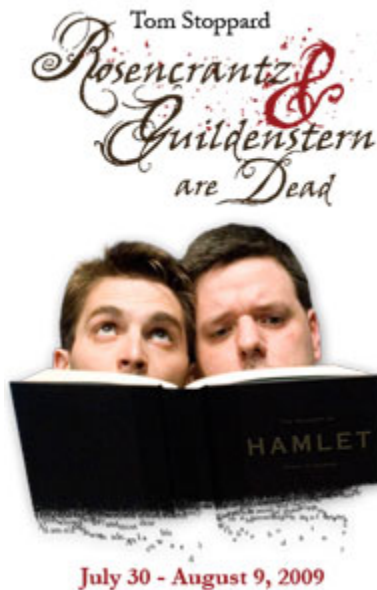


## Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead

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Two befuddled Danish courtiers summoned to their king's palace to do a little spying find that they are in over their heads in the tragic goings on at Elsinore. Unable to make a whole lot of sense out of the tragic events that occur for the most part out of their sight, they find their own destinies are woven into a situation they don't quite understand.

Minor players lurking off to the side in Shakespeare's Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become the focal point of a comedic drama and meditation on the meaning of life and impending death from contemporary playwright Tom Stoppard. First performed Aug. 24, 1966 at the Edinburgh "fringe" Festival, the play established the young Stoppard as a fiercely intelligent voice and a writer who loves word play.

A modern day existential puzzle told through humor and pathos, **Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead** is being given a splendid production by Bad Habits Productions. The lead off production of this young group's third season, which according to a program note will "wrestle with the elements of fate and destiny" over the next year, has been smartly directed by Steve Kleinedler who teases out the nuances of this sophisticated piece of writing as well as keeping the energy level high.

The brief run ends Sunday, May 9 with a 3 pm matinee at the Durell Theater, the YMCA in Central Square Cambridge, 820 Massachusetts Avenue.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were the only really Danish names used by Shakespeare in Hamlet, which was set in a time contemporary to the Bard. They were common Danish family names of the era with up to a tenth of the aristocrats bearing one or the other of those names, making them "Everyman" characters for Shakespeare. Stoppard takes that idea further, with a running joke as to the interchangeability of the names. Even the courtiers themselves seem uncertain which of them is Rosencrantz and which Guildenstern.

The pair gets inextricably caught up in the horrors at the palace when after Hamlet stabs Polonius to death, the king requests that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern accompany Hamlet on a boat to England. Claudius gives them a sealed letter to be delivered with Hamlet to the King of England containing orders to kill Hamlet. When Hamlet discovers the content of the letter he substitutes a different one calling instead for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When Hamlet heads back to Elsinore. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's unhappy fate is sealed.

Spirited performances from everyone in the cast in the Bad Habits production ensures that the comedy Stoppard intended for his Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead comes off in high fashion. The play could otherwise be something of a death march. The playwright would likely observe that the lesson is to live your life with pizzazz. After all, there is no escaping that for you (and everyone else) this journey ends in death.

Among the memorable performances are the leads with Stephen Libby as Guildenstern and Jonathan Overby as Rosencrantz who add a comforting note of optimism to the story through wonderfully detailed characterizations that clearly evidence these two are not interchangeable after all. That individualization is Stoppard's other important message.

Also thought provoking and delightful are the actors of the company of players Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet on their way to Elsinore (who at Hamlet's instruction will reenact the murder of his father by Claudius). They're rather a scary group in their willingness to perform whatever they perceive an audience wants to see from pornography to the tragedy that has ignited Hamlet's desire for revenge. Particularly startling is their director and lead actor The Player, performed with an almost demonic wildness by Dennis Hurley. Ryan Douglass as Alfred, the slight and very young actor who performs the women in their plays from rape victims to Queen Gertrude, was also mesmerizing with his demoralized demeanor.

On the tiniest of budgets costume designer Laura Grandi-Hill has perfectly outfitted the actors. f This is most cleverly realized with the vests worn by the actors playing the doomed courtiers (in the play-within-the-play) that echo the colors worn by the doomed Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. There is also some remarkable original music from Stephen Gilbane that eerily sets the atmosphere through instrumentation that relies on modern day computerized sounds.

The Bad Habits Productions exceptionally good staging of Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead is so well done it's a pity the run is so brief.

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