

**Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead**  
**Heidelberg Theatre Company – 17 Sep to 3 Oct 2009**

Tom Stoppard's 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead' (R & G) is the play that brought him international acclaim while still in his twenties.

He has of course gone on to become one of the most important playwrights using the English language and certainly one of the greatest living dramatists.

My favourites of his are more recent, *Night and Day*, *The Real Thing* and his very best, *Arcadia*. I have seen R & G before but a long time ago and I must confess that I had thought of it as an apprentice play which was a bit too long.

Well, I was wrong. It is witty, bizarre and thought provoking. R & G obviously has a relationship with *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's longest masterpiece. *Hamlet*'s play revolves around himself and all others were there to facilitate his journey.

R & G are summoned to befriend and spy on *Hamlet* and ultimately are sent with him to England with letters ordering his execution. *Hamlet* however escapes after having changed the letter to make his hapless colleagues the ones to be killed.

The expendability of the title characters is demonstrated by the fact that Olivier cut them completely from his film.

As Stoppard says every exit is an entry somewhere else. So where do they go, do they have an independent life? Well of course as fictional characters they don't.

But Stoppard puts them on the stage and let's them try to find out on their own. An absurd notion? Yes of course, the dramatist was schooled in the Absurdist tradition.

In this play the two protagonists are caught up in events over which they have no understanding or control. Most of the time they are just waiting for something to happen, like the two tramps in the *Godot* play and with just as much futility.

The play is a very funny one. I was with a friend who had never been exposed to *Hamlet* and who enjoyed herself even though she was aware there was much she was missing. If you are able to reference Shakespeare's play it will be much more satisfying and amusing.

There are three stand-out performances in Heidelberg's production. The eponymous Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, played by Tim Constantine and John Jenkins, and Barry Lockett as the Player.

The performers of the title roles are not distinguished from each other in the play, so it is as well that the two performances were so equally excellent as I don't know which was which even though I did try to find out.

Barry Lockett gives a magnificent performance as an archetypal old style actor. He could be channelling Henry Irving. Bruce Akers provided a lovely cameo as Polonius and there were two young impressive actors, one is David Paul and the other will have to be identified by members of the company, I can't work it out from the cast list. It is good to see such striking new talent.

I also enjoyed James Antonas as *Hamlet*. He could easily convince in the original play. The rest of the cast gave good support.

The play is deliberately theatrical, it even acknowledges the presence of the audience and it is important for this to be confirmed in the style of production.

In this production it is, as exemplified by the manner of playing and such things as the set, designed by Leanne Cole, which looked like a collection of children's play blocks.

The on-stage musician, Paul Karafillis, also composed the background music which adds much to the ambiance of the production. I was also most impressed with George Bisset's sound effects. The off-stage fight with the pirate ship is a great moment.

Chris McLean's direction amplifies the text, adds a number of very clever bits of business and moves the play along with aplomb.

In conclusion, this is a first class production of a great play, wonderfully presented and a very worthwhile evening in the theatre. If only we could see more of this quality.

Diana Burleigh 27 September 2009

3CR's *Curtain Up* – Sundays at One – 855AM.