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Spectators Onstage: Metatheatrical Experiments in Early Tom Stoppard

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Audience participation in theatre has now become almost too commonplace to be remarkable, with even the commercial theatre presenting murder mysteries in which the audience members are encouraged to participate as detectives in their own right or wedding ceremonies where they are the guests (Schmitt 143).[1] It is easy to overlook, therefore, that audience participation, at least by conscious design, is a relatively recent phenomenon in the long history of Western drama, and its unmistakable emergence can be traced back to mid-twentieth century.

Dramaturgs, theatre practitioners, and performance artists as diverse as the Dadaists, Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Allan Kaprow, Julian Beck and Judith Malina, Marina Abramović, and Richard Schechner are often credited with shaking theatre loose from its traditional moorings of a fixed performance space, plot structure and acting style. While the bold experimentation by all these avant-garde theatremakers has been valuable in transforming the theatrical experience into being more immersive and participatory, some contemporary performers have carried spectator engagement to its extreme by crafting "intimate theatre" experiences even for an audience of one (Grant); or even at times assaulting their audience (Jennings; Twite).

In contrast to the extensive critical attention paid to some of these later experiments while studying audience engagement, the significant contribution of the Pirandellian metatheatre and later the Theatre of the Absurd in incorporating the spectator-figure into the dramatic structure remains under-analysed.[2] In fact, one of the well-

[1]Schmitt lists commercial Chicago productions such *Bingo in the First Degree, Murder at the Manor, Who Shot the Sheriff? At the Reunion,* and *The Case of Stanford Claus* among the mysteries and *Tony 'n' Tina's Wedding* (performed in New York, 1988) as an example of a participatory wedding event.

[2]Going by Keir Elam's useful distinction of 'theatre' and 'drama' as "the complex of phenomena associated with the performer-audience transaction" and "that mode of

known and exhaustive studies of the role of audience in theatre, Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, devotes very little attention to the Theatre of the Absurd and its metaphysical engagement with spectatorship, moving quickly instead from the early avant-garde to the later performance arts movements.[3] Similarly, Helen Freshwater's concise yet comprehensive introduction to the subject, *Theatre and Audience*, makes no mention of the work of the Absurdists. In an attempt to redress this oversight, the present paper examines two of the early plays of Tom Stoppard, who combines the metatheatrical structure of Pirandello with the thematic preoccupations of the Theatre of the Absurd. It is argued here that *The Real Inspector Hound* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, like several other Absurd plays of the period, engage with the idea of spectatorship in theatre by creating a distinct character-type that may be called the onstage spectator[4] whom the audience is meant to identify with. Some of the attributes of this character-type are an undisclosed personal history, lack of awareness of or control over the action developing around them and initial aloofness from the action before they get subsumed in the plot.

Many twentieth-century theories had already explored the idea of the blurring line of distinction between the actor and spectator. For instance, the Russian formalist Jan Mukařovský, in his 1941 essay "On the Current State of the Theory of the Theatre," examined the idea of how an actor could simultaneously be a spectator:

> [T]he roles of the actor and the spectator are much less distinguished than it might seem at first glance. Even the actor to a certain extent is a spectator for his [*sic*] partner at the moment when the partner is playing; in particular, extras who do not in-

fiction designed for stage representation and constructed according to particular ('dramatic') conventions" respectively (2), one may say that contemporary scholarship on spectatorship focusses much more on the role of the audience in a *theatrical* setting than in the *dramatic* composition itself. The burgeoning interest in the broad field of Performance Studies has also ensured that any attempt at systematically understanding spectatorship is now shaped largely by the latest theoretical developments in theatre semiotics, reception theory, or phenomenology (Shepherd and Wallis 238–39) rather than dramatic structure alone.

[3]Bennett makes no mention of Ionesco in the book and the only discussion of Genet is confined to the stage setting in *The Balcony*; she does write about the critics in Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* (44) and the stage arrangement (134), but no systematic study of the Absurdists other than Beckett is attempted.

[4]Some other characters that fit a similar definition of the onstage spectator are the Mother and the Son in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Maurice in Fernando Arrabal's *Two Executioners* and Peter in Edward Albee's *Zoo Story*.

> tervene actively in the play are distinctly perceived as spectators. The inclusion of the actors among the audience becomes quite apparent, for example, when a comedian makes a co-actor laugh by his performance. Even if we are aware that such laughter can be intentional (in order to establish active contact between stage and auditorium), we cannot but realize that at such a moment the boundary between the stage and the auditorium runs across the stage itself: the laughing actors are on the audiences' side. (qtd. in Bennett 12)

At the other end of the spectrum, there are moments when the audience in a show becomes an extension of the characters on the stage. This is particularly true when the action contains a set of passive onlookers, playing the equivalent of the audience onstage and their feelings are mirrored in the audience. J. L. Styan examines such a typical moment in *Julius Caesar* when there is an outraged mob of Roman citizens on stage and the audience only seems to "swell their number." As Antony plays his rhetorical tricks to incite them, his address is directed as much at the actual theatre audience as at the unruly Roman crowd. In fact, in productions such as Tyrone Guthrie's, the stage design places the audience as a physical extension of the mob, while Antony faces them together upstage. However, the illusion of participation is short-lived, since the audience do not identify emotionally with the mob for long: they distance themselves from their apparent representatives onstage once they perceive how easily Antony plays on the sentiments of the irrational crowd (Styan 118). The possibilities outlined suggest how a dynamic actor-spectator exchange may take place at a conceptual level without any of the excesses of the later innovators who resort to more intrusive and physical forms of audience participation.

Luigi Pirandello excelled in precisely this kind of audience engagement by creating an endless hall of mirrors in the form of a play-within-a-play-within-a-play. For instance, the central element of his play *Each in His Own Way* is, in Pirandello's own words, the conflict "between the Spectators and the Author and the Actors" which "sends …the performance—up in smoke" (209–10). In this play, he experimented with the complex relationship of the spectator to the spectacle by deliberately conflating the roles of the spectators and actors, as 'spectators' appear within the play to either comment on the action or get involved in it directly.

Building on the Pirandellian precedent, many of the prominent figures associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, such as Samuel

Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Jean Genet carried out these metatheatrical experiments much further. It is noteworthy that these playwrights very often rejected facile or frivolous attempts at establishing a connection with the audience, in favour of achieving a complex—what may be called a metaphysical—engagement with the idea of spectatorship. A classic instance of this is seen in Martin Esslin's account of the rejected endings of Ionesco's first play *The Bald Prima Donna* (1950). Among suggestions that he turned down were ideas such as orchestrating chaos among the audience and later "machine-gunning" them or having the maid announce the entry of the author, who would later walk in and pronounce threats against the audience. Instead, he chose the much more disturbing conclusion of having the play begin all over again from the first (Esslin 112), preferring a deeper even if more indirect emotional connection with the audience to overt sensationalism.

The early works of Tom Stoppard have often been discussed in the context of the Absurd and throughout his career, Stoppard has consistently engaged with metatheatrical devices in plays such as *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth, Travesties,* and *The Real Thing*. Specifically in *The Real Inspector Hound,* which opens with two theatre critics at the première of a whodunit, the focus is on the play-watchers themselves. Birdboot is an experienced critic smitten by an attractive young debutante and Moon is a second-string critic standing in for his superior Higgs, all the while hoping to displace or even kill him. (He also acknowledges that his own stand-in Puckeridge may harbour a similar animosity against him.) Initially, Moon is spotted reading the printed programme, unmistakably bored, while Birdboot opens a chocolate box with an "absurdly loud" crackle (9). While both assume a self-consciously spectatorial position, they play at guessing the murderer or discuss each other's professional achievements. Their actions suggest that they are too sophisticated to be gripped by the atmosphere of 'mystery' onstage or to simple-mindedly identify themselves with the characters and share their anxiety about what might happen next. In fact, they are quick to judge the play before they can even evaluate it, each dictated by his own predilections: Birdboot lavishes praise on the actresses who strike him as sexually attractive, and Moon reveals his penchant for making grandiloquent statements and pretentious allusions to all the literary figures he knows.

At the beginning, the demarcation between the 'play' and 'reality' is sharply drawn. The private lives and preoccupations of the critics alone are given importance as 'reality,' while the inner play is drawn with the bold strokes of a caricature, incessantly calling attention to its own staginess. Through elaborate design, the audience is

invited to identify themselves with the critics, who belong to the more realistic realm. The very opening stage direction presents an "impossible" situation: "the audience appear to be confronted by their own reflection in a huge mirror...a bank of plush seats and pale smudges of faces" (9) and the two critics are seen as a part of the crowd. In fact, Stoppard revealed in an interview that he wanted a real mirror placed upstage to create an illusion of audience surrounding the stage. Further, he noted how in productions of the play it is more effective to place the critics among the real audience or between them and the stage, rather than placing them in the rear onstage ("Ambushes" 70). Stoppard's stage direction further requires that the voices of the critics come through their microphones not as "*sound picked up, amplified and flung out at the audience*" but as "*sound picked up, carried and gently dispersed around the auditorium*" (10). Once the identification of the real audience with the two critics is painstakingly established, they both begin to watch the charade of the murder mystery together.

The play they watch has a ludicrous plot involving a mysterious corpse and an alleged madman-on-the-loose on the secluded premises of Muldoon Manor. The element of exaggeration is made plain in the barely disguised expository statements Mrs. Drudge utters into the phone:

> Hello, the drawing-room of Lady Muldoon's country residence one morning in early spring? [...] I hope nothing is amiss for we, that is Lady Muldoon and her house-guests, are here cut off from the world, including Magnus, the wheelchair-ridden half-brother of her ladyship's husband Lord Albert Muldoon who ten years ago went out for a walk on the cliffs and was never seen again—and all alone, for they had no children. (15)

Lady Cynthia Muldoon who is in mourning is now wooed both by a young man Simon Gascoyne, a new arrival in the neighbourhood, and Lord Magnus Muldoon. All the while, the company at the Manor is engaged in playing cards and nobody in the household notices a corpse lying face down in the middle of the room in full view of the audience. An onstage radio which is turned on at regular intervals seems to have a programme consisting only of 'interruptions' by police—a clear travesty of plot-propellant devices found in popular thrillers.

While Moon and Birdboot remain coolly detached from the spectacle they witness, the conventions of the commercial thriller are constantly satirised: the clichéd stock-in-trade of the genre—the corpse lying in full view unbeknownst to any of the characters, the pointless

threats by the characters to kill one another uttered in the maid's hearing, the gratuitous eeriness of a baying hound—are all laid bare for mockery. Inspector Hound, who arrives on the scene looking for the madman, stumbles on the corpse and concludes that the corpse must be a victim of the madman. As he attempts to investigate the murder, all the characters go on their ways in search of Simon who is now missing. Simon, who is suspected to be the madman, then walks into the room alone and is shot from offstage as he tries to identify the corpse. At this point, the 'play' breaks for interval with the unanswered question of who shot Simon.

In contrast with all these incredible plot contrivances in the inner play, the casual conversation between the critics remains mundane, unpretentious, and mostly credible. Even the stage directions indicate that their behaviour is entirely unselfconscious, which contributes to the largely realistic illusion they are expected to produce. For instance, as Birdboot munches his chocolate, he is heard "chewing into mike" (12). The naturalness of their conversation is highlighted in contrast with the deliberate, inflated style of critical pronouncements they make by putting on a 'public' voice.

Stoppard thus builds up a steady dichotomy between exaggerated theatricality and an illusion of reality at two levels of action, creating a secure distinction between the 'play' and 'life.' However, just as the critics, and vicariously the audience, are about to feel complacently superior to the preposterous action in the play, they find themselves suddenly trapped in it. During the interval, the onstage phone keeps ringing and an annoyed Moon picks it up to realise that the call is for Birdboot from his wife Myrtle. As Birdboot talks over the phone, the 'play' resumes and he is forced to act the part of Simon. As a result, he repeats all of Simon's earlier actions and is killed by the end of the act, but only after he identifies the corpse as that of Moon's superior Higgs. Startled by this bizarre turn of events, Moon ventures onto the stage to look at the corpses and the play resumes once again. Moon is now compelled to play the role of Inspector Hound to solve the case, while the actors who originally played Simon and Hound occupy the critics' seats. The strict demarcation between 'play' and 'reality' has already begun to give way.

In due course, Moon is challenged by the other actors for impersonating Inspector Hound and he begins to feel the plot thickening around himself. Lord Magnus Muldoon now reveals himself to be the "real" Inspector Hound and declares Moon to be the criminal. When Moon recognises Magnus as his own subordinate Puckeridge and at-

tempts to flee, he ends up being shot too. A dying Moon watches his rival in grudging admiration of his ingenuity, while Magnus reveals himself to be also the missing Lord Albert Muldoon who had lost his memory for many years and joined the police under the name of Hound. Though initially insulated from the play, the two critics finally become victims of a criminal mastermind within the thriller in a *coup de théâtre* that overturns the whole setup.

It is interesting to note how the roles of Moon and Birdboot are explicitly written for the audience to identify with, as is clearly reflected in the opening description of the play. They perfectly fit the character-type labelled earlier as the onstage spectator: Moon and Birdboot are as unaware of the course of the action to ensue as the members of the audience, and react to the barefacedly contrived thriller as any experienced playgoer would—by betraying a mildly amused condescension. Only as much is revealed about their personal history—Moon's disgruntlement at living in the shadow of Higgs and Birdboot's weakness for enchanting actresses—as is required to explain their later implication in the action. Ultimately, when Moon and Birdboot are killed as a part of the play, the audience is expected to receive a similar jolt out of their smugness for having condescendingly distanced themselves from the action. Art, even at its inartistic worst, may still invade life in the most insidious ways. In such a case, the carefully built-up distinction between the actors and audience may simply collapse, leaving the spectators inextricably mixed up in the spectacle. Gabriele Scott Robinson notes how the "spectator as hero"[5] is the "most typical Stoppard character" (42). Thus, Stoppard brings the audience into the limelight by a vicarious representation which eschews any undue physical liberties with the audience.

The principle behind "the spectator as hero" is carried much farther in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead,* which among other things, is an extended speculation upon the nature of spectatorship. While many of the momentous events of the play are directly imported from *Hamlet*, the predicament of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as the baffled spectators of the incomprehensible drama around them is what lends significance to Stoppard's play. A brief outline of the plot would serve to explain the unenviable condition of the two attendant lords who can neither understand the purpose of their existence nor control the goings-on around themselves.

[5]Robinson also observes that, incidentally, "spectator as hero" is the title of a chapter in *Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon,* the only novel Stoppard ever wrote (42).

Tossing coins that mysteriously turn up heads consecutively ninety-two times, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern speculate upon their lives which seem to be under the sway of supernatural forces. Summoned by King Claudius to extract the secret of Hamlet's madness, they meet some players on their way to the court and discuss the reasons for the decadence of theatre with them. They rehearse interrogation sessions among themselves in order to fathom the secret of Hamlet's melancholy. Outwitted by the Prince time and again, they seem incapable of fulfilling the King's mission.

Uncomprehendingly, they watch the players rehearsing mimed scenes of the action of *Hamlet* that is to follow, and as they watch, Guildenstern forsees that they both may be fated to die pointlessly. After several failed attempts to discover the reason for Hamlet's melancholia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are commissioned to travel to England with Hamlet. Suddenly, in the final act, they discover themselves hidden in barrels along with Hamlet and the players on-board the ship. Soon, Hamlet disappears and the two attendant lords discover that they are meant to die on reaching England. They argue with the players about the nature and enactment of death, at the end of which the scene switches to the final *tableau vivant*—or rather, *tableau macabre*—from *Hamlet*, where the two are declared to be dead.

Although the larger structure of the play is not an explicit meta-theatrical setup as in *The Real Inspector Hound*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern share much in common with Moon and Birdboot in terms of their function. However, it is important to note that their spectatorial role operates at two distinct levels within the play. In the literal sense, the two gentlemen are invited to be the audience—or, indeed voyeurs—to the players' "performances," a euphemism for their participatory pornographic shows. They constantly interact with the players during their rehearsals as well as even after they are exiled. More than the patronage of the court, the players seem to depend on these two attendant lords to keep them meaningfully occupied. They offer their shabby repertoire of pirated Italian tragedies and melodrama of the "blood, love and rhetoric school" before the two (24) in the hope of finding favour at the court.

On one occasion, the troupe performs a dramatic spectacle in the hope that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are watching and the actors feel betrayed when they realise that their audience is gone (47). They dwell at length on the essence of their profession and the indispensability of the spectators: "...the single assumption which makes our existence viable—that somebody is *watching*... (46). However,

both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern remain unmoved by their protestations and continue to regard them superciliously. Coldly distant, the two refuse to get involved in the pathetic spectacle they witness rehearsed. Even when Rosencrantz betrays concern, Guildenstern warns him against unsolicited involvement: "Keep back—we're spectators" (59). After such patronising aloofness, the two are in for a shock towards the end of the rehearsal when they see their own fates foreshadowed by the 'play,' where two Spies dressed in coats identical to their own are shipped away to England with a letter ordering their deaths. Frustrated at their inability to even control the limited action of the players acting before them, Guildenstern tries for once to mount a coup—by stabbing a player (93). However, his triumph is short-lived and he watches disconcertedly as the player rises and explains that the knife is a fake. The ability of the players to enact a mime that prefigures their destiny subverts the assumed superiority of the two and underlines their role as helpless spectators even within the larger scheme of the play.

Stranded in a situation not of their own making and governed by forces beyond their control, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are ready for any surprise. Having little knowledge of what could happen to them next, they become spectators within the play, functioning as an on-stage surrogate of the audience. Their status as spectators in this wider context is made explicit in their own observations, as can be seen in their anxious exchanges and poor attempts at consolation:

> ROS (*at footlights*). How very intriguing! [...] I feel like a spectator—an appalling prospect. The only thing that makes it bearable is the irrational belief that somebody interesting will come on in a minute....
> GUIL. See anyone?
> ROS. No. You?
> GUIL. No. (*At footlights.*) What a fine persecution—to be kept intrigued, without ever quite being enlightened.... (31)

In moments of confused desperation, it is the security of inaction they depend upon for comfort, as when Guildenstern declares resignedly, "Somebody might come in. It's what we're counting on, after all. Ultimately" (43). Alternatively, when bombarded by a series of disconnected events that seem to defy interpretation, a frustrated Rosencrantz exclaims, "Incidents! All we get is incidents! Dear God, is it too much to expect a little sustained action?!" (89).

In this larger spectatorial framework of the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are baffled onlookers while the self-assured 'actors'—in the sense of being the prime agents of action—are the royalty around them. In relation to them, the two lords exhibit a pattern of behaviour which corresponds with the different stages of a spectator's comprehension of a play and illuminates the manner of an audience's response to a theatrical spectacle. These stages may be roughly named as *capitulation*, *distancing* and *individuation*, in addition to which the two also bring about a subtle *alienation* by parody.

Presented with an emotionally charged or intellectually stimulating piece of dramatic art (with the help of skilful actors and corresponding ambience), the audience, at least momentarily, surrenders to the charm of the spectacle and loses its individual identity. This *capitulation* becomes the insurmountable problem for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, since they know they cannot help being overwhelmed. Rosencrantz confesses to this weakness: "We're overawed, that's our trouble. When it comes to the point we succumb to their personality…" (55). In fact, a simple indication that they cannot resist the spell of the royalty is that, whenever they encounter the royal personages, they switch to a different kind of language in keeping with the manner of the court. Freely conversing in a modern, colloquial idiom between themselves or with the Players, they put on an Elizabethan diction only in the presence of the King, Queen, or Hamlet.

Once the spectacle ends, its charm begins to slowly wear off and the audience may resume their everyday selves, no longer overcome by the sway of a dramatic character. This *distancing* is an essential step towards triggering reflection upon the nature of the scene they have witnessed and an intelligent assessment of its significance—as opposed to its pure affect. In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, this process is indicated by their quick return to modern idiom as soon as the actors depart from the scene. They start analysing the meaning of the action as soon as they are alone. For instance, at the end of the sequence where Hamlet is brought in before Claudius to be deported to England, the two try to understand their own part in the scene:

> ROS (*moves to go*). All right, then?
> GUIL (*does not move: thoughtfully*). And yet it doesn't seem enough; to have breathed such significance. Can that be all? And why us?—anybody would have done. And we have contributed nothing.
> ROS. It was a trying episode while it lasted, but they've done with us now.

GUIL. Done what?
ROS. I don't pretend to have understood. Frankly, I'm not very interested … (70)

The third phase is a logical continuation of the earlier one, where each member of the audience forms his or her own impression of the scene, by means of individual reconstruction and interpretation. The scene no longer 'belongs' to the actors but has been assimilated by every spectator in terms of his or her own unique experience of it. This process of *individuation* is achieved by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when they restate whatever they have heard the actors speak in their presence in their own words. Articulated by these two, the statements become coloured—or more often, simplified—by their consciousness and are no longer the same as the lofty declamations of the royal personages either in form or essence. A striking case is when the King's elaborate rhetoric welcoming the two is reduced to a simple set of instructions.

CLAUDIUS. I entreat you both
That, being of so young days brought up with him
And sith so neighboured to his youth and haviour
That you vouchsafe your rest here in our court
Some little time, so by your companies
To draw him onto pleasures, and to gather
So much as from occasion you may glean,
Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus,
That opened lies within our remedy. (26–27)

These are the King's actual words whereas the two paraphrase the invitation in their casual way:

GUIL. Draw him on to pleasures—glean what afflicts him….
ROS. We cheer him up—find out what's the matter—
GUIL. Exactly, it's a matter of asking the right questions and giving away as little as we can. (30)

It is hard to recognise the grave formality of Claudius's address in such a garbled and watered-down summary, although it is this apparently simple-minded version that makes the sinister intention behind the espionage glaringly obvious.

Once the significance of the play has been broken down to its simplest units and coloured by their individual understanding, the attendant lords turn irreverent enough to parody the foregoing action, achieving for the audience a subtle *alienation*, somewhat similar in its

outcome to the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. The heightened language of the royalty and the authenticity of their feelings are presented through a distorting mirror of parody, thereby, alienating the audience from naïve identification with them. Since the instruments of such devastating parody here are also the vicarious representatives of the audience, it becomes easier for the audience to laugh at Claudius or even Hamlet.

A telling example of such parody is presented in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's recapitulation of their first interrogation session with Hamlet. Their bungling conversation with Hamlet ends with a strange puzzle:

> HAMLET. But my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived.
> GUIL. In what, my dear lord?
> HAMLET. I am but mad north north-west; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw. (40)

As they analyse how they had been outwitted by the Prince's obscure responses, Rosencrantz's restatement strips the speech of its air of grave mystification: "Denmark's a prison and he'd rather live in a nutshell; some shadow-play about the nature of ambition, [...] and finally one direct question which might have led somewhere, and led in fact to his illuminating claim to tell a hawk from a handsaw" (42). Towards the end of the play, all of Hamlet's actions have been reduced to a preposterous list of peculiar maladies:

> GUIL. It really boils down to symptoms. Pregnant replies, mystic allusions, mistaken identities, arguing his father is his mother, that sort of thing; intimations of suicide, forgoing of exercise, loss of mirth, hints of claustrophobia not to say delusions of imprisonment; invocations of camels, chameleons, capons, whales, weasels, hawks, handsaws—riddles, quibbles and evasions; amnesia, paranoia, myopia; day-dreaming, hallucinations; stabbing his elders, abusing his parents, insulting his lover, and appearing hatless in public... (88)

If the Brechtian actor is advised to alienate or estrange the audience from feeling any empathy towards the role he or she is playing, the two parodist-lords here succeed in estranging the audience from the royalty whom they travesty.

Having examined the role of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as spectators within the play, it is easy to understand how the audience

are invited to identify with them. Guildenstern acknowledges early on the inevitability of their involvement in the action when he observes, "We've been caught up" (30). Their lack of knowledge of or control over the happenings is made explicit in such exchanges as when Rosencrantz wonders where it is all going to end and Guildenstern responds, "That's the question" (33). Further, they make a claim on the audience's empathy when Guildenstern complains, "We only know what we're told, and that's little enough" (49). Finally, the absence of any personal history for the two except their summons to Elsinore (11-14) contributes to making them onstage representatives of the audience.

In fact, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern illustrate a further trait of theatre audience that Richard Schechner describes: "Unlike the performers, the spectators attend theatre unrehearsed; they bring to the theatre a decorum that has been learned elsewhere but which is nevertheless scrupulously applied here. Usually the audience is an impromptu group, meeting at the place of the performance and never meeting as a defined group again" (44). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have obviously blundered into a setting where they do not know how to act; they try applying the laws of another world that seem to be void in the new, incomprehensible universe of *Hamlet*—as demonstrated by Guildenstern's frustrated attempts at testing the laws of probability by tossing coins; finally, both seem aware that they have been thrown together only by accident, as when Guildenstern exclaims: "What could we possibly have in common except our situation?" (35–36).

At a point when the pain of philosophical speculation on the meaning and purpose of their existence becomes intolerable for Guildenstern, the player advises him to act like a cool spectator, a piece of advice that might as well be directed at the audience turning testy about the surface absurdity of the action: "You're nobody special.... Relax. Respond. That's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn." Later on, he unceremoniously cuts off Guildenstern when he pleads helplessness:

> GUIL. But we don't know what's going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don't know how to *act*.
> PLAYER. Act natural. You know why you're here at least. (49)

The suggestion may not be altogether helpful to Guildenstern, but spoken appropriately by the player, it reassures a perplexed audience that they are ultimately there to witness the drama of two attendant lords

from *Hamlet* and to depart on their own ways even if they had been momentarily swept into the action for the duration of the play.

Taken together, Tom Stoppard's early works *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *The Real Inspector Hound* are an indication of the continued metatheatrical engagement that can be seen throughout his career. In the context of the innovations such as intimate theatre or other postmodern performances such as those by the Blue Man Group, it is interesting to see how much Tom Stoppard has anticipated the changing perceptions of the audience's role in theatre and included a spectator-figure vicariously representing the audience within his plays. In a world where life itself is increasingly turning into an incomprehensible spectacle, he has succeeded in getting his audience to reflect upon their roles both within and outside the theatre.

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