

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead
by Tom Stoppard

UIL One Act Play 2023
Martin High School Theatre

ROS: (*Flips a coin*) Heads. (*He puts it in his bag*) Heads.
(*Again*) Heads. (*Again*) Heads. (*Again*) Heads.

GUIL: (*Flipping a coin*) There is an art to the building up of suspense.

ROS: Heads.

GUIL: (*Flipping another*) Though it can be done by luck alone.

ROS: Heads.

GUIL: If that's the word I'm after.

ROS: (*GUIL spins another over his shoulder without looking at it*) Heads.

GUIL: A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability. (*He flips another coin over his shoulder*)

ROS: Heads. (*GUIL flips another.*) Heads. (*An embarrassed laugh*) Getting a bit of a bore, isn't it?

GUIL: It must be the law of diminishing returns...I can feel the spell about to be broken. (*Energizing himself somewhat. He takes out a coin, spins it high, catches it, turns it over to the back of his other hand, studies the coin and tosses it to ROS. His energy deflates.*) Well, it was an even chance- if my calculations are correct.

ROS: Eighty-five in a row- beaten the record!

GUIL: We have been spinning coins together since- This is not the first time we have spun coins.

ROS: Oh no- we've been spinning coins for as long as I remember.

GUIL: How long is that?

ROS: I forget. Mind you- eighty-five times! *(He flips another)* Heads. *(And another. And another. Then he flips one, catches it in his right hand, turns it over onto his left wrist, lobs it in the air, catches it with his left hand, raises his left leg, throws the coin up under it, catches it and turns it over on top of his head. ROS comes, looks at it, puts it in his bag.)* I'm afraid-

GUIL: So am I.

ROS: I'm afraid it isn't your day.

GUIL: I'm afraid it is. *(Small pause)* It must be indicative of something, besides the redistribution of wealth. *(He muses)* List of possible explanations. One: I'm willing it. Inside where nothing shows, I am the essence of a man spinning double-headed coins, and betting against himself in private atonement for an unremembered past. *(He spins a coin at ROS)*

ROS: Heads.

GUIL: Two: time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times... *(He flips a coin, looks at it, tosses it to ROS)* On the whole, doubtful. Three: divine intervention. Four: a spectacular vindication of the principle that each individual coin spun individually - *(He spins one)* is as likely to come down heads as tails and therefore should cause no surprise each individual time it does. *(It does. He tosses it to ROS)*

ROS: I've never known anything like it.

GUIL: What's the first thing you remember?

ROS: Oh, let's see. The first thing that comes into my head, you mean?

GUIL: No- the first thing you remember.

ROS: Ah. *(Pause)* No, it's no good, it's gone. It was a long time ago.

GUIL: (*Patient but edged*) No, you don't get my meaning. What is the first thing after all the things you've forgotten?

ROS: Oh I see. (*Pause*) I've forgotten the question.

GUIL: (*He leaps up and paces*) Are you happy?

ROS: What?

GUIL: Content? At ease?

ROS: I suppose so.

GUIL: What are you going to do now?

ROS: I don't know. What do you want to do?

GUIL: I have no desires. None. (*He stops pacing, dead.*) There was a messenger- that's right. We were sent for. (*He wheels at ROS and raps out*) Syllogism: 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. Discuss. (*ROS stares. Acidly*) Not too heatedly.

ROS: I'm sorry I- What's the matter with you?

GUIL: (*With tight hysteria, under control*) We have been spinning coins together since I don't know when, and in all that time (if it is all that time) the sun came up about as often as it went down, and a coin showed heads about as often as it showed tails. Then a messenger arrived. We had been sent for. 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 a flute. (*Tensed up*) Do you remember the first thing that happened today?

ROS: I woke up, I suppose. (*Triggered*) Oh- I've got it now- that man, a foreigner, he woke us up-

GUIL: A messenger.

ROS: That's it!

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: We were sent for.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: That's why we're here. *(He looks around, seems doubtful, then the explanation)* Travelling.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: *(Dramatically)* It was a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons. Fearful lest we come too late!

(Small pause)

GUIL: Too late for what?

ROS: How do I know? We haven't got there yet.

GUIL: Then what are we doing here, I ask myself.

ROS: You might well ask.

GUIL: We better get on.

ROS: *(Actively)* Right! *(Pause)* Where?

GUIL:: Forward.

ROS: *(Forward to footlights)* Ah. *(Hesitates)* Which way do we- *(He turns round)* Which way did we- ?

GUIL: We are entitled to some direction- I would have thought.

ROS: *(Alert. Listening)* I say-! I say-

GUIL: Yes?

ROS: I can hear music.

GUIL: Yes?

ROS: Like a band. *(He looks around. Suddenly THE PLAYERS enter. They are six in number, including a small boy, ALFRED. THE PLAYER brings up the rear and is the first to notice ROS and GUIL)*

PLAYER: Halt! *(THEY halt. Joyously.)* An audience! *(ROS and GUIL half rise)* Don't move! *(They sink back. He regards them fondly)* Perfect! A lucky thing we came along.

ROS: For us?

PLAYER: Let us hope so. *(They ALL flourish and bow, raggedly)* Tragedians, at your command.

ROS: 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.

PLAYER: A pleasure. We've played to bigger, of course.

ROS: What is your line?

PLAYER: Tragedy, sir. Deaths and disclosures, universal and particular, denouements both unexpected and inexorable, transvestite melodrama on all levels including the suggestive. We transport you into a world of intrigue and illusion. Clowns, if you like, murderers- we can do you ghosts and battles, heroes, villains, tormented lovers, *flagrante delicto* at a price, but that comes under realism for which there are special terms. Getting warm, am I?

ROS: Well, I don't know-

PLAYER: It costs little to watch, a little more if you happen to get caught up in the action, if that's your taste and times being what they are.

ROS: What are they?

PLAYER: Indifferent.

ROS: Bad?

PLAYER: Wicked. Now what precisely is your pleasure? *(He turns to the PLAYERS)* Gentlemen, disport yourselves. *(The PLAYERS shuffle into some sort of line)* There! See anything you like?

ROS: *(Doubtful, innocent)* What do they do?

PLAYER: Let your imagination run riot.

ROS: *(Tosses a coin on the ground between them. Bravely.)* What will you do for that? *(The PLAYERS lurch for the coin. The PLAYERS stamps his foot over it)*

PLAYER: *(Suggestively)* What did you have in mind?

ROS: Do you know any good plays?

PLAYER: Plays?

GUIL: I thought you said you were actors.

PLAYER: *(Dawning)* Oh. Oh, well, we are.

GUIL: Well then- one of the Greeks, perhaps? You're familiar with the tragedies of antiquity, are you?

PLAYER: We're more of the blood, love and rhetoric school.

GUIL: Well, I'll leave the choice to you.

PLAYER: I can do you blood and love without the rhetoric, and I can do you blood and rhetoric without the love, and I can do you

all three concurrent or consecutive, but I can't do you love and rhetoric without the blood. Blood is compulsory- they're all blood, you see.

GUIL: Is that what people want?

PLAYER: It's what we do. *(The PLAYERS get set) Entrances there and there. (The PLAYER has not moved. GUIL waits.)*

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

PLAYER: I never change out of it, sir.

(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. ROS walks up to him till they are face to face.)

ROS: Excuse me. *(The PLAYER lifts his foot. It was covering GUIL'S coin. ROS smiles.)* Thank you.

(The PLAYER turns and goes. ROS bends for the coin.)

GUIL: Come on.

ROS: I say, that was lucky.

GUIL: What?

ROS: It was tails.

(He tosses the coin to GUIL who catches it. Simultaneously OPHELIA runs on in some alarm, holding up her skirts- followed by HAMLET. HAMLET takes her by the wrist and raises a sigh so piteous and profound. He lets go of her and with his head over his shoulder turned, he goes out backwards without taking his eyes off her- she runs off in the opposite direction.)

GUIL: Come on!

(But a flourish- enter CLAUDIUS and GERTRUDE, attended.)

CLAUDIUS: Welcome, dear Rosencrantz- *(he raises a hand at GUIL while ROS bows- GUIL bows late and hurriedly)* and Guildenstern. *(He raises a hand at ROS while GUIL bows to him- ROS is still straightening up from his previous bow and halfway up he bows down again, with his head down, he twists to look at GUIL, who is on the way up.)*

Moreover that we did much long to see you,
 The need we have to use you did provoke
 Our hasty sending.
 Something have you heard
 Of Hamlet's transformation, so call it
 Sith neither th'exterior nor the inward man
 Resembles what it was. What it should be,
 More than his father's death, I cannot dream of.
 I entreat you both-
 That, being of so young days brought up with him
 That you vouchsafe your rest here in our court
 Some little time, so by your companies
 To draw him on to pleasures, and to gather
 So much as from occasion you may glean,
 Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus.

GERTRUDE: Good *(Fractional suspense)* gentlemen.

(They BOTH bow.)

He hath much talked of you,
 And sure I am, two men there is not living

To whom he more adheres. If it will please you
 To show us so much gentry and goodwill
 Your visitation shall receive such thanks
 As fits a king's remembrance.

ROS: Your majesties.

GUIL: We both obey.

CLAUDIUS: Thanks, Rosencrantz (*Turning to ROS who is caught unprepared, while GUIL bows*) and gentle Guildenstern (*Turning to GUIL who is bent double*)

GERTRUDE: (*Correcting*) Thanks Guildenstern (*Turning to ROS, who bows as GUIL checks upward movement to bow too- BOTH bent double, squinting at each other*) and gentle Rosencrantz (*Turning to GUIL, BOTH straightening up- GUIL checks again and bows again.*)

And I beseech you instantly to visit
 My too much changèd son. Go, some of you,
 And bring these gentlemen where Hamlet is.

(ROS and GUIL start to follow an ATTENDANT when POLONIUS enters. They stop and bow to him. He nods and hurries to CLAUDIUS. They turn to look at him)

POLONIUS: My lord.

I do think, or else this brain of mine
 Hunts not the trail of policy so sure
 As it hath used to do, that I have found
 The very cause of Hamlet's lunacy.

(Exeunt- leaving ROS and GUIL)

ROS: I want to go home.

GUIL: Don't let them confuse you.

ROS: You made me look ridiculous.

GUIL: I looked just as ridiculous as you did.

ROS: I want to go home. Which way did we come in? I've lost my sense of direction.

GUIL: The only beginning is birth and the only end is death- if you can't count on that, what can you count on?

ROS: What have we got to go on?

GUIL: We have been briefed. Hamlet's transformation. What do you recollect?

ROS: Well, he's changed, hasn't he?

GUIL: Draw him on to pleasures- glean what afflicts him.

ROS: Something more than his father's death-

GUIL: He's always talking about us- there aren't two people living whom he dotes on more than us.

ROS: Find out what's the matter-

GUIL: Exactly, it's a matter of asking the right questions. It's a game.

ROS: And then we can go?

GUIL: And receive such thanks as fits a king's remembrance.

ROS: I like the sound of that. *(Pause)* Shouldn't we be doing something- constructive?

GUIL: What did you have in mind? A short, blunt human pyramid?

ROS: We could go.

GUIL: Where?

ROS: After him.

GUIL: Why? They've got us placed now- if we start moving around, we'll all be chasing each other all night.

ROS: *(At footlights)* How very intriguing! I feel like a spectator- an appalling business. 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. What a fine persecution- to be kept intrigued without ever quite being enlightened. *(Pause)* We've had no practice.

ROS: We could play at questions.

GUIL: What good would that do?

ROS: Practice!

GUIL: Statement! One-love.

ROS: Cheating!

GUIL: How?

ROS: I hadn't started yet.

GUIL: Statement. Two-love.

ROS: Are you counting that?

GUIL: What?

ROS: Are you counting that?

GUIL: Foul! No repetitions. Three-love. First game.

ROS: I'm not going to play if you're going to be like that.

GUIL: Whose serve?

ROS: Hah?

GUIL: Foul! No grunts. Love-one.

ROS: Whose go?

GUIL: Why?

ROS: Why not?

GUIL: What for?

ROS: Foul! No synonyms! One-all.

GUIL: What in God's name is going on?

ROS: Foul! No rhetoric. Two-one.

GUIL: What does it all add up to?

ROS: Can't you guess?

GUIL: Were you addressing me?

ROS: Is there anyone else?

GUIL: Who?

ROS: How would I know?

GUIL: Why do you ask?

ROS: Are you serious?

GUIL: Was that rhetoric?

ROS: No.

GUIL: Statement! Two-all. Game point.

ROS: What's the matter with you today?

GUIL: When?

ROS: What?

GUIL: Are you deaf?

ROS: Am I dead?

GUIL: Yes or no?

ROS: Is there a choice?

GUIL: Is there a God?

ROS: Foul! No *non sequiturs*, three-two. One game all.

GUIL: (*Seriously*) What's your name?

ROS: What's yours?

GUIL: I asked you first.

ROS: Statement. One-love.

GUIL: What's your name when you're at home?

ROS: What's yours?

GUIL: When I'm at home?

ROS: Is it different at home?

GUIL: What home?

ROS: Haven't you got one?

GUIL: Why do you ask?

ROS: What are you driving at?

GUIL: What's your name?!

ROS: Repetition! Two-love. Match point to me.

GUIL: *(Seizing him violently)* WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

ROS: Rhetoric! Game and match! *(Pause)* Where's it going to end?

GUIL: That's the question.

ROS: It's *all* questions.

(Enter HAMLET, crossing the stage reading a book)

GUIL: Rosencrantz!

(HAMLET exits)

ROS: Who was that?

GUIL: Didn't you know him?

ROS: He didn't know me.

GUIL: He didn't see you.

ROS: I didn't see him.

GUIL: We shall see. I *hardly* knew him, he's changed.

ROS: You could see that?

GUIL: Transformed.

ROS: He's changed.

GUIL: I could see that. *(Beat)* Glean what afflicts him.

ROS: Me?

GUIL: Him.

ROS: How?

GUIL: Question and answer. Old ways are the best ways.

ROS: He's afflicted.

GUIL: You question, I'll answer.

ROS: He's not himself, you know.

GUIL: I'm him, you see.

(Beat)

ROS: Who am I then?

GUIL: You're yourself.

ROS: Are you afflicted?

GUIL: That's the idea. Are you ready?

ROS: Let's go back a bit.

GUIL: I'm afflicted.

ROS: I see.

GUIL: Glean what afflicts me.

ROS: Right.

GUIL: Question and answer.

ROS: How should I begin?

GUIL: Address me.

ROS: My dear Guildenstern!

GUIL: *(Quietly)* You've forgotten- haven't you?

ROS: My dear Rosencrantz!

GUIL: *(Great control)* I don't think you quite understand. What we are attempting is a hypothesis in which *I* answer for *him*, while *you* ask me questions.

ROS: Ah! Ready?

GUIL: You know what to do?

ROS: What?

GUIL: Are you stupid?

ROS: Pardon?

GUIL: Are you deaf?

ROS: Did you speak?

GUIL: *(Admonishing)* Not now-

ROS: Statement.

GUIL: *(Shouts)* Not now! *(Pause. They separate and sit.)* Perhaps he'll come back this way.

ROS: Should we go?

GUIL: Why?

(Pause)

ROS: *(Starts up. Snaps fingers)* Oh! You mean- you pretend to be *him*, and *I* ask you questions!

GUIL: *(Dry)* Very good.

ROS: You had me confused.

GUIL: I could see I had.

ROS: How should I begin?

GUIL: Address me.

(They stand facing each other, posing)

ROS: My honored lord!

GUIL: My dear Rosencrantz!

(Pause)

ROS: Am I pretending to be you, then?

GUIL: Certainly not. Shall we continue?

ROS: Question and answer.

GUIL: Right.

ROS: Right. My honored lord!

GUIL: My dear fellow!

ROS: How are you?

GUIL: Afflicted!

ROS: Really? In what way?

GUIL: Transformed.

ROS: I see. *(Pause)* Not much new there.

GUIL: Go into details. *Delve*. Probe the background, establish the situation.

ROS: So- so your uncle is the king of Denmark?!

GUIL: And my father before him.

ROS: His father before him?

GUIL: No, my father before him.

ROS: But surely-

GUIL: You might well ask.

ROS: Let me get it straight. Your father was king. You were his only son. Your father dies. You are of age. Your uncle becomes king.

GUIL: Yes.

ROS: Unorthodox.

GUIL: Undid me.

ROS: Usurpation, then.

GUIL: He slipped in.

ROS: Which reminds me.

GUIL: Well, it would.

ROS: I don't want to be personal.

GUIL: It's common knowledge.

ROS: Your mother's marriage.

GUIL: He slipped in.

(Beat)

ROS: (*Lugubriously*) His body was still warm.

GUIL: So was hers.

ROS: Extraordinary.

GUIL: Indecent.

ROS: Hasty.

GUIL: Suspicious.

ROS: It makes you think.

GUIL: Don't think I haven't thought of it.

ROS: And with her husband's brother.

GUIL: They were close.

ROS: She went to him-

GUIL: -Too close-

ROS: -for comfort

GUIL: It looks bad.

ROS: It adds up.

GUIL: Incest to adultery.

ROS: To sum up: your father, whom you love, dies, you are his heir, you come back to find that hardly was the corpse cold before his young brother popped onto his thorne and into his sheets, thereby offending both legal and natural practice. Now why exactly are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?

GUIL: I can't imagine! *(Pause)* But all that is well known, common property. Yet he sent for us. And we did come. *(Pause)* Go and see if he's there.

ROS: *(He goes to the wing, looks, returns formally making his report)* Yes.

GUIL: What is he doing?

ROS: *(Repeats movement)* Talking.

GUIL: To himself? *(ROS starts to move, GUIL cuts it impatiently)* Is he alone?

ROS: No.

GUIL: Then he's not talking to himself, is he?

ROS: Coming this way, I think. Should we go?

GUIL: Why? We're marked now.

(HAMLET enters, backwards, talking, followed by POLONIUS)

HAMLET: ...for you yourself sir, should be as old as I am if like a crab you could go backward.

POLONIUS: *(Aside)* Though this be madness, yet there is method in it. Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

HAMLET: Into my grave.

POLONIUS: Indeed, that's out of the air. My lord, I will take my leave of you.

HAMLET: You cannot take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal- except my life, except my life, except my life-

POLONIUS: Fare you well, my lord. *(To ROS)* You go to seek Lord Hamlet? There he is.

ROS: *(To POLONIUS)* God save you, sir.

(POLONIUS goes)

GUIL: *(Calls to HAMLET)* My honored lord!

ROS: My most dear lord!

HAMLET: My excellent good friends! How dost thou Guildenstern?
(Raises his arm to ROS, GUIL meanwhile bowing to no greeting. HAMLET corrects himself. Still to ROS:) Ah, Rosencrantz! *(They laugh good-naturedly at the mistake. HAMLET, in the middle, arm over each shoulder)* Gentlemen, you are welcome to Elsinore! *(He takes their hands)* 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.

(POLONIUS enters)

POLONIUS: Well be with you, gentlemen.

HAMLET: *(To ROS)* Mark you, Guildenstern *(Uncertainly to GUIL)* and you too; That great baby you see there is not yet out of his swaddling clouts.

POLONIUS: My lord, I have news to tell you.

HAMLET: *(Mimicking)* My lord, I have news to tell you.

POLONIUS: The actors are come hither, my lord.

HAMLET: Buzz, buzz.

(Exeunt HAMLET and POLONIUS. ROS and GUIL ponder. Each reluctant to speak first)

GUIL: Hm?

ROS: Yes?

GUIL: What?

ROS: I thought you-

GUIL: No.

ROS: Ah.

(Pause)

GUIL: I think we can say we made some headway.

ROS: I think we can say he made us look ridiculous.

GUIL: We played it close to the chest of course.

ROS: *(Derisively)* "Question and answer. Old ways are the best ways!" I was waiting for you to *delve*. "When is he going to start *delving*?"

GUIL: We got his symptoms, didn't we?

ROS: Half of what he said meant something else, and the other half didn't mean anything at all.

GUIL: I'm prepared to let the whole matter drop. *(Pause)*
Somebody might come in. It's what we're counting on, after all.

ROS: Give them a shout. Something provocative. *Intrigue* them.

GUIL: Wheels have been set in motion, Each move is dictated by the previous one- that is the meaning of order. If we start being arbitrary it'll just be a shambles.

(Pause. ROS leaps up and bellows at the audience)

ROS: Fire!

GUIL: *(He jumps up)* Where?

ROS: It's all right- I'm demonstrating the misuse of free speech. To prove it exists. *(He regards the audience with contempt)* Not a move. They should burn to death in their shoes.

(POLONIUS enters with the PLAYERS, followed by HAMLET)

POLONIUS: Come, sirs.

HAMLET: Follow him, friends. We'll hear a play tomorrow. *(Aside to the PLAYER)* Dost thou hear me, old friend? Can you play *The Murder of Gonzago*?

PLAYER: Ay, my lord.

HAMLET: We'll ha't tomorrow night. 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?

PLAYER: Ay, my lord.

HAMLET: Very well. Follow that lord, and look you mock him not. *(THE PLAYERS notes ROS and GUIL. Stops. HAMLET addresses them without pause)* My good friends, I'll leave you till tonight. You are welcome to Elsinore.

ROS: Good, my lord.

(HAMLET goes)

GUIL: So you've caught up.

PLAYER: You left us.

GUIL: Yes, I'm sorry we had to miss it.

PLAYER: You don't understand the humiliation of it- to be tricked out of the single assumption which makes our existence viable- that somebody is *watching*. *(Lost)* There we were-

demented children mincing about in clothes that no one ever wore, speaking as no man ever spoke, swearing love in wigs and rhymed couplets, killing each other with wooden swords, hollow potestations of faith hurled after empty promises of vengeance- and every gesture, every pose, vanishing into the thin unpopulated air. Don't you see?! We're actors- we're the opposite of people! We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade, that someone would be watching. And then, gradually, no one was.

(Silence. He starts to exit)

GUIL: Where are you going?

PLAYER: I can come and go as I please.

GUIL: We're still finding our feet.

PLAYER: I should concentrate on not losing your heads.

(The PLAYER makes to go again, GUIL cuts him off again)

GUIL: The truth is, we value your company, for want of any other. We have been left so much to our own devices- after a while one welcomes the uncertainty of being left to other people's.

PLAYER: Uncertainty is the normal state. You're nobody special.

(He makes to leave again. GUIL loses his cool)

GUIL: What are we supposed to do?!

PLAYER: Relax. Respond. That's what people do. You can't go through life questioning your situation at every turn.

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.

GUIL: We only know what we're told, and that's little enough. And for all we know it isn't even true.

PLAYER: For all anyone knows, nothing is. *(Beat)* What do you assume?

ROS: Hamlet is not himself, outside or in. We have to glean what afflicts him.

GUIL: He's- melancholy.

PLAYER: Melancholy?

ROS: Mad.

PLAYER: How is he mad?

ROS: Ah. *(To GUIL)* How is he mad?

GUIL: More morose than mad, perhaps.

PLAYER: Melancholy.

GUIL: Moody.

ROS: He has moods.

PLAYER: Of moroseness?

GUIL: Madness. And yet.

ROS: Quite.

GUIL: For instance.

ROS: He talks to himself, which might be madness.

GUIL: If he didn't talk sense, which he does.

ROS: Which suggests the opposite.

PLAYER: Of what?

(Small pause)

GUIL: I think I have it. A man talking sense to himself is no madder than a man talking nonsense not to himself.

ROS: Or just as mad.

GUIL: Or just as mad.

ROS: And he does both.

GUIL: So there you are.

ROS: Stark raving sane.

(Pause)

PLAYER: Why?

GUIL: Ah. *(To ROS)* Why?

ROS: Exactly.

GUIL: Exactly what?

ROS: Exactly why.

GUIL: Exactly why *what*?

ROS: What?

GUIL: *Why*?

ROS: Why what, exactly?

GUIL: Why is he mad?!

ROS: *I don't know!*

(Beat)

PLAYER: The old man thinks he's in love with his daughter.

ROS: *(Appalled)* We're out of our depth here.

PLAYER: No, no, no- *he* hasn't got a daughter- the old man thinks he's in love with *his* daughter.

ROS: The old man is?

PLAYER: Hamlet, in love with the old man's daughter, the old man thinks.

ROS: Ha! It's beginning to make sense!

(The PLAYER moves)

GUIL: *(Fascist)* Nobody leaves this room! *(Pause, lamely)* Without a very good reason.

PLAYER: Why not?

GUIL: All this strolling about is getting too arbitrary by half. I'm rapidly losing my grip. From now on reason will prevail.

PLAYER: I have lines to learn.

GUIL: Pass!

(The PLAYER passes into one of the wings. ROS cups his hands and shouts into the opposite one)

ROS: Next!

(But no one comes)

GUIL: What did you expect?

ROS: Something... someone... nothing.

GUIL: One must think of the future.

ROS: It could go on for ever. Well, not for ever, I suppose.
(Pause) Do you ever think of yourself as actually *dead*, lying in a box with a lid on it?

GUIL: No.

ROS: Nor do I, really... It's silly to be depressed by it. I mean one thinks of it like being *alive* in a box, one keeps forgetting to take into account the fact that one is *dead*...which should make all the difference...shouldn't it? I mean, you'd never *know* you were in a box, would you? It would be just like being *asleep* in a box. Not that I'd like to sleep in a box, mind you, not without any air- you'd wake up dead, for a start, and then where would you be? Apart from inside a box. That's the bit I don't like, frankly. Because you'd be helpless, wouldn't you? Stuffed in a box like that, I mean you'd be in there forever. Even taking into account the fact that you're dead, it isn't a pleasant thought. *Especially* if you're dead, really...ask yourself, if I asked you straight off- I'm going to stuff you in this box now, would you rather be alive or dead? Naturally, you'd prefer to be alive. Life in a box is better than no life at all. I expect. You'd have a chance at least. You could lie there thinking- well, at least I'm not dead! (Pause) I wouldn't think about it if I were you. You'd only get depressed. (Pause) Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean, where's it going to end?

(He leaps up and shouts into the wings)

All right, we know you're in there! Come out talking! (Pause) We have no control. None at all. *(He paces)* They're taking us for granted! Well I won't stand for it! *(he wheels again to face the wings)* Keep out, then! I forbid anyone to enter! *(No one comes.)* That's better.

(Immediately behind him a grand procession enters: CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, POLONIUS, and OPHELIA. CLAUDIUS takes ROS's elbow as he passes and is immediately in deep conversation)

GERTRUDE: Did he receive you well?

ROS: Most like a gentleman.

GUIL: But with much forcing of his disposition.

GERTRUDE: Did you assay him to any pastime?

ROS: Madam, it so fell out that certain players
We o'erraught on the way: of these we told him
And there did seem in him a kind of joy
To hear of it. They are here about the court,
And, as I think, they have already ordered
This night to play before him.

POLONIUS: 'Tis most true
And he beseeched me to entreat your Majesties
To hear and see the matter.

CLAUDIUS: With all my heart, and it doth content me
To hear him so inclined.
Good gentlemen, give him a further edge
And drive his purpose into these delights.

ROS: We shall, my lord.

CLAUDIUS: Sweet Gertrude, leave us, too,
For we have closely sent for Hamlet hither,
That he, as t'were by accident, may here
Affront Ophelia...

(Exeunt)

ROS: 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: I'm going. *(GUIL ignores him. ROS heads to the wings, looks
out and comes back quickly)* He's coming.

GUIL: What's he doing?

ROS: Nothing.

GUIL: He must be doing something.

ROS: Walking.

(Pause)

GUIL: I can't for the life of me see how we're going to get into conversation.

(HAMLET enters, weighing the pros and cons of his quietus. ROS and GUIL watch him)

ROS: One might well...accost him...Yes...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.

(OPHELIA enters, with prayerbook)

HAMLET: Nymph, in thy orisons be all my sins remembered.

OPHELIA: Good my lord, how does your honor for this many a day?

HAMLET: I humbly thank you- well, well, well.

(They disappear talking into the wing)

ROS: It's like living in a public park!

GUIL: Very impressive. Yes, I thought your direct informal approach was going to stop this thing dead in its tracks. If I might make a suggestion- shut up and sit down.

ROS: *(Near tears)* I'm not going to stand for it!

(The PLAYERS enter)

PLAYER: *(Claps his hands)* Right! We haven't got much time!

GUIL: What are you doing?

PLAYER: Dress rehearsal. Now if you two wouldn't mind just moving back...there...good. *(to the PLAYERS)* Everyone ready? Good. Silence! Off we go! Act One moves now!

(The mime. Soft music from a recorder. PLAYER-KING and PLAYER-QUEEN embrace. She kneels and makes a show of protestation to him. He takes her up, declining his head upon her neck. He lies down. She, seeing him asleep, leaves him.)

GUIL: What's the dumbshow for?

PLAYER: Well, it's a device, really- it makes the action that follows more or less comprehensible.

(Enter POISONER. He takes off the SLEEPER'S crown, kisses it. He has brought in a small bottle of liquid. He pours the poison in the SLEEPER'S ear, and leaves him. The SLEEPER convulses heroically, dying.)

ROS: Who was that?

PLAYER: The King's brother and uncle to the Prince.

(The QUEEN returns, makes passionate action, finding the KING dead. The POISONER comes in again, attended by TWO OTHERS (two in cloaks). The POISONER seems to console with her. The dead BODY is carried away. The POISONER woos the QUEEN with gifts. She seems harsh awhile but in the end accepts his love. End of mime, at which point the wail of a woman in torment and OPHELIA appears, wailing, closely followed by HAMLET in a hysterical state, shouting at her, circling her.)

HAMLET: Go to, I'll no more on't; it hath made me mad! *(She falls on her knees, weeping)* I say we will have no more marriage! Those that are married already- *(He leans close to the PLAYER-QUEEN and POISONER, speaking with quiet edge)* all but one shall live. The rest shall keep as they are. *(To OPHELIA)* To a nunnery, go.

(He goes out. OPHELIA falls to her knees, sobbing. CLAUDIUS enters with POLONIUS and goes over to OPHELIA and lifts her to her feet)

CLAUDIUS: There's something
In his soul o'er which his melancholy sits on
Brood, and I do doubt the hatch and the
Disclose will be some danger; which for to
Prevent I have in quick determination thus set
It down: he shall with speed to England...

(Which carries the three of them - CLAUDIUS, POLONIUS, OPHELIA - out of sight. The PLAYER moves, clapping his hands for attention)

PLAYER: Act Two! Positions!

GUIL: Wasn't that the end?

PLAYER: Do you call that an ending?- with practically everyone on his feet? My goodness no- over your dead body. Positions!
(The PLAYERS have taken up their positions for the continuation of the mime: which in this case means a love scene, sexual and passionate, between the QUEEN and the KING. They begin. The PLAYER contributes a breathless commentary) Having murdered his brother and woo'd the widow- the poisoner mounts the throne! Here we see him and his queen give rein to their unbridled passion! She little knowing that the man she holds in her arms-
(to GUIL) I come on in a minute. Lucianus, nephew to the king.
(To the PLAYERS) Next! *(They disport themselves to accommodate the next piece of mime).*

Lucianus, nephew to the King...usurped by his uncle and shattered by his mother's incestuous marriage...loses his reason...throwing the court into turmoil and disarray as he alternates between bitter melancholy and unrestricted lunacy...staggering from the suicidal *(a pose)* to the homicidal *(here he kills "POLONIUS")*...he at last confronts his mother in a scene of provocative ambiguity *(A somewhat oedipal embrace)* begs her to repent and recant- *(He springs up, still talking)* The King- *(He pushes forward the POISONER/KING)* tormented by guilt- haunted by fear- decides to dispatch his nephew to

England- and entrusts this undertaking to two smiling accomplices- friends- courtiers- to two spies- (*He has swung round to bring together the POISONER/KING and the two cloaked PLAYERS; the latter kneel and accept a scroll from the KING*) -giving them a letter to present to the English court! And so they depart- on board ship- (*The two SPIES position themselves on either side of the PLAYER and the THREE of them sway gently in unison, the motion of a boat; then the PLAYER detaches himself.*) -and they arrive- (*One SPY shades his eyes at the horizon*) -and disembark- and present themselves before the English king- (*He wheels round*) The English king- (*An exchange of headgear creates the ENGLISH KING from the remaining player who played the original murdered king.*) But where is the prince? Where indeed? The plot has thickened- a twist of fate and cunning has put into their hands a letter that seals their deaths! (*The Two SPIES present their letter; the ENGLISH KING reads it and orders their deaths. They stand up and turn. They start to spin imaginary coins. To GUIL*) Are you familiar with this play?

GUIL: No.

PLAYER: A slaughterhouse- eight corpses all told. It brings out the best in us.

GUIL: (*Tense, progressively rattled during the whole mime*) You! What do you know about *death*?

PLAYER: It's what the actors do best.

GUIL: (*Fear, derision*) Actors! The mechanics of cheap melodrama! That isn't *death*! You scream and choke and sink to your knees, but it doesn't bring death home to anyone- it doesn't catch them unawares and start the whisper in their skulls that says- "One day you are going to die."

PLAYER: (*to the SPIES*) Show! (*The SPIES die at some length, rather well. The lights begin to fade as GUIL speaks*)

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 death. It's just a man failing to reappear, that's all- now you see him, now you don't.

(The two SPIES lie still. The PLAYER comes forward and throws the SPIES' cloaks over their bodies. ROS starts to clap, slowly. BLACKOUT. A second of silence, then much noise. Shouts... "The King rises!"... "Give o'er the play!"... and cries for "Lights, lights, lights!" When the lights come back up, it comes as a sunrise. ROS and GUIL are in the approximate positions last held by the SPIES.)

ROS: That must be east, then. I think we can assume that.

GUIL: I'm assuming nothing. *(Looks out to the audience)* They're waiting to see what we're going to do.

ROS: Good old east.

GUIL: As soon as we make a move they'll come pouring in from every side, shouting obscure instructions, confusing us with ridiculous remarks, messing us about from here to breakfast and getting our names wrong.

(From offstage, with urgency)

CLAUDIUS: Ho, Guildenstern!

ROS and GUIL: You're wanted.

(CLAUDIUS and GERTRUDE enter. They are in some desperation)

CLAUDIUS: Friends both, go join you with some further aid: Hamlet in madness hath Polonius slain, and from his mother's closet hath he dragged him. Go seek him out; speak fair and bring the body into the chapel. I pray you, haste in this. Come, Gertrude...

(They've gone. ROS and GUIL remain quite still.)

GUIL: Well...

ROS: Quite...

GUIL: Well, well.

ROS: Quite, quite. (*Nods with spurious confidence*) Seek him out.
(*Pause*) Etcetera.

GUIL: Well, that's a step in the right direction.

ROS: You think so? He could be anywhere.

GUIL: All right- you go that way, I'll go this way.

ROS: Right. (*They walk towards opposite wings. ROS halts*) No.
(*GUIL halts*) You go this way- I'll go that way.

GUIL: All right.

(*They march towards each other, cross.*)

ROS: Wait a minute. (*GUIL halts*) We ought to stick together. He might be violent.

GUIL: Good point. (*They move together*) Well, at last we're getting somewhere. (*Pause*) Of course, he might not come.

ROS: Oh, he'll come. Don't worry- take my word for it. (*Looks out-is appalled*) He's coming!

(*HAMLET enters dragging POLONIUS'S body, crosses the stage, then exits.*)

He was dead.

GUIL: Of course he's dead! (*Angrily*) Death's death, isn't it?
(*Pause*) Perhaps he'll come back this way.

ROS: Give him a shout.

GUIL: I thought we'd been into all that.

ROS: (*Shouts*) Hamlet!

GUIL: Don't be absurd.

ROS: (*Shouts*) Lord Hamlet! (*HAMLET enters*) What have you done, my lord, with the dead body?

HAMLET: Compounded it with dust, where to 'tis kin.

ROS: My lord, you must tell us where the body is and go with us to the King.

HAMLET: The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing-

GUIL: A thing, my lord?

HAMLET: Of nothing. Bring me to him.

(HAMLET moves towards one wing, ROS and GUIL following. Just before they reach the exit, HAMLET, apparently seeing CLAUDIUS approaching, bends low in a sweeping bow. ROS and GUIL also bow deeply. HAMLET, however, continues the movement into an about-turn and walks off in the opposite direction. ROS and GUIL, with their heads still low, do not notice. No one comes on. ROS and GUIL find they are bowing to nothing. CLAUDIUS and GERTRUDE enters behind them. At his first words they leap up and do a double-take.)

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: Bring him before us.

(ROS turn to GUIL, with great deliberation.)

ROS: Ho! Bring in the lord.

(HAMLET, escorted, is marched in just as CLAUDIUS leaves.)

Will it please you go, my lord?

HAMLET: I'll be with you straight. Go you a little before.

(HAMLET turns to face Upstage. ROS returns down to GUIL)

ROS: He *said* we can go. Cross my heart.

GUIL: I like to know where I am. Even if I don't know where I am, I like to know *that*. If we go, there's no knowing.

ROS: No knowing what?

GUIL: If we'll ever come back.

ROS: We don't want to come back.

GUIL: That may very well be true, but do we want to go?

ROS: We'll be free.

GUIL: I don't know.

ROS: We've come this far. And besides, anything could happen yet. *(Lights blackout suddenly. Sea sounds. Shouts of sailors calling nautical instructions from all directions. Lights back up. We see three large man-sized barrels. A large gaudy striped umbrella on a pole stuck into the deck.)* We're on a boat. *(Looking around)* What now?

GUIL: What do you mean?

ROS: Well, nothing is happening.

GUIL: We're on a boat.

ROS: I'm aware of that.

GUIL: (*Angrily*) Then what do you expect?

ROS: (*Almost in tears*) Oh, what's going to become of us!

GUIL: Don't cry...it's all right.

ROS: But we've got nothing to go on, we're out on our own.

GUIL: We're on our way to England. We're taking Hamlet there.

ROS: What for?

GUIL: What for? Where have you been?

ROS: When?

GUIL: We take him to the king. We've got a letter. You remember the letter.

ROS: Do I?

GUIL: Everything is explained in the letter.

ROS: Is that it, then?

GUIL: Then that's it. We're finished.

ROS: But what are we going to say?

GUIL: We say- Your majesty, we've arrived!

ROS: (*Kingly*) And who are you?

GUIL: We are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

ROS: (*Barks*) Never heard of you!

GUIL: Well, we're nobody special-

ROS: *(Regal and nasty)* What's your game?

GUIL: We've got our instructions-

ROS: First I've heard of it-

GUIL: *(Angry)* Let me finish- *(Humble)* We've come from Denmark.

ROS: What do you want?

GUIL: Nothing- we're delivering Hamlet-

ROS: You expect me to take in every lunatic you try to pass off-

GUIL: We've got a letter-

(ROS snatches it and tears it open)

ROS: *(Efficiently)* I see...I see... it is an exact command from the king of Denmark, importing Denmark's health and England's too, that on the reading of this letter, without delay, I should have Hamlet's head cut off-! *(GUIL snatches the letter. ROS double-taking, snatches it back. GUIL snatches it half back. They read it together. Pause)* We're his friends.

GUIL: How do you know? *(Beat)* Death comes to us all, etcetera. *(Beat)* And then again, what is so terrible about death? Since we don't know what it is, it is illogical to fear it. It might be... very nice. *(Beat)* We are little men, we don't know the ins and outs of the matter- it would be presumptuous of us to interfere with the designs of fate. All in all, I think we'd be well advised to leave well enough alone.

ROS: It's awful.

GUIL: It could have been worse. I was beginning to think it was. *(His relief comes out as a laugh. Behind them, HAMLET appears from behind the umbrella and blows out the lantern. The stage goes pitch black. The black resolves itself to moonlight. HAMLET approaches the now sleeping ROS and GUIL. He extracts the*

letter, and replaces it, and retires. Morning comes. Beneath the umbrella, reclining in a deck-chair, reading a book sits HAMLET. ROS and GUIL watch the sun rise. The muffled sound of a recorder. ROS and GUIL sit up.) Out of the void, finally, a sound. Go and see what it is.

(ROS listens. Inspects the barrels. He lifts one of the lids and The PLAYER's head pops out.)

PLAYER: Aha! All in the same boat, then! *(He climbs out and goes around banging on the other barrels.)* Everybody out! *(Impossibly, the PLAYERS climb out of the barrels.)*

GUIL: What are you doing here?

PLAYER: Travelling. In disfavor. Our play offended the King.

GUIL: Yes.

PLAYER: Well, he's a second husband himself. Tactless, really. We had to run for it just as we were. Surprised to see us?

GUIL: I knew it wasn't the end.

PLAYER: With practically everyone on his feet. What do you make of it so far?

ROS: *(He jumps up)* Incidents! All we get is incidents! Is it too much to expect a little sustained action?!

(And with that the "Pirates" attack. That is to say noise and shouts and rushing about. Everyone visible goes frantic. HAMLET, ROS, GUIL and the PLAYER draw swords. They shout various lines: "To arms!" "Pirates!" "Up there!" "Down there!" "Action!" Fighting continues. They leap into the barrels to hide. The lights fade to black as the fighting sounds continue then fade to nothing. Lights up. ROS, GUIL and THE PLAYER emerge from their respective barrels.)

ROS: They've gone. That was close. *(Notices HAMLET is missing)* Where's-?

PLAYER: Once more, alone- on our own resources.

GUIL: What do you mean? Where is he?

PLAYER: Gone.

GUIL: Gone where?

ROS: Is he dead?

PLAYER: Who knows?

ROS: He's dead as far as we're concerned.

PLAYER: Or we are as far as he is.

GUIL: But he can't- we're supposed to be- we've got a *letter*- we're going to England with a letter from the King-

PLAYER: Yes, that much seems certain. I congratulate you on the unambiguity of your situation.

GUIL: But you don't understand- the whole thing's pointless without him.

PLAYER: Pirates could happen to anyone. Just deliver the letter-

GUIL: (*Worked up*) Can't you see- nothing will be resolved without him! We need Hamlet for our release! What are we supposed to do?

PLAYER: This. (*He turns away, lies down*)

ROS: (*Sighs*) The sun's going down. (*Pause*) It'll be night soon. (*Pause*) If that's west. (*Pause*) Unless we've-

GUIL: (*Shouts*) Shut up! I'm sick of it! Do you think conversation is going to help us now? (*Broken*) We've traveled too far. We move idly toward eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation.

ROS: Be happy. If you're not even *happy* what's so good about surviving? We'll be all right. I suppose we just go on.

GUIL: Go where?

ROS: To England.

GUIL: What do we say?

ROS: We say- We've arrived!

GUIL: (*Kingly*) And who are you?

ROS: We're Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

GUIL: What's it all about?

ROS: Well, we were bringing Hamlet- but then some pirates-

GUIL: I don't begin to understand.

ROS: We have a letter-

GUIL: (*Snatches the letter*) A letter-yes-that's true. That's something... (*Reads*) "As England is Denmark's faithful tributary...as love between them might flourish, etcetera...that on the knowing of this contents without delay should those bearers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, put to sudden death-"

(He double-takes. ROS snatches the letter. GUIL snatches it back. ROS snatches it half back. They read it again and look up. The PLAYER gets to his feet and walks over to the barrel and kicks it and shouts:)

PLAYER: It's all over!

(One by one the PLAYERS emerge. ROS and GUIL are still appalled and mesmerized)

GUIL: (*Quietly*) Where we went wrong was getting on a boat.

ROS: They had it in for us, didn't they?

GUIL: But why? Who are we that so much should converge on our little deaths? Who are we?

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

GUIL: No- it is not enough. To be told so little- to such and end- and still, finally, to be denied an explanation-

PLAYER: In our experience, most things end in death.

GUIL: *(Fear, vengeance, scorn)* Your experience!- *Actors!* *(He snatches a dagger from The PLAYER'S belt and holds the point at his throat)* I'm talking about death- you've never experienced that. You cannot act it. No one gets up after death- there is no applause- there is only silence, and that's death- *(and he pushes the blade up to the hilt. The PLAYER stands with huge terrible eyes, clutches at the wound, makes small weeping sounds and falls to his knees, dying. GUIL, nervous, almost hysterical, wheels on the PLAYERS)* If we have 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-

(The PLAYERS watch the PLAYER die. A short silence. The PLAYERS applaud with genuine admiration. The PLAYER stands up, brushing himself down.)

PLAYER: *(Modestly)* Oh, come, come, gentlemen- no flattery- it was merely competent. *(He approaches GUIL who still stands holding the dagger)* What did you think? *He holds his hand out for the dagger. He slowly presses the point into his palm and pushes- the blade slides back into the handle. He smiles.)*

ROS: *(Relief, loud laughter)* Oh, very good! Very good! *(Claps)*
Encore!

PLAYER: *(Activated, arms spread)* Deaths for all ages and occasions! Climatic carnage, by poison and by steel-! Double deaths by duel-! Show-!

(And now a representation of the "duel scene" at the end of "Hamlet." The PLAYER himself - as "Hamlet" - duels with "Laertes" each being mortally wounded. Meanwhile ALFRED as the "Queen" drinks from a poisoned goblet before the King can stop him and dies. The PLAYER kills the KING. LAERTES dies. The PLAYER dies after the speech that follows. Amid the dying:)

GUIL: *(Tired, drained but still impatient)* No...no...not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over.

(The light begins to fade, leaving only ROS and GUIL visible)

ROS: That's it, then, is it? *(No answer. He looks out front)* The sun's going down. Or the earth's coming up. *(Small pause)* Not that it makes any difference. *(Pause)* What was it all about? When did it begin? *(Pause. No answer)* We're still young...fit...we've got years... *(Pause. A cry)* We've done nothing wrong! We didn't harm anyone. Did we?

GUIL: I can't remember.

ROS: *(He pulls himself together)* All right then. I don't care. I've had enough. To tell you the truth, I'm relieved.

(He disappears. Or hangs himself?)

GUIL: There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said- no. But somehow we missed it. *(He looks around)* Rosen-? Guil-? *(He gathers himself)* Well, we'll know better next time. Now you see me, now you-

(And he disappears. Or hangs himself? Immediately the stage is lit up, revealing the tableau of court and corpses that is the last scene of Hamlet. That is: CLAUDIUS, GERTRUDE, LAERTES, and HAMLET all dead. HORATIO holds HAMLET. An Ambassador from England surveys the scene:)

AMBASSADOR: The sight is dismal;
And our affairs come too late.

The ears are senseless that should give us hearing
To tell him his commandment is fulfilled,
That Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

(Music. Blackout.)