment and Ophelia appears, wailing...followed by Hamlet in a hysterical state, shouting at her, circling her, both midstage*” (78). Again, the entrances of the characters from *Hamlet* are full of motion; Ophelia “*appears*” but she must move, as she ends up “*midstage*,” while Hamlet “[*shouts*] at her” and “[*circles*] her.” Even more, Ophelia is “*wailing*,” implying that her body is compelled to move by emotion—something that Ros and Guil, of course, could never feel. Importantly, Hamlet and Ophelia interrupt the dumbshow in *Rosguil* just as Claudius halts *The Murder of Gonzago* in *Hamlet* (3.2.261-265). The interruptions come at extremely distressing times for Hamlet and Claudius; Claudius, who feels most upset about his murder, interrupts the dumbshow when that act is depicted; while Hamlet stops *The Murder of Gonzago* when the Poisoner wins the Player Queen’s love. Stoppard subscribes to an oedipal reading of *Hamlet* here; what upsets Hamlet most is not that his father is dead but that he did not kill him and that someone else has already won his mother’s love. The comparison to Claudius is also furthered by Hamlet’s actions while onstage in this portion of *Rosguil*; Stoppard chooses the portion of *Hamlet* where Hamlet behaves most odiously (insulting Ophelia, the woman who loves him) as the portion to appear onstage in *Rosguil*, making him seem villainous just like Claudius.

Additionally, Hamlet and Ophelia interrupt the dumbshow within *Rosguil* at the precise moment when the events in the dumbshow that take place offstage in *Hamlet* cease. We never see Claudius poison old King Hamlet or win Gertrude's love in *Hamlet* itself; instead, Claudius and Gertrude begin the play already married and no true proof is ever offered of the Ghost's assertion that Claudius killed him by the specific method of pouring poison into his ear. Hamlet and Ophelia's interruption of the dumbshow, then, is similar to the other *Hamlet* characters' constant interruptions of *Rosguil*. Both *Rosguil* and the dumbshow portray events that happen offstage in *Hamlet*; however, the characters from *Hamlet* can interrupt events both within the dumbshow and within *Rosguil* with impunity. Hamlet and Ophelia continue their rapid motions around the stage while they are on it; Hamlet "*leans close to the Player-Queen and Poisoner*" and then "*starts to back out*" before he "*leaves;*" while Ophelia "*[totters] upstage*" and then "*falls on her knees*" (78). Her extreme sadness puts her into a perfect position to be lifted up by Polonius, who enters with Claudius and "*goes over to Ophelia and lifts her to her feet*" (78). Claudius begins to speak while still marching across the stage about Hamlet, saying "Love? His affections do not that way tend,/ Or what he spake, thought it lacked form a little,/ Was not like madness" (78, 3.1.162-164). The effect here is one of compression; Hamlet treats Ophelia poorly and then immediately Claudius comes on and announces that Hamlet's seeming madness stems not from love. Stoppard here quickens the pace of *Hamlet*, and as the events of *Hamlet* happen faster, they seem more inevitable and unstoppable to the audience and more puzzling to Ros and Guil. The breakdown of the walls separating *Rosguil* from *Hamlet* reflects the breakdown of events in *Hamlet* itself;

for both the characters from *Hamlet* and Ros and Guil, events seem to spiral out of control simultaneously.

The ninth invasion comes as events within *Hamlet* become even less controllable. After Claudius yells from offstage, “Ho, Guildenstern... *Guil leaps furiously to his feet as Claudius and Gertrude enter. They are in some desperation*” (86, 4.1.32). Again, the entrance of the characters from *Hamlet* is rapid; Claudius and Gertrude burst onstage desperately, while the only movement from either Ros or Guil is Guil “[leaping] *furiously*” to his feet. Guil can only mimic the actions of characters from *Hamlet*; Claudius enters in a panic, so Guil behaves similarly. Again, Stoppard emphasizes Ros and Guil’s passivity in Guil’s mimicry. Claudius tells them, “Friends both, go join you with some further aid:/ Hamlet in madness hath Polonius slain...Go seek him out” (86, 4.1.33-36). Again, Claudius and Gertrude’s entrance and exit is characterized by motion; Claudius delivers his lines while “*he and Gertrude are hurrying out,*” even though Ros and Guil remain flatfooted and motionless. Stoppard uses this particular excerpt from *Hamlet* for two purposes. First, it moves the plot; Claudius’s lines here set Ros and Guil on their inevitable course towards accompanying Hamlet to England and their doom. However, the invasion also emphasizes how events in *Hamlet* have become unhinged—Claudius’s carefully-laid plan to discover the cause of Hamlet’s insanity has gone awry, as Hamlet has murdered Polonius. Within *Hamlet*, Claudius is at this time in the same position as Ros and Guil; he simply does not understand why Hamlet killed Polonius, and events seem to be happening around him rapidly and inexplicably. A king should be regal, unworried, but Claudius here seems in a panic, walking from one side of the stage to the other and “*in some desperation.*” Ros and Guil spend their lives being ordered

around by more powerful men in Elsinore. When one of those men behaves the way Claudius does, Ros and Guil know that events are moving far beyond their pitiful capacity to control.

As events continue to move rapidly within both *Hamlet* and *Rosguil*, Ros and Guil prepare to trap Hamlet, who they realize is approaching from offstage for the tenth invasion. Their actions prior to Hamlet's appearance are frenetic:

[Guil] positions Ros with his back to one wing, facing Hamlet's entrance. Guil positions himself next to Ros, a few feet away, facing the opposite side. Guil unfastens his belt. Ros does the same. They join the two belts, and hold them taut between them. Ros's trousers slowly slide down. (89)

Ros and Guil display more activity in a short period here than they do at any point in the remainder of the play. What with the moving around onstage and the fastening and unfastening of belts one could almost be tempted to mistake them for men of action. However, all their movements take place prior to the entrance of Hamlet, and when Hamlet enters, their movement terminates. "*Hamlet enters opposite, slowly, dragging Polonius's body. He enters upstage, makes a small arc, and leaves by the same side, a few feet downstage. Ros and Guil...stare at him in some bewilderment. Hamlet leaves*" (89). Really, Ros and Guil's previous action only contrasts with their complete "*bewilderment*" once Hamlet comes onstage. In the presence of characters from *Hamlet*, in the presence of more powerful men, they must remain passive. With Hamlet onstage, they cannot act. Moreover, Stoppard uses the sad plight of these two bunglers to illustrate something central to the human condition—the tendency of all our plans to go awry. Ros and Guil plan to catch Hamlet and talk to him by trapping him with their belts; however,

Hamlet avoids the simple trap and Ros and Guil fail. Ros and Guil's plan could never have succeeded, but it was a plan; it showed far more initiative from them than any other occasion in *Rosguil*. However, the sheer wretchedness of the plan suggests that any attempts by the duo to act are doomed to failure; even when they try to act, their actions are so pathetic that it would be better for them not to try at all. Ros states, after their pitiful attempt, "That was close," and Guil responds, "There's a limit to what two people can do," but their sad attempts to rationalize their effort are full of pathos for the audience. (89) Those attempts are the same ones we make, every day, in an effort to change our situation, and Ros and Guil's attempts at rationalization only make the tableau all the more discouraging.

Hamlet returns quickly for the eleventh invasion, sans Polonius's body, when Ros shouts for, "Lord Hamlet!" (90) At first it appears as if Ros actually managed to summon Hamlet—to give him an order, to act, in other words. However, when "*Hamlet enters...Ros is a little dismayed*," showing that Ros did not actually intend for him to come; Ros called Hamlet without expecting Hamlet to respond, and indeed is upset when Hamlet does so. Hamlet, as usual, acts only according to his preferences, and not to Ros and Guil's (90). When Hamlet does come on, however, he spends most of his time spouting nonsense that Ros and Guil cannot begin to understand. Hamlet calls Ros a "sponge...that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities," to which Ros can only respond, "I understand you not, my lord" (90-91, 4.2.10-19). Hamlet speaks in riddles, and neither Ros nor Guil can comprehend his meaning. When more powerful men choose to disguise their words, to Ros, Guil, or us, we can only hope to catch a mere glimmer of meaning. After he humbugs Ros and Guil a bit more, Hamlet

moves resolutely towards one wing. They move with him, sheperding. Just before they reach the exit, Hamlet, apparently seeing Claudius approach from offstage, bends low in a sweeping bow. Ros and Guil, cued by Hamlet, also bow deeply—a sweeping ceremonial bow with their cloaks swept round them. Hamlet, however, continues the movement into an about-turn and walks off in the opposite direction. Ros and Guil, with their heads low, do not notice. (91)

Hamlet chooses once again to fool Ros and Guil. He moves, of his own accord, to the wings, though Ros and Guil attempt to act as if they are “*shepherding*” Hamlet to the exit. However, Hamlet proves to everyone that Ros and Guil are not in control of him by deceiving them once more; he turns his bow into an about face and leaves the stage (again, a privilege denied Ros and Guil). Moreover, Hamlet bows first, and Ros and Guil are compelled to follow. It is clearly Hamlet who is the actor, and Ros and Guil who are the followers. Hamlet moves first, prompting Ros and Guil to follow him, and then leaves, while Ros and Guil remain behind, confined to the stage.

The twelfth and final invasion from *Hamlet* gives the coup de grâce to Ros and Guil’s feelings of power and significance. Immediately after Hamlet fools Ros and Guil and exits behind them, “*Claudius enters behind them. At first words they leap up and do a double take*” (91). Ros and Guil, again, are fooled; Hamlet leads them to expect Claudius to enter one way, but he enters the other. Ros and Guil, whose nerves must undoubtedly be frazzled by the constant entering and exiting of powerful people, understandably are exceptionally startled by Claudius’s entrance. Once again, Ros and Guil are reminded of their insignificance; they must bow not only to kings and princes but also, apparently, to empty space. As Claudius’s entrance shows, Hamlet forces them to bow to nothing. Claudius, of course, does not comment on Ros and Guil’s bowing the

wrong direction; after all, one does not inquire of a table why it is facing the wrong way. Instead, he peremptorily addresses Ros and Guil:

Claudius: How now? What hath befallen?

Ros: Where the body is bestowed, my lord, we cannot get from him.

Claudius: But where is he?

Ros (*fractional hesitation*): Without, my lord; guarded to know your pleasure.

Claudius (*moves*): Bring him before us.

This hits Ros between the eyes but only his eyes show it. Again his hesitation is fractional. And then with great deliberation he turns to Guil.

Ros: Ho! Bring in the lord. (91-92, 4.3.11-15)

Ros and Guil attempt to fulfill their task but cannot—they cannot bring Hamlet with him as they have no power over him, and thus when Claudius orders them to bring Hamlet before him Ros and Guil must lie or confess. Ros shows his guilt once Claudius makes his demand—“*his eyes show it*”—but Claudius, again, does not really care if Ros or Guil actually accomplished their task. The thought that Ros and Guil might fail seems to never have crossed Claudius’s mind; thus, when Ros reveals inadvertently that he has failed, Claudius does not react. Ros’s reaction to being caught is central as well. Instead of lying or confessing, both of which would be at least be somewhat active, he instead tries to shift the blame, telling Guil to “Bring in the lord.” Ros’s actions here perfectly crystallize his character. Faced with a choice between lying and confessing, he chooses neither. He picks the most passive response, just as he and Guil always do; instead of doing something, he tries to avoid the burden of acting. What happens next, of course, confuses Ros and Guil even further:

Again there is a fractional moment in which Ros is smug, Guil is trapped and betrayed. Guil opens his mouth and closes it.

The situation is saved: Hamlet, escorted, is marched in just as Claudius leaves. Hamlet and his escort cross the stage and go out, following Claudius. (92)

Ros and Guil are shown just how little they really know. Ros thinks he has passed off responsibility onto Guil, while Guil thinks that it is now he who must bear the responsibility of acting. Even when Ros and Guil think they have failed, they cannot be right; the characters from *Hamlet*, and especially Hamlet himself, seem to exist only to thwart their perceptions. Also, Claudius's actions here reveal again his lack of concern for Ros and Guil. Hamlet is marched in "*just as Claudius leaves;*" thus, Claudius never stays to see whether Ros and Guil actually manage to bring Hamlet in as ordered. As always, Claudius tells Ros and Guil what to do, but it makes no difference to him whether Ros and Guil actually do it.

Within the invasions from *Hamlet* one finds crystallized the central themes of *Rosguil*. Ros and Guil, throughout these invasions, do whatever they possibly can to remain passive—when told to glean what afflicts Hamlet they do nothing, when told directly to bring Hamlet to Claudius they do nothing, and when told to bring Hamlet from offstage to Claudius they do nothing. Their passivity is so complete that they cannot even bring themselves to move of their own volition when characters from *Hamlet* are present onstage. The invasions also emphasize the essential metatheatricality of *Rosguil*. Much of the dialogue onstage during these invasions is meant to be understood on two levels; it comments on both the action within *Rosguil* and on the play itself. Even more

metatheatrical, however, is the deliberate artificiality of the events within the invasions; they consist of characters from a play (an artificial construct, familiar to the entire audience) coming onstage and interrupting events that are traditionally meant to seem real. The invasions, then, are the foremost examples of metatheatricality and of passivity within *Rosguil*, and as such form much of our understanding of the life of Ros and Guil at Elsinore. Richard Corballis writes, “The *Hamlet* action seems to go its own way under its own momentum, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern stand about on the fringes, more like spectators than participants” (35). Corballis’s point here is correct; Ros and Guil’s passivity highlights their separation from the events in *Hamlet*, a separation that comes partly from passivity and partly through lack of understanding. Like us, they find themselves buffeted by events far beyond their comprehension, and what little time they have they spend trying to understand their place in an unexplained world.

VI. The Dumbshow

Significantly, the dumbshow in *Rosguil* begins with an attempted exit. The chief Player accidentally stomps on Ros's hand; in response, Ros attempts frantically to exit the stage but is stymied repeatedly by Tragedians entering from the wings (76). Ros's attempted exit is an effort for him to move beyond his status as a character within the play; in essence, the way he could show himself to be real (to show he has an offstage existence) is to transcend the bounds of the stage and actually make his way, as Ros, into the real world. He is stopped, significantly, by actors entering; the implication is that Ros's life is scripted so that he is intelligent enough to want to escape, but is prevented from doing so by a larger script over which he has no control. In the metatheatrical sense, this is exactly true; Ros's character is written to be just smart enough to understand how little he can do to influence the events happening around him.

Moreover, the play itself is scripted so that Ros never exits, and Ros's attempted exit almost seems to be an attempt to move beyond the script of the play. Ros wants to exit, but the playwright will not let him, and contrives to (impossibly) send characters on stage at just the right moment to stop Ros's exit.¹¹ Metatheatrically, Ros's attempted exit again draws attention to the contrived and impossible nature of so many events on stage; Ros tries to leave but is thwarted by an impossible group of coincidences that strain the boundaries of credulity. In life, someone describing a situation similar to Ros's inability to exit would be regarded at the very least as an embellisher of the truth, if not an outright fabricator. On stage, such an occurrence of impossible coincidences is treated as normal;

¹¹ Many have cited the obvious influence of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* on *Rosguil*; this particular section seems to be extremely influenced by Beckett's *Act Without Words*, where the onstage actor finds himself unable to exit through a variety of impossible contrivances (*Endgame* 87-91).

indeed, after Ros's failure to depart the Player "*claps his hands matter-of-factly.*" (76) Compare this to the flipping of coins that opens the play; both Ros's repeated failures in exiting and the coin's repeated failure to land tails are highly improbable events, and as such prompt both laughter and excitement from the audience. But in the same sense as the coin, Ros's repeated failure to exit is utterly unsurprising; after all, that is how the play is scripted. Ros cannot deviate from the script of the play any more than the other actors, and in an existential sense he is completely stuck; he will forever try to escape the stage and forever be unable to do so because that is not how the play is written.

After one failed attempt to start *The Murder of Gonzago*, the Players proceed with the dumbshow prior to the actual performance. The dumbshow opens with the Player-King and the Player-Queen's embracing and demonstrating their love for one another, as in *Hamlet*. During this action, Guil asks:

Guil: What is the dumbshow for?

Player: Well, it's a device, really—it makes the action that follows more or less comprehensible; you understand, we are tied down to a language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style. (77)

This curious statement by the Player can be interpreted in several ways. First, of course, the Player means that actions can be interpreted more easily than words—the dumbshow, with its clear action, is more understandable than any language, which can confuse and befuddle instead of illuminate. Additionally, the Player could be referring to his status as a character within *Hamlet*, and Hamlet's initial impenetrability to many a modern reader. Shakespeare's English was not Stoppard's English, and Stoppard could be having some fun at the expense of Elizabethan English. However, I would argue that this is unlikely; it is difficult to imagine Stoppard's clear (though lighthearted) reverence for *Hamlet* and

Shakespeare in general agreeing with a statement that Shakespeare “lacks in style.”

Another possibility is that Stoppard is punning on himself; *Rosguil* deals with many deep topics, and requires close attention to extract true meaning; Stoppard could be deprecating his own language while also simultaneously pointing out the difficulty of his play. This could be true, but I think it is too shallow an interpretation; instead, I would push for a more metatheatrical reading. The player says that the dumbshow “makes the action that follows more or less comprehensible;” that is, without the dumbshow, neither the actors nor the audience would understand *The Murder of Gonzago* perfectly. Of course, the Player does state the action is “more *or less* comprehensible” (italics mine); he implies the dumbshow could confuse just as thoroughly as dialogue could. The metatheatricality comes from an extension of this scenario into real life; if we consider ourselves to be actors in an existential drama, then our lives would certainly be rendered more comprehensible—to both ourselves and to others—if they began with a dumbshow. The events within *Rosguil*, *Hamlet*, and *The Murder of Gonzago* are preordained; they are scripted, and are decipherable to anyone who knows the script. The dumbshow is not necessary for the events of the play to be comprehensible to the audience; rather, the dumbshow is an attempt by the actors to make sense of what is. What the audience watches when the dumbshow occurs is an attempt by the actors to make sense themselves of the events within the play; they are aware they are moving on preset paths, but have no idea what those paths are.

The Poisoner enters and poisons the Player-King through his ear; the Player-Queen mourns the dead Player-King and then gives into the Poisoner’s advances by allowing him to marry her. Suddenly, however, the action onstage is interrupted by the

action of *Hamlet*, with Ophelia and Hamlet bursting on stage and Hamlet assailing Ophelia, ending with his famous line “To a nunnery, go” (78, 3.1.149). After the Player-King again attempts to begin *The Murder of Gonzago* with “Full thirty times hath Phoebus’ cart,” he is interrupted, this time by Claudius, who bursts in proclaiming that Hamlet’s affliction is not love and that Hamlet must be sent to England. These repeated interruptions, like all scenes from *Hamlet* in Stoppard’s play, are staged with constant motion. Within *Rosguil*, all the main characters from *Hamlet* have existences that are characterized by motion; they enter and exit the stage with impunity while Ros and Guil cannot leave at all. As the characters from *Hamlet* were not written by Stoppard, they can do as they please; Ros and Guil, however, are required to remain on stage. Additionally, this interruption from *Hamlet* seems to knock the dumbshow off the rails—previously, it had only depicted events from *Hamlet* that the version of *The Murder of Gonzago* within *Hamlet* itself also depicted; however, the dumbshow after the interruptions depicts the eventual fates of Ros and Guil by showing the eventual deaths by stabbing of the two Spies within *Hamlet*.

After the interruptions, Guil and the Player-King again talk:

Player: Gentlemen! (*They look at him.*) It doesn’t seem to be coming.

We are not getting it at all. (*To Guil:*) What did you think?

Guil: What was I supposed to think?

Player (*to Tragedians*): You’re not getting across! (79)

The key idea within this passage is that the Player expects the dumbshow to be didactic—when Guil tells him he is not sure what to think, the Player informs the Tragedians that they are not getting their point across. Indeed, the Player thinks of the dumbshow in the same manner that Hamlet thinks of *The Murder of Gonzago* within *Hamlet*—both expect

the intended audience (Ros and Guil and Claudius, respectively) to be exactly sure how to react to the play. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet's view of Claudius's reactions is manichean; either Claudius reacts to *The Murder of Gonzago*, in which case he is guilty, or he does not, in which case he is innocent. It is unclear what the Player wants Ros and Guil to glean from the dumbshow in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, but it is clear that the Player expects them to understand something; when they do not, his response is to criticize the actors. Again, this expectation of meaning emphasizes Ros and Guil's passivity; the dumbshow is expected to tell them what to think, or what to do, and when they do not understand clearly what is to be done or thought, then the dumbshow is not getting its message across. On an even more metatheatrical level, I think the Player's didacticism is Stoppard's punning on authorial intent and taking an irreverent look at meaning. The Player never pauses to consider that perhaps the dumbshow is written or staged poorly; instead, he assumes that if the dumbshow's meaning is not getting across then the actors must be at fault. On an additional level, the joke is that the Player assumes that the dumbshow must have meaning at all; within the context of the intent of the author of *The Murder of Gonzago*, the dumbshow might have been intended to have no meaning whatsoever, no connection to the greater message of the play. Indeed, within Elizabethan theatre dumbshows commonly usually just recapitulated the plot of the larger play in pantomime (Baldick 99-100). The Player, like a misguided theatre critic or audience member; assumes that there must be deep meaning when perhaps the author intended the dumbshow to be banal.

The Player pronounces the beginning of Act 2 within the dumbshow, prompting Guil to ask, "Wasn't that the end?" (79). This is a sly joke by Stoppard—pointing out that

in *Hamlet*, *The Murder of Gonzago* has in fact ended by this point. However, it also gives the Player the opportunity to reveal to Guil and Ros the Tragedians' idea of death and, eventually, their conception of reality:

Player: There's a design at work in all art—surely you know that?

Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion.

Guil: And what's that, in this case?

Player: It never varies—we aim at the point where everyone who is marked for death dies.

Guil: Marked?

Player: Between “just desserts” and “tragic irony” we are given quite a lot of scope for our particular talent...

Guil: Who decides?

Player: *Decides?* It is *written*... We're tragedians, you see. We follow directions—there is no *choice* involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means.¹² (80)

The Player's fatalistic commentary shows his and the Tragedians' conception of life. Within the world of theatre itself, he is preaching the truth to Ros and Guil. Tragedies do end unhappily for the bad and unluckily for the good. Events do play themselves to aesthetic, moral, and logical conclusions—if they did not, then it would not produce good drama. And in an existential sense, the player is simply detailing the facts of their own lives to Ros and Guil. They are characters within a play, not real people. They are not permitted to make decisions; their role has already been written, and they must follow instructions. Stoppard presses home Ros and Guil's essential passivity; they

¹² This is a clear reference to Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where Miss Prism tells Cecily that in her novel “The good ended happily, the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means” (43).

have no decisions to make, as the script has already determined things for them. As much as they may try to transcend their limited existences (witness Guil and Ros's repeated but unsuccessful attempts to leave the stage), they cannot disobey what has been written. In a larger sense, the Player's view also applies to the audience as a whole. What the player is arguing for is a preordained future. Some omnipotent Writer has scripted everyone's lives, and we only have the illusion of making decisions. We blunder through life, as Ros and Guil do, being shunted to and fro without ever knowing why; more powerful men than we make brief, inexplicable entries into our lives before they exit again bafflingly, and we have just enough intelligence to know that we do not know enough to understand. We do not have choice; we merely have to play our parts. The logical conclusion of the Player's view of life is rather simple; life is a tragedy in a determined universe, and thus the bad among us will end unhappily, and the rest of us will end unluckily.

Next the Player continues the narration of the action from *Hamlet*, but with one significant change from the cast list of *The Murder of Gonzago*. In the *Hamlet* version of *The Murder of Gonzago*, the character of Lucianus is the King's nephew who puts poison in his ear—in other words, the Claudius stand-in within *The Murder of Gonzago*. In the *Rosguil* version, the character of Lucianus is still “nephew to the king;” however, here he is the Hamlet stand-in, “usurped by his uncle and shattered by his mother's incestuous marriage” (81). The dumbshow begins to recapitulate the plot of *Hamlet*, while switching the Poisoner's identity; in *Hamlet*, Lucianus was the poisoner (giving action to Hamlet's unvoiced oedipal urges), whereas in *Rosguil* the Poisoner (incontrovertibly Claudius) does the poisoning, and Lucianus, as nephew to the king, takes his revenge. Next, the stand-in for Claudius (the Poisoner) gives a letter to the “Spies” who are the stand-ins for

Ros and Guil; this letter then brings about their deaths. The Spies “*kneel and accept a scroll from the King*,” but the scroll is never swapped out onstage; instead the action in the dumbshow is just “*the two spies present their letter; the English King reads it and order their deaths*.” (81-82) Even the Player’s narration leaves this ambiguous; he proclaims, “The plot has thickened—a twist of fate and cunning has put into their hands a letter that seals their deaths!” (82) Later, when discussing the fate of the Spies, he shouts, “Traitors hoist by their own petard?—or victims of the gods?—we shall never know!” (82) Metatheatrically, of course, the Player’s statement is a reference to the questions about the guilt of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (in *Hamlet*) and Ros and Guil (in *Rosguil*). In the context of the dumbshow, however, the Ros and Guil stand-ins are “victims of the gods.” The Spies are told to present the letter; they do, and it orders their deaths. They are clearly innocent. On a deeper level, the action with the letter suggests that the death of the Spies was inevitable. Fundamentally, what was or was not contained in the letter is meaningless; as soon as Claudius involved the Spies in the actions of more powerful men, their deaths were assured, regardless of who played the trick on them. The predestination here necessarily implies inaction; if the very action of taking the letter insures Ros and Guil’s death, then they are reduced to fundamentally passive individuals.

Shockingly, the two Spies, when they take off their cloaks, are revealed to be wearing the same clothes as Ros and Guil. Ros is startled, feels he recognizes one of the spies, and approaches him, saying “I know you, don’t I? I never forget a face...not that I know yours, that is. For a moment I thought—no, I don’t know you, do I? Yes, I’m afraid you’re quite wrong. You must have mistaken me for someone else” (82). Ros’s experience of recognition and confusion here serves two purposes. First, his seeming

identification of the actor as someone close to himself puts him in the same position of the audience member. Like Ros, we occasionally see ourselves reflected in characters, sometimes so closely that we feel we have known them all our lives, and occasionally so closely that we feel they are manifestations of ourselves. But like Ros, when we look closely enough, we discover that they are not copies of us—indeed, when looked at closely, they are not even recognizable. Secondly, his confusion over who is who again serves to emphasize the interchangeability of Ros, Guil, and their ilk. Just like Ros, the Spies are insignificant people who have been marked for death, and on that most fundamental level, they are completely transposable.

Guil is intelligent enough to recognize the Spies as analogous to himself as Ros, and thus becomes rattled:

Guil...: You!—What do *you* know about *death*?

Player: It's what actors do best. They have to exploit whatever talent is given to them, and their talent is dying. They can die heroically, comically, ironically, slowly, suddenly, disgustingly, charmingly, or from a great height. My own talent is more general. I extract significance from melodrama, a significance which it does not in fact contain; but occasionally, from out of this matter, there escapes a thin beam of light that, seen at the right angle, can crack the shell of mortality.

Ros: Is that all they can do—die?

Player: No, no—they kill beautifully. In fact some of them kill even better than they die. (83)

The Player's statement has a much broader implication than a simple reading would suggest. Yes, the Tragedians do appear to be exceptional at dying; later in the play, the Player himself fools Guil entirely with his miming of death. However, when the

actors are taken as stand-ins for humanity as a whole, the Player's statement becomes much deeper. Dying is, in fact, what human beings are best at. Death is the one endeavor where we are guaranteed of success. People die in various ways—"charmingly," "disgustingly," etc.—but everyone dies at one point or another, and that is the point that the Player makes. Ronald Hayman also finds this point of view within *Rosguil*; he states that in *Rosguil* "Everyone's life, like a tragedy written by God, moves relentlessly towards death and it is disconcerting to believe that it does not matter what we do with our circumscribed freedom of choice" (41). What the Player advocates—and Hayman and I have found present within *Rosguil*—is a disturbing view of human existence where the choices we make mean little in the face of our looming demise. Our two greatest talents, cynically, are killing and dying. Even our art mirrors this; the most enduring play in the Western repertoire, according to the Player, is "a slaughterhouse—eight corpses all told" (83). Even our art reflects our true talents. The Player portrays his role as extracting false significance from life, which can occasionally "crack the shell of mortality." Plays are meaningless, but, if interpreted properly, they can transcend our eventual fate. To quote James Joyce in *Travesties*, another Stoppard play, art is what turns "a minor redistribution of broken pots" into "a face that launched a thousand ships" (42). Joyce (and Stoppard) argue that art's function is to imbue human events with significance; in Homer's hands, the Trojan War became not a minor trade dispute but a heroic epic detailing humankind's vanity and bravery. Art "[cracks] the shell of mortality" by making events (and the people who participate in them) live forever—something which Ros and Guil, as passive non-participants in the dramas of Elsinore, will be denied. And, ironically, the works of art we remember most gain their immortality through the death of

characters; without the deaths of Patroclus and Hector and Hamlet and Claudius the *Iliad* and *Hamlet* would be forgotten.

Guil objects, proclaiming “Actors! The mechanics of cheap melodrama! You can’t *act* death!” but the Player counters with the story of the time he actually had one of his actors hanged on stage, finishing with “Audiences know what to expect, and that is all that they are prepared to believe in” (83, 84). The first part of the Player’s statement is indisputably true; deaths in plays almost always occur onstage, in order to make the death seem more realistic. Audiences want to see a body. The second part of the statement is not true; and the primary example is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves. In *Hamlet*, their deaths occur off stage, and the Ambassador brings the news. Guil’s final statement to the Player on death deals with this:

Guil: No, no, no...you’ve got it all wrong... you can’t act death. The *fact* of it is nothing to do with seeing it happen—it’s not gasps and blood and falling about—that isn’t what makes it death. It’s just a man failing to reappear, that’s all—now you see him, now you don’t, that’s the only thing that’s real: here one minute and gone the next and never coming back—an exit, unobtrusive and unannounced, a disappearance gathering weight as it goes on, until, finally, it is heavy with death. (84)

The simple fact is, as Guil points out, that no matter how the Tragedians die, they still awaken and live once the show is completed. Intellectually, the audience knows that the actors miming death on stage will get up and walk away once the performance is over. It is a fake death, a poor imitation, and *Hamlet*, with its final tableau of corpses, is full of this fakery. In this sense, then, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s deaths in *Hamlet* are more real, or at least more challenging, than the deaths of Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, et. al. Their deaths force the audience to confront the reality of death directly—

a disappearance, not an act. *Rosguil* ends the way it does for this very reason. At the end of the play, first Ros disappears, and then Guil, with his last words being, “Now you see me, now you— (*and disappears*),” which is a direct parallel to Guil’s speech during the dumbshow (126). Victor Cahn also recognizes the parallels between “now you see him, now you don’t” and Guil’s disappearance; he writes, “Guildenstern’s description is an ironic foreshadowing of his own death at the end of the Stoppard play” (58). After Ros and Guil’s disappearances, the “*tableau of court and corpses which is the last scene of Hamlet*” appears, and the Ambassador reports that “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead” (126, 5.2.354). The audience members are shown perfectly the contrast. The dead bodies from *Hamlet* are to appear “*in the approximate positions last held by the dead Tragedians*,” making clear that the dead at the end of *Hamlet* are just acting death, just faking. (126) Ros and Guil are gone, disappeared, and will not be coming back—a much truer approximation of our demise than any scene full of dead bodies. Ros and Guil’s disappearance again emphasizes their deaths mirrored their lives; as they did not act in life, so too they do not leave anything behind—not even a body—as evidence of their previous existence.

VII. Control

In the third act, Ros and Guil's passivity is so complete that they are unwilling (or unable) to alter their situation in the smallest detail. The final act of *Roguil* begins with the duo in total darkness, soon revealed to be a boat by a series of "*obscure but inescapably nautical instructions from all directions, far and near*" (98). Ros and Guil (apparently) are sitting in a boat; eventually, "*a lantern is lit upstage—in fact by Hamlet...the stage lightens disproportionately*" (99). Significantly, despite the fact that Ros and Guil are sitting without any light they do nothing to brighten their situation; instead, they sit and wait until a character from *Hamlet* (in this case Hamlet himself) gives them light. The boat in which Ros and Guil are enclosed is bringing them to England so that they can deliver the letter ordering Hamlet's demise to the king; however, the setting of a boat also lends Stoppard a potent metaphor for Ros and Guil's inactivity:

Guil: Yes, I'm very fond of boats myself. I like the way they're—
 contained. You don't have to worry about which way to go, or whether
 to go at all—the question doesn't arise, because you're on a *boat*, aren't
 you? Boats are safe areas in the game of tag...the players will hold
 their positions until the music starts...I think I'll spend most of my life
 on boats. (100-101)

Boats, as Guil so pithily points out, are contained; unless you are the captain of your particular boat, you have no control over where you go. During the Elizabethan era, prior to the advent of steam power, foul weather or strong currents could force you

thousands of miles off course,¹³ even if you started off with a specific goal. In that sense, then, boats are the ultimate in passivity—a thoroughly appropriate form of transportation for Guil to favor. Even his description—“boats are safe areas in the game of tag”—pictures boats as centers of inactivity; tag involves mostly running around, but if you are in a safe area, you can simply stand still. Guil also envisions boats as similar to a game of musical chairs where no one moves—“the players will hold their positions until the music starts”—while providing a bit of foreshadowing for the eventual appearance of the Tragedians on the boat when the music does in fact start.

Passivity is emphasized again with Guil’s next comment; when Guil says, “One is free on a boat. For a time. Relatively” and Ros responds with “What’s it like,” Guil can only come up with “rough” (101). Guil qualifies the freedom he has on a boat—it is only for a time, and only relative. Yet even that freedom is “rough;” even the tiny freedoms one has on a boat—the liberty to move about the boat without restraint, the freedom to look at the water if one wishes—wear on Guil. Having even the tiniest ability to make choices for himself is “rough.” As Victor Cahn states, “[Guildenstern] wants to escape having to plan and think and wonder. Then he might enjoy the freedom of not being free, relief from the burden of autonomy” (48). However, Guil makes absolutely clear his conception of the freedom he and Ros have been granted in his next speech:

Guil: Free to move, speak, extemporize, and yet. We have not been cut loose. Our truancy is defined by one fixed star, and our drift represents merely a slight change of angle to it: we may seize the moment, toss it around while the moments pass, a short dash here, an exploration there,

¹³ Navigation by sea was notoriously difficult prior to the invention of steam power; to cite one notable example that is (relatively) contemporaneous with *Hamlet*, the navigator Pedro Cabral set off from Portugal in 1500 with the intention of sailing around the Cape of Good Hope and thence to India. Instead, he discovered Brazil.

but we are brought round full circle to face again the single immutable fact—that we, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing a letter from one king to another, are taking Hamlet to England. (101)

Guil sees his and Ros's fate as determined. They may have the small measure of freedom they gain by being on a boat, but their "truancy is defined by one fixed star." They cannot, in essence, change their fates. What Guil presents here is an argument for inactivity. Guil and Ros can, as he says, "seize the moment, toss it around while the moments pass, a short dash here, an exploration there," but they cannot change who they are and what they are doing. They may deviate only slightly from their course, set out for them by men far more powerful than they. To Guil, action is pointless; he and Ros must do what they are told, and any actions they take will undoubtedly be countermanded by future orders. They may do something for a moment, but sooner or later someone will come around and order them to move on. In a larger sense, of course, Ros and Guil's fates are fixed just as ours are; their lives, like ours, can end only in death.

Of course Stoppard takes the opportunity to remind the audience that there are active characters within *Rosguil*, as Ros approaches Guil and informs him, "I say—*he's there!*" (101) Hamlet, along with Ros and Guil, is on the boat, and, after lighting the lantern, has apparently gone to sleep. After Ros and Guil agree that Hamlet can sleep because "he's got us now," Guil cries out "And we've got nothing...All I ask is our common due!" (102) Of course Guil fails to realize that he will get his "common due" just as we all do—death will come for him the same as everyone else. Guil feels a lack of direction—despite the fact that he and Ros know their ultimate orders (they must deliver the letter to the King of England), they cannot fathom what to do while they are on the boat. Their end has been determined, but their present has been left indefinite. Guil's next

line echoes his uncertainty as well—“Give us this day our daily cue” (102). Here his and Ros’s inaction takes on a religious aspect; Guil’s line echoes “give us this day our daily bread” from the Lord’s Prayer. Guil literally prays for someone to tell him what to do. Angrily, he asks Ros “What do you expect?” and then tells him “we act on scraps of information...sifting half-remembered directions that we can hardly separate from instinct” (102). Guil and Ros have not been ordered to do something; indeed, their time on the boat represents the first occasion within the play that they have not had a task on which to focus. In the beginning of Act 1, Ros and Guil had been summoned; they were ordered to report to Elsinore. In the end of Act 1 and Act 2, they were to meet Hamlet, and find out what ailed him, and then once Hamlet killed Polonius they were to bring Hamlet to Claudius. In all these occasions, they could justify anything as being progress made towards the task assigned; they were always moving towards Elsinore or always rehearsing their encounter with Hamlet, despite the fact that they were actually doing nothing. Now that they are stuck in the middle of the ocean, they are indisputably unable to do anything towards the completion of their task; after all, they cannot make the boat move any faster. Ros and Guil cannot handle this forced inaction; so they must act on “half-remembered directions that...can hardly [be separated] from instinct.” Such a state of mind sounds almost animalistic; Ros and Guil, if they were to act, would act without any thought.

Stoppard uses the ensuing dialogue to emphasize Ros and Guil’s passivity:

Guil: Everything is explained in the letter. We can count on that.

Ros: Is that it, then?

Guil: What?

Ros: We take Hamlet to the English king, we hand over the letter—
what then?

Guil: There may be something in the letter to keep us going a bit.

Ros: And if not?

Guil: Then that's it—we're finished.

Ros: At a loose end?

Guil: Yes. (105)

If the letter does not say anything about what Ros and Guil should do next, they are “finished.” They will have no more purpose—their inaction will become total—and they will cease to be. Of course the audience knows that Ros and Guil are already finished, and this knowledge forms the foundation for a metatheatrical joke on Stoppard's part. In *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not appear onstage once they leave Elsinore—the audience is only informed by narration of the details of Hamlet's journey and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's deaths. Thus, within the larger world of *Hamlet*, Ros and Guil are already finished; their role within Shakespeare's play is complete, and any further action on their parts is antithetical to Shakespeare's original text. Ros and Guil in this act are already “loose [ends],” just as they are in *Hamlet*; Stoppard implies that Ros and Guil's fates must be tied up neatly and loosely in *Rosguil* just as they are in *Hamlet*. They have completed their role in *Hamlet*, and they must be dealt with in order to avoid dramatic discontinuity.

Even the small task Ros and Guil are assigned—the small bit of action they are responsible for—is almost beyond their reach. Ros and Guil, being the bunglers they are, discover that they do not know where they put the letter meant for the King of England. Guil, in a bit of a tizzy, tells Ros “this is all getting rather undisciplined... The boat, the night, the sense of isolation and uncertainty... We must not lose control” (107). Guil's

admonition to Ros that they “must not lose control” highlights just how little control he and Guil have; the only action they have power over is whether they have the letter or not, and they abdicate control over it as well. Guil finally discovers the letter, but only by assuming that if Ros does not have it, *he* must. After Guil finds the letter, they turn again to the philosophical:

Ros: We drift down time, clutching at straws... We might as well be dead. Do you think death could possibly be a boat?

Guil: No, no, no... Death is... not. Death isn't. You take my meaning. Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being. You can't not-be on a boat.

Ros: I've frequently not been on boats.

Guil: No, no, no—what you've been is not on boats.

Ros: I wish I was dead. (*Considers the drop.*) I could jump over the side. That would put a spoke in their wheel.

Guil: Unless they're counting on it.

Ros: I shall remain on board. That'll put a spoke in their wheel... All right! We don't question, we don't doubt. We perform. But a line must be drawn somewhere, and I would like to put it on record that I have no confidence in England. (108)

From Ros here the audience gets the sense of both inevitability and confusion—we “drift down time,” against our will, while we are “clutching at straws,” with no direction. His statement “we might as well be dead” is also a metatheatrical nod in two ways; theatre characters are just that—characters—and thus are not alive, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, having disappeared from the stage by this point in *Hamlet*, could be considered theatrically dead at this point. Guil's statements about boats serve both a philosophical and a metatheatrical purpose. Philosophically, he makes a crucial distinction between being and non-being; he and Guil can “not be” certain places—

Elsinore, a boat, etc.—but they cannot “not be” at all. They are always somewhere. Metatheatrically, of course, the entire discussion slyly references Hamlet’s famed “to be or not to be” soliloquy; Guil seems to suggest that Hamlet has the proper conception of death, that suicide is choosing “not to be” (3.1.56). At a certain point, one simply is not; Guil’s feelings here also coincide with what he tells the Player about death in Act 2, where he tells him that death is simply “now you see him, now you don’t” (84). Additionally, Ros here shows some of the first signs of defiance of powerful men; he wishes to “put a spoke in their wheel.” However, he cannot figure out how to put a spoke in their wheel; if he jumps over the side of the boat, he might be acting out a part in their plan. In a reverse of the usual sequence, Ros understands why he must fight against powerful men, but does not understand how to do so. Finally resigning himself to his fate, Ros realizes it is his destiny only to “perform;” he does not have the freedom to choose his own end. He “[puts] it on record that [he] has no confidence in England,” and he is right not to have any; he and Guil will never reach it. But, for all he knows, even his lack of confidence might be part of their plan.

Ros and Guil’s inactivity is so excessive that they seemingly allow it to insure the death of a man. After Ros and Guil ascertain (accidentally) that the letter they carry orders Hamlet’s death, they argue over whether they should do anything to save Hamlet’s life. Guil here takes on the more actively anti-interventionist stance; when Ros declares that they were brought up with Hamlet, Guil only responds, “You’ve only got their word for it” (110). Ros and Guil indeed only have “their word for it;” as they had no past prior to being sent for, they cannot verify for themselves whether Hamlet was their friend since birth. It seems an odd choice for Stoppard to emphasize here Ros and Guil’s lack of a

past; however, Guil's words also highlight his and Ros's essential inactivity. They are so inactive, so torpid, that they do not (or perhaps cannot) ascertain the genuineness or lack thereof of their pasts; instead, they simply take what others tell them (from within the fictional world of *Hamlet*) to be true. Guil then explicates several arguments for non-intervention, concluding with:

Guil: Or to look at it another way—we are little men, we don't know
the ins and outs of the matter, there are wheels within wheels,
etcetera—it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs
of fate or even of kings. All in all, I think we'd be well advised to leave
well alone. Tie up the letter—there—neatly—like that.—They won't
notice the broken seal, assuming you were in character.

Ros: But what's the point?

Guil: Don't apply logic.

Ros: He's done nothing to us.

Guil: Or justice. (110-111)

Guil articulates here how small he and Ros genuinely feel. Guil does not think he and Ros should not intervene to save Hamlet's life; instead, he feels as if they cannot. He states, "it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate or even of kings"—placing the designs of kings as less likely to be interrupted than fate itself. He also refuses to apply either logic or justice to the situation; this refusal makes Guil's insistence on inaction seem not inevitable but rather illogical and immoral. William Gruber, in his essay, "'Wheels within wheels, etc.': Artistic Design in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*," states that "Given the opportunity for meaningful action, Guil (and thus, by way of tacit compliance, Ros) refuses to act" (39). Guil and Ros could define themselves, break free of their roles within *Hamlet* and (perhaps) change their fate.

But they are too paralyzed by inaction; they choose instead to let their friend die. Guil's next statement echoes this immorality; Ros comments on the awfulness of the situation, to which Guil responds, "But it could have been worse. I was beginning to think it was" (111). To Guil the worst thing is not killing an innocent man, or betraying a friend; instead, the worst of all fates is to be forced into action. Here also, as Gruber points out, is an argument for Ros and Guil's culpability; they realize what the letter says, and whose death it orders, but do nothing to prevent Hamlet's execution (38-39). Earlier, Stoppard omitted portions of *Hamlet* featuring Ros and Guil that made them seem more culpable; now, he invents a situation where Ros and Guil know about Hamlet's impending demise and do nothing to stop it. It appears Stoppard himself does not want the audience to know whether Ros and Guil are "traitors hoist by their own petard" or "victims of the gods" (82).

Prior to the appearance of the Players on the boat with Ros, Guil, and Hamlet, Stoppard takes the opportunity one more time to emphasize Ros and Guil's inaction. When discussing their situation vis-à-vis Claudius and the English King, Ros declares:

Ros: We hand over the letter, which may or may not have something in it to keep us going, and if not, we are finished and at a loose end, if they have loose ends. We could have done worse. I don't think we missed any chances...Not that we're getting much help...If we stopped breathing we'd vanish. (112)

Ros wants to be ordered, needs to be ordered to do things; if the letter does not contain instructions for him and Guil, he will be "at a loose end." However, his inaction does not alarm him; instead, he thinks of it as a positive. He states, "we could have done worse;" implying that facing a completely uncertain future and hoping that a letter

contains “something to keep [them] going” is not the worst possible outcome for him and Guil; indeed, within *Rosguil* inaction is the normal state of affairs. He also states, “I don’t think we missed any chances,” which shows a complete lack of self-awareness; he and Guil in fact just missed a chance to alter the letter or not deliver it in order to save both Hamlet’s life and (as it turns out) their own. Ros’s statement that “if we stop breathing we’d vanish” also emphasizes his innate feelings of insignificance; he and Guil do so little, he reasons, that if they stopped doing even the least bit of acting possible they would simply cease to be. Note that he says vanish—Ros imagines himself and Guil not dying, collapsing on stage and leaving a body behind, as the Tragedians do, but rather simply vanishing into thin air, another case of “now you see him, now you don’t” (84, and see also pages 76-77 of this document where I deal with this from another perspective).

The reappearance of the Tragedians presents Ros and Guil with some fellow travelers to commiserate with; however, the Tragedians do not provide Ros and Guil with any succor for their feelings of insignificance and inability to influence events. The Tragedians’ presence is announced by “*the muffled sound of a recorder,*” with Guil exclaiming excitedly, “a thing like that, it could change the course of events” (112). He then tells Ros to “request a tune...before we lose our momentum” (113). Guil and Ros have declined so much that any change to their situation—even a recorder playing—gives them “momentum;” they yearn for change but are either unable or unwilling to effect it. Ros at first thinks that the music is coming from outside the stage, but eventually realizes it comes “*from the middle barrel*” onstage; when he realizes the source of the music, he cries out “plausibility is all I presume!” (114) Again, Ros pleads for some sort of

understanding; he and Guil now seem even more awakened to the extreme implausibility of certain events onstage. The refrain is always the same with Ros and Guil; they are presented with implausible events, but the most they are willing to do is talk about the strange occurrences. Never are they actually willing to act. Immediately after Ros's plea for understanding, the Player emerges from the middle barrel, and exclaims "Aha! All in the same boat, then!" after which the Tragedians emerge from the other barrels, "*impossibly*" (114). Again Stoppard challenges the audience with metatheatricality; Ros claims he wants "plausibility" and then the Tragedians emerge "*impossibly*." Clearly, the audience is meant to feel buffeted by impossible events, just as Ros is. The Player's comment towards Ros and Guil is also metatheatrical; "all in the same boat" applies not just to the characters onstage but also to the audience. We are all in the same metaphorical boat, buffeted this way and that by bizarre currents which we are either unable or unwilling to understand truly.

The next dialogue, like so many portions of *Rosguil*, can be interpreted doubly; Guil acknowledges his status as a passenger on a boat both literally and metaphorically. Guil tells the Player:

Guil: We are not restricted. No boundaries have been defined, no inhibitions imposed. We have, for the while, secured, or blundered into, our release, for the while. Spontaneity and whim are the order of the day. Other wheels are turning but they are not our concern. We can breathe. We can relax. We can do what we like and say what we like to whomever we like, without restriction.

Ros: Within limits, of course.

Guil: Certainly within limits. (116)

The gag here—an absolute statement followed by a qualifier—is a favorite of Stoppard’s, and he uses it throughout *Rosguil*. But the gag also emphasizes exactly how Ros and Guil feel. They have total freedom of speech and freedom of action, but that freedom has limits. Ros and Guil’s limited freedom connects with their repeated discussions about boats; they have absolute freedom to do whatever they want on the boat, and only on the boat (100-101). We can do what we like on our little vessel, but that little vessel is carried to and fro on the tides and currents of life without any control or foreknowledge. The speech here is also metatheatrical, of course; Guil could very well be referring to his status as a character, where he seems free but in fact has to follow the script written by the playwright. Hamlet himself acts to underscore the metatheatricality; immediately after Ros and Guil’s acknowledgement of limits, Hamlet “*comes down to footlight and...clears his throat noisily and spits into the audience*” (116). Guil and Ros acknowledge limits; Hamlet has none. Indeed, Hamlet is so powerful that he can break the fourth wall, and he can do so sans repercussions. It almost seems as if Hamlet, and the characters from *Hamlet* overall, are outside Stoppard’s control, doing what they wish; hence the timing of Hamlet’s exhortation, which seems to come at the precise moment needed to contradict Guil’s (and by extension Stoppard’s) perception of freedom. The contrast between Ros and Guil and Hamlet is drawn even more sharply by Ros’s next lines; he relates, “a compulsion towards philosophical introspection is [Hamlet’s] chief characteristic” (116). This description, of course, could just as easily be applied to Ros and Guil themselves; the difference is that Hamlet eventually acts on his philosophy, though he only does this after he knows he is about to die.

The pirates arrive, and Hamlet disappears, and all the tumult only highlights Ros and Guil's inactivity and helplessness, as well as the unavoidability of death. Once it becomes clear that Hamlet is gone, never to return, Guil panics; he tells the Player, "but you don't understand—[the letter] contains—we've had out instructions...the whole thing's pointless without [Hamlet]...the pirates left us home and high—dry and home—drome" (120). Guil simply cannot conceive of what to do without Hamlet's presence; if they cannot deliver the letter and Hamlet, then Guil feels that he and Ros are utterly ruined. The Player makes a reasonable suggestion—simply tell the King of England about the pirates and he would surely understand—but that is not an appropriate solution for Ros and Guil; any deviation from the plan, from what is written, is unaccountably upsetting to them. Besides, Guil's statement represents a perversion of cliché similar to his confusion of monkeys and coins in the first act; he cannot properly say "high and dry." Such a breakdown of language reflects the breakdown of Guil's mental state; he is so confused without direct orders that he cannot keep his clichés straight. (See also pages 17-18 of this document, where I discuss Guil's first confusion of clichés) Finally, Guil resorts to asking the Player, "What are we supposed to do?" to which the Player responds "this" and then he "*turns away, lies down if he likes*" (120). The Player's response, simply put, is to do nothing; a response that should no doubt appeal to Ros and Guil. The Player understands his role; he is a plaything, for both more powerful men and more powerful forces, and any attempt to usurp any other role is beyond the pale. When bad, unexpected things happen, such as Hamlet's disappearance, the best course is simply to remain passive and wait for the next line. Ros accepts the Player's suggestion, pronouncing himself and Guil "saved again," but to Guil it is not enough. "*Broken,*" he

states, “We’ve travelled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope or explanation” (121). Perhaps Ros and Guil have in fact traveled too far, but if they have the point at which they had traveled too far was birth. Everyone—Ros and Guil, the Player, the audience,—moves “idly towards eternity.” We are all headed to the same goal. We may forestall death, elude it occasionally, but it comes for us just the same.

Of course *Rosguil* must end with the deaths of Ros and Guil, and their deaths are both inevitable and affecting. Ros and Guil once again act out what will happen when they get to England, and once again open the letter and read it; this time, they discover that the letter instructs the King of England to put them to death. As soon as Ros and Guil discover the switch, “*the Players emerge, impossibly, from the barrel, and form a casually menacing circle around Ros and Guil*” (122). The metatheatricality present in the Tragedians’ “impossible” emergence from the barrel serves to underscore the inevitability of Ros and Guil’s demise. Ros and Guil are not given time to plead for their lives, or anything along those lines; instead, the written word (the letter) cannot be broken, and when the letter is read their lives are forfeit. The metatheatricality present calls attention to the play itself as written word, and therefore emphasizes the connection between the switched letter and the play; both Hamlet and Stoppard himself are guilty of ensuring Ros and Guil’s demise. Guil says, quietly:

Guil: Where we went wrong was getting on a boat. We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current...

Ros: They had it in for us, didn't they? Right from the beginning.

Who'd have thought that we were so important?

Guil: But why? Was it all for this? Who are we that so much should converge in our little deaths? (*In anguish to the Player:*) Who are we?

Player: You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's enough.

Guil is correct in that he and Ros were doomed from the moment they got on a boat; what he fails to understand, however, is that getting on a boat is equivalent to embarking on the voyage of life. The “larger [current] that carries us along...inexorably” is the current of life itself, carrying us inescapably towards death. Ros and Guil are convinced that their deaths were something special, that someone must have “had it in” for them; Guil questions, “Who are we that so much should converge in our little deaths?” The Player, however, sets the record straight; he simply tells them, “You are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's enough.” No one had it in for Ros and Guil; instead, like everyone else on Earth, they were pawns caught up in events beyond their control. The Player's words could be said to anyone; when anyone questions death, the Player could simply respond, “You exist. That's enough.” In a world of infinite complexity, “so much” must converge in everyone's death; think of all the little things that must occur, and occur in an extraordinarily specific sequence, in order to prompt someone's death in a car crash, or in battle, or from cancer. There is nothing special in Ros and Guil's deaths, no grand plot to kill them and them alone; instead, when faced with their end, they try and find a significance that simply is not present. They are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. That's enough.

Guil does not find the Player's explanation sufficient. He takes the Player's dagger and menaces him with it, saying “no one gets up after *death*—there is no

applause—there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that’s—death” (123). Guil differentiates his experience of death from the Tragedians’; they die thousands of time, but he tastes of death but once. He sees something substantively different between real death and stage death, which is of course metatheatrical; the audience sees an actor lecturing another actor about how his death will be real while the other’s will not be. Guil stabs the Player in the neck, and turns to the Tragedians saying, “If we had a destiny, then so had he—and if this is ours, then that was his—and if there are no explanations for us, then let there be none for him—” (123). Guil’s attempted murder is the key moment in the play. It represents the first open, unprompted, and definitive action taken by either Ros or Guil; it is no mere attempt to pass the time, like coin-flipping, and Guil is not serving as an errand boy for a powerful man, as he did for Claudius. Guil’s stabbing is a genuine effort to take a life—along with sex, arguably the most active thing one can do—and his attempt to do so is an attempt to assert some sort of control. His words as he stabs show that he believes he is placing the Player into the same position that he and Ros are forced into; the Player now has a destiny, just as Ros and Guil do, and will not be given an explanation, just as Ros and Guil are not. Guil’s would-be act of murder represents his attempt to join the ranks of the powerful, of the men who act, and of course it is doomed to failure. The dagger was a trick dagger, with a collapsible blade; when the Player reveals this, he tells Guil, “For a moment you thought I’d—cheated” (124). Initially the audience, and Ros and Guil, think that the Player truly has cheated death, and is immortal. There is some truth in this point of view—both Stoppard and Shakespeare never give the Player a name, unlike Ros and Guil, so he stands as a universal actor, representative of every Player and not just himself. Something that universal can never

die—it is difficult to imagine a future where acting is unknown—so of course the Player cannot die, and attempts to end his life will be futile. But, as is typical with Stoppard, there is a far more mundane explanation; the dagger was simply a trick.¹⁴ Even Guil’s attempt at murder is pathetically doomed to failure. The Players mime the deaths of all the characters from *Hamlet* they represent, and the Player tells Ros and Guil, “So there’s an end to that—it’s commonplace: light goes with life, and in the winter of your years the dark comes early” (124). He is right. Death is commonplace. Ros and Guil are nothing special.

Guil, of course, still cannot abide the sheer theatricality of the Tragedians’ deaths:

Guil: No...no...not for *us*, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over...Death is not anything...death is not...It’s the absence of presence, nothing more...the endless time of never coming back...a gap you can’t see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound... (124)

Guil’s attempts to come to terms with his own inevitable demise results in repeated attempts to express the ineffable—he must describe something that, as he conceives it, is literally nothing. The reversal here from the first act is also important; there, Guil, shortly after his metaphorical birth (when he is summoned by the messenger, for further details, see pages 21-26 of this document), describes hearing the sound of the Tragedians’ drums and flute “on the wind of a windless day” (18). Now, as the Tragedians lie “dying” around him, he describes death as a “gap you can’t see, and when the wind blows through it, it makes no sound.” Life, then, is in some sense nothingness (no wind) carrying sound, while death is something (wind) making no sound; despite the fact that Guil describes

¹⁴ Again, recall the peacock story mentioned in this document on pages 29-30. Something fantastic—the Player’s seeming resurrection—has a mundane explanation once all the facts are known.

death as “not anything.” These inherent contradictions are the only way for Guil to make sense of death. Ros’s final attempts to make sense of his demise are as futile as Guil’s. He asks, “What was it all about? When did it begin?...Couldn’t we just stay put? I mean no one is going to come and drag us off...They’ll just have to wait...We’ve done nothing wrong!” (125) These attempts echo Ros’s earlier arguments for saving Hamlet’s life—he applies both logic (they can just wait) and justice (they’ve done nothing wrong), but both of those refuges for humanity are irrelevant in the face of death. Ros’s death is not dramatic; instead, he simply gives in, saying “All right, then. I don’t care. To tell you the truth, I’m relieved” (125). Notably, he “*disappears from view*,” to use the parlance of the play, when he gives in to death, he simply is not (125).

Guil has the last word, and the last word shows exactly how inevitable Ros and Guil’s deaths were. He says, plaintively, “Our names shouted in a certain dawn...a message...a summons...There must have been a moment, at the beginning, when we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it” (125). It is no coincidence that Guil’s idea of a “moment” where they could have said no comes right after his description of their metaphorical birth—in essence, the placement suggests that there never was such a moment. To use the parlance of the play again, we are born on a boat; and once we are born, we have no choice as to where the boat makes port. Ros and Guil could not very well have chosen not to be born; thus, there was no one moment where they could have prevented their eventual deaths. Perhaps by their inaction they hastened their deaths, or ensured that they would come in the manner described in *Rosguil*, but the story of their lives only ever had one ending. Guil’s final words before dying are “now you see me, now you—,” bringing full circle his repeated earlier conceptions of death (125). Guil

cannot even get his last word in; he vanishes before he can complete his final thought. In life he had no say, and in death he cannot communicate to others as well. A few critics, foremost among them Norman Berlin, have criticized *Rosguil* on the grounds that Ros and Guil's death is not tragic. Berlin states:

Stoppard makes us think—the words ‘document’ and ‘think’ pointing to the modernity and particular value of [*Rosguil*] as well as to its impoverishment as a tragedy...perhaps [the play] shows the direction in which some modern drama will be going—“times being what they are”—but it is a direction clearly nontragic because death and determinism have lost their haunting quality and the secrecy of the cause is never felt. (50)

Berlin seems here to consider the thoughtfulness of the play to be a detriment, as it precludes tragedy; other critics have questioned Berlin's assertion, and I think their interpretations of the ending are closer to the truth. Tim Brassell, for example, states unequivocally, “The play is not, I think, an attempt to produce *Hamlet* with a new pair of tragic heroes. The fates of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not tragic in *either* play” (66). In *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are meant to receive their comeuppance; they betrayed their friendship with *Hamlet* and thus pay the ultimate price. In *Rosguil*, their fates are not tragic; they die, as all men do, and their death is no more (or less) tragic than that of the average man on the street. Berlin complains that “the secrecy of the cause” of death “is never felt,” but the point of the play is that there is no secrecy; the cause of death for everyone is being human. Edward Petherbridge, the actor who played Guil in the original 1966 National Theatre production of *Rosguil*, remarks:

At least there's an acceptance of their deaths. I don't know if it really means anything. There's no choice involved. I mean, it's a question of

“Rosen—Guil--,” and he’s gone. And he says, “Oh, well...” and then he’s gone. That’s not a choice, that’s merely going out not fighting, as opposed to fighting and what else can any of us do anyway?...It comes along, well, we know it’s coming anyway...and you can go out screaming, or you can accept it, and it’s painful, or it’s not.” (Faraone 50)

Petherbridge understands the essential humanity contained within Ros and Guil’s deaths. They understand their deaths are inevitable, and understand that their choice is not whether to die but how to go about doing so. They understand death is coming just as we all understand that death is inevitable, and they meet their demise with dignity and humanity.

Guil vanishes, without a trace, and the “*tableau of court and corpses which is the last scene of Hamlet*” appears, along with two ambassadors from England, who relate that, “the ears are senseless that should give us hearing/to tell him his commandment is fulfilled,/that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead./Where should we have our thanks?” (126, 5.2.352-355) The audience simply hears that Ros and Guil are dead. The ending seems to turn Ros and Guil’s deaths into a footnote, a minor matter to be reported by two ambassadors in a court littered with the corpses of more powerful men. Ros and Guil are dead and do not merit a body; in that way, their death is far more real than the deaths of Hamlet and his ilk. The audience knows that the actors playing Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, etc. will arise once the play is over and return to their daily lives. Ros and Guil’s deaths, on the other hand, are far more challenging; at the close of the play, they simply are not, and perhaps are meant to stay that way. Anthony Jenkins approximates the feelings of the audience when he says:

In the daring theatricality of the moment, Stoppard makes us live through the illusion despite all the play's reminders that it *is* just an illusion. Then as Ros and Guil make their final abrupt exit, "Now you see me, now you--," we are left to bear the weight of loss and to experience the pain of absence that Guil has identified as death (*Critical Essays* 59).

Some have criticized Stoppard's early plays as lacking true emotion. But as Jenkins correctly points out, the audience feels pain at the disappearance of Ros and Guil, perhaps more pain than they feel when the "tableau of court and corpses" is revealed. *Rosguil* is not devoid of feeling; instead, it forces us to experience a different kind of death. Death in *Hamlet* is visible; characters are stabbed, poisoned, and drowned, and death comes in all manner of active ways. Death in *Rosguil* is passive; Ros and Guil simply disappear, and we are compelled to come to terms with death not as a glorious event but as a simple not-being.

VIII. Conclusion

Stoppard has woven the twin themes of metatheatricality and passivity deeply into *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Ultimately, I believe the play reconciles these two themes, and their interaction with each other underscores the play's perception of the conflict between predestination and free will. Ros and Guil are extremely inactive characters; whenever they can avoid action, they seek to do so, and are even willing to let innocent men (first Hamlet, and then themselves) die in order to avoid acting. Additionally, *Rosguil* constantly draws attention to its status as a play; the question, then, is why Stoppard so focuses on his main characters' passivity while also choosing to constantly remind the audience that what they are viewing is scripted. In my opinion, both the metatheatricality inherent in *Rosguil*'s premise and the metatheatrical comments by Ros, Guil, and the Player serve as continual reminders of another level of inaction within the play as a whole. The audience sees Ros and Guil as having the choice not to act; the characters, as they speak and move about on stage, have the illusion of free will, despite that fact that their every motion and word is scripted. When the illusion of free will for Ros and Guil is stripped away—when Stoppard, through his use of metatheatricality, reminds the audience that they are watching a play—Ros and Guil's inaction becomes even more profound. Ros and Guil do not choose inaction; instead, inaction is chosen for them by Stoppard himself. All their ennui and lassitude is prescribed for them; in the end, their inaction has an inaction about it. In drawing attention to *Rosguil*'s status as a play, Stoppard also draws attention to Ros and Guil's extreme inertness; they are so passive that, ultimately, they do not even choose to act passively. Neil Sammells also makes an interesting point in his book *Tom Stoppard: The*

Artist As Critic about the relationship Guil's inaction has to Stoppard himself. He states, "Stoppard succeeds where Guildenstern fails: he does not act *in* Shakespeare's drama, he acts *upon* it" (38). Sammells' sense of Guil as someone essentially inactive is correct; Guil spends his life as a bit player in someone else's drama. Stoppard, however, reshapes *Hamlet* into *Rosguil* by sheer force of action; instead of being passive, he turns the most revered play in the Western canon into something original of his own. Such a contrast between Stoppard's active part in the composition of *Rosguil* and the inactive part played by Ros and Guil in its action only makes Ros and Guil seem all the more impotent.

This additional emasculation of Ros and Guil's ability to act fits very well with *Rosguil's* views on predestination and free will. Stoppard chose to title the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* deliberately; the title foreshadows the end of Ros and Guil while lending an air of inevitability to the entire process. Stoppard always intended for *Rosguil* to be about the deaths of Ros and Guil; prior to the premiere of the play at the National Theatre in 1967 Stoppard intended to change the title to *Exit Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, implying that Ros and Guil's exit from life and exit from the stage would come simultaneously. He only decided to change the title because he felt he "couldn't expose [himself] to the danger of anybody thinking that [he'd] thought a plural subject would take a singular verb" (Nadel 184). While Stoppard certainly seems to acknowledge Ros and Guil's interchangeability by appending to their demise a singular verb, he also reveals his feelings about the action of the play; *Rosguil* is concerned entirely with Ros and Guil's predestined deaths. Indeed, the deaths of Ros and Guil are predestined, by the contents of their characters if by nothing else. The simplest levels of predestination are the authorial levels. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are

characters from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and they meet their demise within the action of that play; as such, Stoppard, in order to be faithful to the source material, must insure that Ros and Guil meet their demise in *Rosguil* as well. That is one type of predestination—Ros and Guil must die to maintain textual continuity with *Hamlet*. Of course, Ros and Guil die in *Hamlet* by execution; one presumes that they arrive at the English court, present their letter, and are promptly (and justly) beheaded. In *Rosguil*, by contrast, Ros and Guil never reach England; they vanish prior to their ship's arrival. The differences in their ends seem to undermine the notion that Ros and Guil must die because Shakespeare wrote their deaths; if Stoppard is willing to break with *Hamlet* in manner of death he could very well have chosen to break with the text over Ros and Guil's deaths as a whole. The final scene of *Rosguil*, with the ambassadors from England arriving and announcing Ros and Guil's deaths, reinforces this notion of discontinuity; how, the audience wonders, were the ambassadors to report deaths they never saw? The second level of predestination for Ros and Guil lies with *Rosguil* itself; namely, they are characters following a script and the script calls for them to die. They cannot disobey the script given their status as fictional characters; Stoppard writes for them to disappear so disappear they will. These textually-based arguments for predestination within the world of *Rosguil* function only within the world of the play itself; if one removes the necessity for textual continuity and removes the script, textually-based predestination disappears. The third kind of predestination Ros and Guil must deal with is the same kind that all humans must face; namely, the fact that our lives only ever have one ending, and that ending is death. *Rosguil* is about the deaths of Ros and Guil, but their deaths were inevitable as all human deaths are inevitable. In contrast to the textually-based types of

predestination, the predestination based on the inevitability of death functions within life itself; we all are predestined to die. However, it loses functionality within the world of *Rosguil*; few plays end with every character dead, and thus predestination by way of inevitable death fails to account for the inevitability of Ros and Guil's fates within *Rosguil* itself. The final sort of predestination is predestination by content of character, and I think this kind of presentation fits best within the context of *Rosguil* and within real life. Ros and Guil's death in *Rosguil*, and all the choices we make in life, are inevitable based on the contents of our characters. Ros and Guil are, in the context of *Rosguil*, exceptionally passive people; they make no attempt to do anything themselves, and indeed when they are confronted by active people their habit is to become entirely inactive. Ros and Guil's demise comes because they do not act, they do not have it in their characters to act, and thus when presented with the choice between action and death they will inevitably (because of the content of their characters) choose death.

Immediately before he dies, Guil remarks, "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it" (*Theatre* 125).

Anthony Jenkins references this line in *The Theatre of Tom Stoppard*, saying "[Guil] is wrong if he thinks they could have said 'no' to the messenger who summoned them at Claudius' requests; had they done so they could not have been Ros and Guil" (48).

Jenkins correctly points out that it would have been entirely antithetical to Ros and Guil's characters for them to refuse the summons; their innate passivity made their acquiescence and thus their demise inevitable. Unfortunately for Ros and Guil, the moment "where [they] could have said 'no'" was birth, and once they existed they could not have taken

any other path. Their deaths were predestined because of who they were; they, like all men, could not escape their own inner selves.

Rosguil may often seem confusing, or ambiguous, in its treatment of the issues it raises. Ros and Guil are predestined—or perhaps there was a moment where they could have changed their fates. Their inaction seals their fates—but when they try to act, as when Guil stabs the Player, their actions prove entirely ineffectual. Stoppard omits certain scenes from *Hamlet* that make Ros and Guil seem more culpable—but he also has them find the letter ordering Hamlet’s death and do nothing in response. Certainly Stoppard has left ample room for all kinds of interpretations. He has made very clear, in nearly every interview where he has discussed the play’s meaning, that this kind of ambiguity is deliberate. In an oft-quoted interview, “Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas,” Stoppard states:

There is very often *no* single, clear statement in my plays. What there is, is a series of conflicting statements made by conflicting characters, and they tend to play a sort of infinite leap-frog. You know, an argument, a refutation, then a rebuttal of the refutation, then a counter-rebuttal, so that there is never any point in this intellectual leap-frog at which I feel *that* is the speech to stop it on, *that* is the last word (“Ambushes” 58-59).

Additionally, Stoppard says, in a 1968 letter to John Boorman, “I know now...that possibly the main reason for the play’s effectiveness is that it doesn’t attempt to break down or analyze or explain; it simply pitches you into these ambiguities” (Fleming 53). And he also tells Mel Gussow, “I write plays because dialogue is the only respectable way of contradicting yourself” (3). Clearly, Stoppard wants to say certain things about certain subjects, but he does not mind too much if some of the things he says

do not necessarily agree with other ideas. In interviews, he has also been especially keen to emphasize *Rosguil*'s status as a comedy; he says, "Whatever else [*Rosguil*] is, [it] is a comedy...It is worth bearing in mind that among the productions staged all over the world, two were comparative failures, and both of those took the play very seriously indeed" (Fleming 51). In the same "Ambushes" interview, Stoppard responds to the question "What was calculated?" by saying:

What was actually calculated was to entertain a roomful of people with the situation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at Elsinore. The chief thing that added one line to another line was the combination of the two should retain the audience's interest in some way. ("Ambushes" 57)

Finally, in a 1989 conversation with Thomas O'Connor, Stoppard tells him "I saw a stage production of [*Rosguil*] just a couple of years ago...It was still funny, which was the main thing. If it's not funny it isn't anything" (230).

I have emphasized within this document that in many ways Ros and Guil's situation is our own; often in life we feel just as they do, buffeted by forces beyond both our ken and our control. Given that the play puts the audience in the position of the two main characters, who are never quite sure of anything, it is appropriate that the play itself never gives the audience or the reader a definitive message. In life, we cannot be sure of the answers to the big questions about free will and predestination. If *Rosguil* attempts to represent life truly, then, it cannot give a definitive answer either. Ambiguity in the play reflects ambiguity in life. Such uncertainty can seem daunting; indeed, a life of ambiguity could be paralyzing, impossible to live, and we could end up in the same position as Ros and Guil, endlessly trying to remain as passive as possible. What prevents this crushing feeling of inescapable uncertainty is humor—the ability to look into the void and laugh.

That ability is what *Rosguil* possesses in immeasurable quantities; we feel for Ros and Guil and their situation, and we feel that in many ways their helplessness and cluelessness are in fact ours, and we are still able to find humor amidst the pathos.

Without comedy, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* would be an immensely sad play; with humor, however, it becomes not just a statement on fiction and theatre but a wise, compassionate, and yes, funny, statement on the human condition.

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Honor Code

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