Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead: By Their Own Insinuation

I should concede at the outset that Tom Stoppard’s now-classic meta-theatrical *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is one of my favorite plays. It is a clever and rapid-fire comedy that combines Marx Brothers witticisms with serious philosophical quandaries, but – trust me on this from personal experience – is a lot funnier than a graduate-level metaphysics class.

The titular characters are two minor courtiers in *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, arguably the single best-known play in the English language. Everyone is familiar with it, even if they have never seen it or read it, because it is so much a part of the culture. If you know *The Lion King* or *Sons of Anarchy*, you know at least the basic outline of *Hamlet*. The meta-joke is that we, the audience, know the whole story of *Hamlet*, but the courtiers only see glimpses of it, trying to make sense of their roles like mice on a battlefield.

By 1966, when *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was first performed, having characters in a play come to consciousness of their status as characters in a play was by no means a new idea. Luigi Pirandello did it memorably in the 1920s with *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Even the device of coin-flipping as an indication of determinism had been used a few years earlier by the science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick in his 1962 masterpiece *The Man in the High Castle* where the characters, trapped in an alternative history where Germany and Japan won World War II, cast I Ching fortune telling rods to learn something about what the readers of the book would regard as reality where Germany and Japan lost the war. All of these works, including the original *Hamlet*, have a play within a play or a book within a book as well. Nor was Shakespeare himself above this kind of playful meta-joke: in *Hamlet*, he has the characters of Hamlet and Polonius discussing their previous acting experience playing the roles of Brutus and Caesar, almost certainly a reference to the same actors having performed in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.

Wilbury Group puts their unique stamp on it and plays this for all it’s worth, slyly referencing through scenery and delivery recent pop-cultural memes such as the hip-hop parody *I’m on a Boat*. The Tragedian Band (Julia Bartoletti, Tom Grace, Marc Kaplan, and David Tessier) perform covers of, among other things, *Any Road* by George Harrison (“With the spin of the wheel with the roll of the dice; Ah yeah, you pay your fare; If you don’t know where you’re going; Any road will take you there”), *Tumbling Dice* by the Rolling Stones (“You got to roll me and call me the tumblin’; Roll me and call me the tumblin’ dice”) and *It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue* by Bob Dylan (“The highway is for gamblers, better use your sense; Take what you have gathered from coincidence; The empty-handed painter from your streets; Is drawing crazy patterns on your sheets”).

Joshua Andrews (Rosencrantz) and Patrick Saunders (Guildenstern) hold the stage from their entrances to their exits, surprisingly sympathetic characters because they are so utterly and cheerfully clueless, despite our knowing they are obsequious jerks whom Hamlet dismisses without remorse (“They are not near my conscience; their defeat does by their own insinuation grow”). Blissful in their ignorance, often smiling idiotically yet vaguely troubled by inconvenient curiosity, they remain unaware of the events swirling about them.
David Tessier stands out in the central role of “The Player,” the head of the company of tragedians, who is the only character who has even a hint of his own significance or lack thereof. Near the end, when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are wondering what they did wrong and what they could have done differently, it is The Player who demonstrates that the answers, respectively, are nothing and nothing, because the play was written that way. Tessier’s Player deliberately overacts, a version of his character who is himself a meta-character, in order to emphasize the artificiality of theater. This is a difficult task that, if done badly in the hands of a less capable actor, deteriorates into foolishness.

Nile Hawver (Hamlet), Julia Bartoletti (Tragedian, Ophelia), Andrea Carlin (Tragedian), Cory Crew (Tragedian, Claudius), Sam Dumas (Alfred), Seth Finkle (Tragedian), Melissa Penick (Tragedian, Gertrude), and Stuart Wilson (Tragedian, Polonius) round out the capable cast.

The best part of Wilbury Group’s production is that it captures the playfulness and humor, both high-brow and low-brow, not only in the script but in the very structure of the play. Fortunately for the comedy, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is a lot closer in tone to the Marx Brothers than one of the targets of its satire, Waiting for Godot, is to Laurel and Hardy.

The show is appropriate for anyone who would understand The Lion King. It’s the most fun you’re likely to have at a hanging.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, The Wilbury Group, 393 Broad St, Providence. Directed by Josh Short. Thu 1/29, 2/5, 2/12, Fri 1/30, 2/6, 2/13, Sat 1/31, 2/7, 2/14 at 7:30pm; Sun 2/1 at 2pm. About 90 minutes in two acts with one intermission. E-mail: info@thewilburygroup.org Web: thewilburygroup.org/now-playing.html

Facebook event: facebook.com/events/1528132430772766/

Tickets: brownpapertickets.com/event/986011 or telephone 401.400.7100