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THEATRE AS ONTOLOGY: DRAMATURGICAL FORM AND PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY IN TOM STOPPARD'S CREATIVE ACTIVITY

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Abstract. This paper examines the defining dramaturgical strategies that shape Tom Stoppard's postmodern theatrical practice, tracing their formal, philosophical, and aesthetic development from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) through *Arcadia* (1993) and *The Invention of Love* (1997). Challenging the persistent critical tendency to reduce Stoppard's achievement to its most visible surface – intertextual wit, verbal ingenuity, and affinities with the Theatre of the Absurd – the study advances a systemic reconstruction of his dramaturgy as a coherent philosophical-poetic model. This model is grounded in the interaction of five interrelated principles: exuberance of invention, parody as structural critique, semiotics of unstable language, theatrical spectacle as an ontological medium, and staging of ideological and philosophical collision. These principles are first articulated in their theoretical interdependence and then examined in concentrated form through a close reading of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as a paradigmatic instance of postmodern drama. The analysis demonstrates that Stoppard's intertextual reconfiguration of *Hamlet* does not merely reinterpret a canonical text but enacts, at the level of dramaturgical structure, the epistemological uncertainty and ontological instability that define his broader poetics. Particular attention is devoted to the representation of death as simultaneously a metaphysical problem, a theatrical construct, and a site of ontological absence. In this context, the play is situated at the intersection of Samuel Beckett's absurdism, Martin Heidegger's concept of Being-toward-death, and Jacques Derrida's notion of aporia. The paper concludes that Stoppard's dramaturgy emerges as a distinctive aesthetic project that affirms theatre as a privileged mode of philosophical inquiry into the human condition, while simultaneously exposing the irreducible contingency of meaning, identity, and human existence.

Key words: English dramaturgy; English dramatists; literary creative activity; literary genres; literary plots; plays; T. Stoppard; postmodern theater; metatheater; dramaturgical principles; intertextuality; parody; ontology; death

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ТЕАТР КАК ОНТОЛОГИЯ: ДРАМАТУРГИЧЕСКАЯ ФОРМА И ФИЛОСОФСКОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ В ТВОРЧЕСТВЕ ТОМА СТОППАРДА

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются ключевые драматургические стратегии, определяющие постмодернистскую театральную практику Тома Стоппарда, с акцентом на их формальное, философское и эстетическое развитие от пьесы «Розенкранц и Гильденстерн мертвы» (1966) до «Аркадии» (1993) и «Изобретения любви» (1997). Вопреки устойчивой критической тенденции сводить достижения Стоппарда к их наиболее очевидной поверхности – интертекстуальному остроумию и резонансам театра абсурда, – в статье предлагается системная реконструкция его драматургии как целостной философско-поэтической модели. Данная модель основана на взаимодействии пяти взаимосвязанных принципов: избытка художественного изобретения, пародии как формы структурной критики, семиотики нестабильного языка, театрального зрелища как онтологической среды и сценического развертывания идеологических и философских столкновений. Указанные принципы сначала рассматриваются в их теоретической взаимозависимости, а затем анализируются в концентрированном виде посредством подробного прочтения пьесы «Розенкранц и Гильденстерн мертвы» как парадигмального примера постмодернистской драмы. Особое внимание уделяется проблеме смерти, представленной одновременно как метафизическая апория, театральный конструкт и пространство онтологического отсутствия. Делается вывод о том, что драматургия Стоппарда представляет собой строго последовательную эстетическую программу, утверждающую театр как привилегированное пространство философского познания и одновременно подчеркивающую неустрашимую контингентность смысла, идентичности и человеческого существования.

Ключевые слова: английская драматургия; английские драматурги; литературное творчество; литературные жанры; литературные сюжеты; пьесы; Т. Стоппард; постмодернистский театр; метатеатр; драматургические принципы; интертекстуальность; пародия; онтология; смерть

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Introduction

Among contemporary British dramatists, Tom Stoppard (1937–2025) occupies a singular position as one of the most intellectually audacious and formally inventive playwrights of the past half-century. His work synthesizes philosophical inquiry, linguistic ingenuity, and structural experimentation into a dramaturgy that is as rigorously cerebral as it is theatrically alive. As Dennis Kennedy notes, “Stoppard’s language is a theatre of its own, where puns, paradoxes, and philosophical musings create a performance of intellect as much as of character” [Kennedy 2003: 612]. Yet language in Stoppard is never simply an instrument through which thought is expressed; rather, it constitutes the very medium in which reality, subjectivity, and meaning are simultaneously produced, contested, and destabilized.

What distinguishes Stoppard’s achievement is not simply its erudition or formal ingenuity, but its development across three decades into an increasingly unified and philosophically ambitious poetics. From the parodic intertextuality of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) and *Travesties* (1974), through the metaphysical acrobatics of *Jumpers* (1972), to the temporal palimpsests of *Arcadia* (1993) and the elegiac intellectualism of *The Invention of Love* (1997), Stoppard’s oeuvre reveals a sustained engagement with questions that transcend individual plays: the nature of truth, the limits of reason, the instability of identity, the relationship between determinism and freedom, and the possibility of meaning in a fragmented cultural landscape. Katherine E. Kelly notes that “Stoppard elevates theatre to a site of epistemological inquiry, where questions of determinism, free will, and moral ambiguity are explored not only through dialogue, but through the very architecture of the play itself” [The Cambridge Companion to Tom Stoppard 2001: 6]. This structural coherence has been further illuminated by Elena G. Dotsenko, who argues that the multiplication of realities and interpretive frameworks constitutes the defining principle of Stoppard’s postmodern dramaturgy, producing a dramatic universe in which literature, philosophy, science, and art converge within a complex process of encoding and decoding meaning [Dotsenko 2020: 63]¹.

The present article proposes a systematic reconstruction of Stoppard’s dramaturgy as an integrated philosophical-poetic vision grounded in the interaction of five interrelated principles: exuberance of invention, parody as structural critique, the semiotic instability of language, theatrical spectacle as ontological medium, and the staging of ideological collision. Against a dominant critical tendency – visible in John Fleming’s emphasis on “finding order amid chaos” and Patrick Delaney’s focus on moral vision – to examine these dimensions separately, the study insists on their

underlying conceptual unity and philosophical orientation. Methodologically, this reconstruction combines close reading, intertextual analysis, comparative dramaturgical inquiry, and philosophical hermeneutics. Close reading provides the principal analytical instrument for examining specific dramatic moments and formal strategies; intertextual analysis traces the intricate network of literary, philosophical, and cultural references that structure Stoppard’s works; comparative analysis identifies formal continuities across his oeuvre as well as productive points of dialogue with Shakespeare, Beckett, and other major predecessors; and philosophical hermeneutics, drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Heidegger, Derrida, Bakhtin, and Baudrillard, enables a more comprehensive articulation of the ontological and epistemological dimensions of his theatrical practice. The broader critical objective is the need to reconsider postmodern dramaturgy as a mode of philosophical inquiry in which theatrical form does not merely illustrate ideas but actively produces them: a distinction that will emerge with particular force in the analysis of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, where questions of identity, language, and death acquire not only thematic articulation but structural and ontological expression. It is, as Martin Esslin observed, the intellectual pyrotechnics of the stage that most powerfully distinguish Stoppard’s work – and it is precisely those pyrotechnics that this paper seeks to theorize [Esslin 1980: 297].

Stoppard’s Dramaturgical Principles: Wit, Philosophy, and Play

a) Exuberance of Invention

Among the defining features of Tom Stoppard’s dramaturgy is what may be termed the *exuberance of invention* – his penchant for eschewing the dramatization of quotidian or narrowly psychological experiences in favour of theatrically inventive, intellectually saturated, and structurally intricate narratives. Stoppard’s plots seldom conform to the realist conventions that characterize much of British postwar drama; they operate on a metafictional plane, where artifice is foregrounded and narrative construction becomes a theme in its own right. As R. Darren Gobert notes, “Stoppard’s theatre thrives on the tension between philosophical abstraction and dramatic action, refusing to settle into the binaries of realism and absurdism, politics and aesthetics” [Gobert 2014: 32].

A paradigmatic example is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. In this postmodern reimagining of *Hamlet*, Stoppard redirects the audience’s focus onto two marginal figures whose roles in the original tragedy are incidental and cryptic, transforming their peripheral journey into a philosophical meditation on determinism, identity, and existential absurdity. As Stoppard himself remarked, the play is “about the misuse of reality. About being caught between reality and appearance” [Stoppard, qtd. in Haffenden 1981]. Equally emblematic is *Travesties* (1974), which filters the un-

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Dotsenko’s Russian-language works cited in this article are my own.

canny historical coincidence of Lenin, Joyce, and Tzara in 1917 Zurich through the unreliable recollections of a minor British consular official. As Ruby Cohn remarks, it “is not merely parody but a structural and thematic interrogation of parody itself” [Cohn 1976: 201] – or, in Linda Hutcheon’s terms, a work of “historiographic metafiction” that simultaneously constructs and questions historical knowledge [Hutcheon 1988: 105].

b) Parody as Structural and Critical Form

Intricately entwined with Stoppard’s inventiveness is his *gift for parody*, a tool he wields with both irreverent wit and critical acumen. Crucially, Stoppard’s parody is not mimicry: it is philosophical auditing. By subjecting canonical texts to comic pressure, he isolates the assumptions they have naturalized and forces audiences to recognize the epistemological and ideological investments those conventions carry. As Linda Hutcheon argues, parody in the postmodern mode serves to “problematize representation by foregrounding its conventions” [Hutcheon 1985: 35] – and this is nowhere more rigorously enacted than in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, where the tragic determinism of *Hamlet* is systematically undercut by the peripheral characters’ disorientation and epistemological uncertainty.

In *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), this parodic reach extends to the entire genre of the country house murder mystery: a whodunit unfolds onstage while two theatre critics observe from their seats until the boundaries between spectatorship and participation dissolve. In *Jumpers* (1972), Stoppard parodies the rhetorical excesses of academic philosophy: George Moore’s disquisitions on the existence of God are rendered absurd by their theatrical context, juxtaposed against his wife’s nervous breakdown and the intrusion of murder. As Thomas Whitaker suggests, *Jumpers* “parodies the Enlightenment’s confidence in reason by plunging it into a world where logic is unmoored and metaphysics becomes vaudeville” [Whitaker 1983: 112]. Across these works, parody functions, in the words of Brian McHale, as “ontological theatre” – a strategy for exposing multiple, conflicting realities [cf. McHale 1987].

c) The Semiotics of Speech: Language, Play, and Instability

A further defining characteristic is Stoppard’s *persistent and playful engagement with language* – not merely as a vehicle for communication, but as a dynamic, multivalent object of philosophical inquiry in its own right. His plays are saturated with puns, riddles, paradoxes, and meta-literary allusions that not only delight but destabilize, drawing sustained attention to the slipperiness of signification and the constructedness of all discourse. The opening moments of *Arcadia* are quintessential: Thomasina’s query about “carnal embrace,” met by Septimus’s definition of it as “hugging a side of beef,” inaugurates a playful spiral in which language becomes simultaneously an instrument of revelation and concealment – a means of probing the fault lines between innocence and knowledge, between what is said and what is understood. In *The Invention of Love* (1997), dialogue is punctuated by echoes of Latin verse and Victorian poetry,

the gap between classical precision and lyric longing functioning as the medium in which an entire life’s tragedy is rendered legible. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* mischievously interlaces Hamletian iambs with Beckettian absurdism, and the interweaving is not merely stylistic but epistemological. When Hamlet enters and speaks – “To be, or not to be, that is the question” – his words carry the full metaphysical weight of the Shakespearean iambic tradition: the self present to itself, reasoning with formal clarity about its own existence. Seconds later, Rosencrantz deflates this with a line of pure Beckettian contingency: “Do you think death could possibly be a boat?” [Stoppard 2007: 103]. The juxtaposition is a formal philosophical argument. The iambic pentameter, with its internal logic of stress and resolution, enacts a world in which language and reality are commensurate; Rosencrantz’s non-sequitur enacts the collapse of that adequacy: a world in which words no longer answer to things, in which the inherited structures of meaning have become arbitrary, provisional, and faintly absurd. What unites these strategies is a consistent thesis: that language does not transparently name the world but actively constructs and conceals it – and that the kind of language one inherits, whether Shakespearean tragedy or Beckettian farce, determines the kind of world one can, or cannot, inhabit¹.

Stoppard’s linguistic exuberance is never divorced from the physicality of the theatre. The high-flown debates of *Jumpers* unfold amid acrobatic performances; the philosophical musings of *Arcadia* are paralleled by temporal shifts across centuries; the question game of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* turns the condition of not-knowing into a theatrical sport with rules, scoring, and disqualification.

d) Spectacle and Ontology: Theatrical Form as Philosophical Medium

Stoppard’s dramaturgy is also marked by a *striking formal inventiveness that foregrounds the physical and visual possibilities of theatre*. As Robert Gordon observes, “The stage is not simply a site for dialogue, but a medium of thought itself” [Gordon 2001: 145]. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the motif of the coin toss – ninety-two consecutive heads – radically destabilizes empirical logic. Guildenstern’s syllogism (“we are now within un-, sub- or supernatural forces” [Stoppard 2007: 18]) is emblematic of what Esslin identifies as the absurdist bewilderment before the unintelligibility of the world [cf. Esslin 1961]. In *Jumpers*, gymnast-philosophers attempt to form a human pyramid beneath a woman swinging from a trapeze. Jim Hunter’s observation that “The pyramid is not merely comic; it is epistemology made flesh” [Hunter 1982: 211] captures the essential point: the stage in these moments does not illustrate a proposition – it is the proposition, enacting rather than describing the precariousness of moral philosophy. This is what distinguishes Stoppard

¹ According to Dotsenko, Stoppard’s linguistic scepticism is indebted to the Wittgensteinian tradition [Dotsenko 2023: 141]. Language consequently appears not as a transparent vehicle of representation but as the very condition of intelligibility, echoing Wittgenstein’s claim that meaning emerges through use within a form of life.

from both the purely intellectual tradition and the purely visceral one, and what no study focused solely on his intertextual wit has adequately accounted for.

e) Staging Thought: Philosophy and Ideological Collision

A final defining feature of Stoppard's dramaturgy is its transformation of abstract thought into dramatic action. Ideas do not remain at the level of thematic reflection but are embodied in theatrical situations, generating conflict and shaping dramatic form. As Dotsenko demonstrates, philosophy remains inseparable from Stoppard's dramaturgy. His plays of the 1970s are strongly informed by the tradition of Cambridge analytic philosophy – particularly Russell, Moore, and Wittgenstein – while his later works increasingly engage with the philosophy of history and the history of ideas [Dotsenko 2023: 133–134]. This dramaturgical method is especially evident in *Jumpers*, where George's pursuit of a rational proof of God's existence culminates in the Dostoevskian proposition that “if there is no God, then everything is permitted.” The play thus dramatizes a crisis of ethical foundations that recalls Alasdair MacIntyre's diagnosis of modernity as an age marked by the fragmentation of moral tradition [MacIntyre 1981: 2]¹.

In *Travesties*, conflicting ideologies – Lenin's revolutionary materialism, Joyce's aesthetic autonomy, Tzara's avant-garde nihilism – are held in productive, unresolved tension. Rather than adjudicating between them, Stoppard stages what Bakhtin termed *dialogism*: the coexistence of mutually irresolvable voices within a single artistic framework [cf. Bakhtin 1981]. The play's intellectual energy arises precisely from this sustained suspension of judgment. The comic dimension of this engagement should not be mistaken for trivialization. Rather, irony here functions as a mode of critical inquiry, what Susan Sontag describes as a form of “moral seriousness” [cf. Sontag 1966]. Stoppard's wit does not diminish the gravity of the questions he raises; it provides the medium through which ideological certainties are exposed, contested, and reimaged².

Postmodern Tragedy: Rewriting *Hamlet* through *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

The remainder of this paper is devoted to an in-depth analysis of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which premiered at the National Theatre in 1967. Widely hailed as a landmark of postmodern drama, the play concentrates within a single work all five of the dramaturgical principles identified above. As John

Fleming notes, the play “established Stoppard as a major voice in contemporary theatre, demonstrating his ability to deconstruct canonical texts while embedding serious metaphysical and epistemological inquiries in the fabric of farce” [Fleming 2001: 47].

The play has two obvious theatrical progenitors. The first is *Hamlet* – Shakespeare's magisterial tragedy from which Stoppard borrows not only his protagonists but also segments of dialogue and action, refracted through a parodic lens. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – minor courtiers in *Hamlet*, here elevated to central characters – are on the road to Elsinore when they encounter a troupe of itinerant players, foreshadowing one of the play's central motifs: the interpenetration of performance and reality.

Stoppard's inversion of *Hamlet*'s dramatic hierarchy constitutes a profound theatrical jest with serious philosophical consequences. At one point, the two protagonists observe Hamlet standing upstage with his back to them, delivering the “To be or not to be” soliloquy. By placing this iconic speech upstage and rendering it inaudible, Stoppard does something more than generate comic deflation: he literally enacts the Derridean displacement of the metaphysics of presence. The soliloquy – the purest theatrical instantiation of a self present to itself, of the Cartesian *cogito* performed in real time – is turned away, withheld, reduced to a silhouette. The centre of Western tragic selfhood is made peripheral, and the periphery – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's bewilderment – becomes the only perspective available. This is not simply a formal jest but the play's governing philosophical proposition condensed in a single stage image.

Deprived of access to Hamlet's inner life, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern attempt to deduce the causes of his behaviour from passive observation. Their effort culminates in a kind of amateur psychodrama in which Guildenstern assumes the role of Hamlet while Rosencrantz questions him. After several pages of speculative roleplay, Rosencrantz offers a succinct summary:

“Your father, whom you love, dies. You are his heir. You come back to find that hardly was the corpse cold before his younger brother popped onto his throne and into his sheets, thereby offending both legal and natural practice. Now why exactly are you behaving in this extraordinary manner?” [Stoppard 2007: 57].

To which Guildenstern responds: “I can't imagine!” [Stoppard 2007: 57]. As Esslin notes, “In Stoppard's hands, the tragic is rendered farcical, not to belittle it, but to question the frameworks through which we assign meaning to suffering and action” [Esslin 1980: 26].

Part of the overarching conceit stems from Stoppard's refusal to endow the eponymous characters with any biographical substance beyond what Shakespeare provides. The characters themselves are bereft of self-knowledge: they know they are named Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but cannot determine which name belongs to whom – a confusion rooted in Shakespeare's original, where Claudius addresses them as “Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern” only for Ger-

¹ Critics have occasionally levelled charges of intellectual elitism at Stoppard. While his texts do reward intertextual fluency, this overlooks the accessible pleasures embedded in his work. As Paul Delaney argues, “Stoppard's brilliance lies in his capacity to embed erudition within entertainment, to make ideas theatrical and dialogue kinetic” [Delaney 1990: 88].

² George's philosophical struggle is also a response to the erosion of language's ability to convey truth. The absurd theatrical spectacle surrounding him reflects the broader dislocation of reason in a world increasingly governed by performativity rather than principle, aligning with Baudrillard's notion of the “simulacrum” [cf. Baudrillard 1994].

trude to invert the order: “Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz” [Shakespeare 2006: 223].

This theatrical device resonates with the play’s postmodern undercurrents at a level that exceeds mere formal cleverness. The characters’ inability to ground themselves in a stable identity is not simply a comic conceit but a rigorous dramatization of what Jacques Derrida, in *Of Grammatology* (1967), theorizes as *différance*: the structural condition whereby meaning is never present to itself but always deferred along an infinite chain of substitutions, never arriving at a fixed origin or terminus [Derrida 1976: 23]. The name – that most elementary unit of identity – is not a label attached to a pre-existing self but a sign that constitutes the subject in the very act of designation, while simultaneously displacing it. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know they bear names, but cannot determine which belongs to which body: the signifier has become detached from any stable signified, and identity is revealed as purely relational and differential – one is “Rosencrantz” only insofar as one is not “Guildenstern.” Since neither character can establish that negative boundary, both are caught in perpetual semiotic suspension. The self is not a substance but a position within a structure, and the structure, as Derrida insists, has no centre that would stabilize it.

This connects to what Derrida identifies as the metaphysics of presence: the Western philosophical assumption that selfhood is grounded in immediate, self-evident interiority. Hamlet is precisely such a figure – his soliloquies the theatrical form of a subjectivity that, however tormented, remains coherent and self-aware. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are constituted as the structural negation of this presence: they are, in Derrida’s sense, the *supplement* to Hamlet – the marginal addition that exposes the fragility of the centre it was meant merely to support [cf. Derrida 1976: 144–145]. By elevating the supplement to centre stage, Stoppard performs theatrically what deconstruction argues theoretically: that the margin is constitutive of the centre, and that the centre, once examined, proves as unstable as the periphery it was supposed to anchor.

Stoppard and Beckett: Echoes of the Absurd

Fundamentally estranged from their own identities and histories, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are cast adrift in a world whose rules they do not understand and over which they exert no control. In this respect, the play reveals the formative influence of a second major theatrical predecessor: Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The parallel is structural as much as thematic. Both works stage the condition of characters who wait without knowing what they are waiting for, who speak without being able to say anything definitive, who exist without being able to confirm that they exist. Both pairs of characters are defined not by action but by its absence – not by what they do but by what they cannot bring themselves to do, and by the ceaseless, anxious, finally futile verbal activity with which they fill the void that action would otherwise occupy. Stoppard’s protagonists are, in essence, Vladimir and Estragon clad in Elizabethan costume – transplanted from Beckett’s featureless nowhere into

the corridors of Elsinore, but no less disoriented, no less purposeless, no less suspended in a recursive loop of existential questioning devoid of meaningful agency¹.

The philosophical resonance between the two plays is, however, more precise than a shared atmosphere of existential bewilderment. What Beckett diagnosed, and what Stoppard inherits and radicalizes, is the collapse of what might be called the grammar of selfhood: the set of assumptions – about continuity, agency, memory, intention – that ordinarily allow a subject to move through the world as a coherent entity with a past, a present, and an anticipated future. Vladimir and Estragon cannot reliably remember yesterday; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot determine their own names. Vladimir and Estragon wait for someone whose existence they cannot verify; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern travel toward a destination whose purpose they do not comprehend, on behalf of a king whose motives they cannot fathom, in a narrative whose outcome – as the title announces from the outset – has already been decided. In both cases, the characters are not so much agents as grammatical functions: placeholders in a syntax whose meaning has been withheld from them. Martin Esslin’s diagnosis of the Theatre of the Absurd as the theatrical consequence of “the decline of religious faith, the destruction of the belief in automatic social and political progress, and the discrediting of the idea that history has any meaning or direction” [Esslin 1961: 23] applies to both plays – but in Stoppard’s case the diagnosis is sharpened by the additional irony that his characters inhabit a world that does have a meaning and a direction, inscribed in the plot of *Hamlet*, which they are simply unable to read.

Further reinforcing the Beckettian undertone is the figure of the Player – verbose, performative, and brimming with misplaced confidence, mirroring Pozzo’s theatrical bravado and illusion of control. What distinguishes the Player, however, is his complete and untroubled identification with performance: he is simply “the Player,” a metonym for his vocation, a man who has dissolved his selfhood entirely into his function. He is not, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, tormented by his inability to find meaning; he has resolved the problem of meaning by abolishing the question. In one of the play’s most memorable speeches, he declares:

“We’re more of the blood, love, and rhetoric school. [...] I can do you blood and love without the rhetoric, and I can do you rhetoric and blood 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” [Stoppard 2007: 35–36].

¹ The Beckettian inheritance in Stoppard has been noted by several critics, but its philosophical depth is often underestimated. As Ruby Cohn observes, Stoppard does not merely borrow Beckett’s theatrical vocabulary but subjects it to a further ironic turn: where Beckett’s characters are ignorant of any framework that might give their situation meaning, Stoppard’s are ignorant of a framework – the plot of *Hamlet* – that exists and is fully legible to the audience. This asymmetry between audience knowledge and character ignorance is the source of the play’s peculiar tragic comedy [cf. Cohn 1976: 213].

This sardonic summation parodies the conventions of Elizabethan tragedy. The Player's deterministic worldview is at once a mockery and an affirmation of classical tragic structure. In contrast to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who suffer from a desperate need to find meaning, the Player is content with artifice – or rather, he has concluded that artifice is all there is. He represents a postmodern awareness that performance is not a means of revealing truth but a substitute for it. And yet his position is no more epistemologically secure than the bewilderment it claims to transcend. His confidence is not wisdom but the aesthetic equivalent of resignation: a professional indifference to the questions that his art raises and cannot answer.

At the outset of Act III, the curtain goes up on pitch darkness:

ROS: "Is that you?" GUIL: "Yes." ROS: "How do you know?" [Stoppard 2007: 105].

This question – "How do you know?" – touches on the classic problem of personal identity. Guildenstern's exasperated "Oh, for God's sake!" is a sardonic nod to Descartes' invocation of divine guarantee; Rosencrantz's reply – "I think so" – undermines Cartesian certainty by introducing a meta-cognitive doubt: *I think I think*. The exchange exemplifies what Esslin identifies as the Theatre of the Absurd, wherein the decline of religious faith has left modern man disoriented in a void [cf. Esslin 1961]. Stoppard deepens this through the question game – a "dialogic sport" that disallows declarative statements and sustains inquiry indefinitely, prolonging the condition of not-knowing. Any attempt to assert a truth results in disqualification.

Despite these parallels, a crucial distinction separates the two plays, encapsulated in their titles. *Waiting for Godot* offers a cyclical image of futility: the second act replicates the first with minimal variation¹. In contrast, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* – a direct quotation from Act V, Scene ii of *Hamlet* – anchors the play in a teleological trajectory. The title is retrospective, announcing an outcome that renders all preceding action fatalistically inevitable. Where Beckett's characters dwell in metaphysical stasis, Stoppard's are swept along by a narrative current toward their terminal point – oblivion inscribed in the very title. This distinction matters: Stoppard's theatre is not Beckettian resignation. It is something more troubling – a determined purposefulness that leads, with the logic of a Greek tragedy, to an end the characters could never have averted and never understood.

Absence Made Visible: Death and Ontological Silence

Much of the dialogue in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is preoccupied with an effort to grasp the nature of death – not as a plot element but as a philosophical problem that the play submits to sustained examination. Three distinct positions are articulated, each representing a different epistemological framework, and each found wanting: the imaginative, the

theatrical, and the phenomenological. That the third position is also ultimately insufficient – that it defines death precisely as what exceeds all frameworks – is the play's deepest philosophical achievement.

Rosencrantz is the first to address the problem explicitly, but his imagination can only approach death by analogy with living experience. His conception fixates on a concrete, claustrophobic image: "Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying in a box with a lid on it?" [Stoppard 2007: 77]. The thought spirals compulsively – "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!" [Stoppard 2007: 78] – and in doing so exposes its own philosophical inadequacy. Rosencrantz cannot conceive of death except as a diminished form of life: a box instead of a room, darkness instead of light, stillness instead of movement. He remains trapped within the phenomenology of presence, unable to think the absolute negation that death represents.

The Player offers a strikingly different conception: death defined entirely by its enactment, by its representation on stage. For him, death is not a philosophical problem but a theatrical one – a question of convention, timing, and audience expectation. He recounts the tale of a former actor condemned to death who, granted permission to carry out the execution during a performance, failed theatrical convention by merely standing and crying rather than performing his own demise. The audience rejected this authentic death as unconvincing. The paradox of representation is thereby exposed with surgical precision: authentic death, unmediated by aesthetic form, is unintelligible within the dramatic frame. Only performed death – death shaped by convention, rhythm, and spectacle – is legible to an audience conditioned to receive it as such. This is what Philippe Ariès describes as the "invisible death" in modern Western society: a death stripped of ritual and collective meaning, banished from the public sphere and rendered unintelligible except through its aesthetic substitutes [cf. Ariès 1974]. The Player's worldview is, in this sense, a perfect theatrical embodiment of Ariès's thesis: death has become a performance problem.

Stoppard dramatizes this disjunction with devastating theatrical economy in the final act aboard the ship, where Guildenstern seizes a dagger and drives it into the Player's throat. The performance that follows – the Player's elaborately choreographed death agony – is so theatrically convincing that the audience is genuinely deceived, until the surrounding players applaud and the Player rises, unharmed. What Stoppard exposes here is not simply the artificiality of theatrical convention but something more unsettling: our profound and apparently inescapable dependency on cultural codes to recognize, process, and authenticate death. We cannot receive death except through representation; and representation, as this scene makes viscerally clear, is always potentially a simulation. As Baudrillard argues, in the hyperreal order of postmodern culture, the distinction between the real and its simulation has collapsed – it is not death we witness, but simulations of death that have replaced and be-

¹ As Vladimir says, "We wait. We are bored. [...] But that's nothing new" – a sentiment that could just as easily describe Stoppard's protagonists.

come more real than the real [cf. Baudrillard 1994]. The Player's fake death is, paradoxically, more recognizable as death than a real death would be. Stoppard's staging of this paradox is one of the most philosophically exact theatrical images in postmodern drama.

Yet Guildenstern refuses both Rosencrantz's imaginative groping and the Player's theatrical artifice as adequate representations. His rejection operates at a deeper than aesthetic level, reflecting an epistemological awareness that neither framework reaches the reality it claims to apprehend. "You can't act death," he insists. "Death is not. It's the absence of presence. [...] the endless time of never coming back. [...] It's an exit that is never followed by a re-entrance" [Stoppard 2007: 118, 136]¹. In refusing theatrical simulation and imaginative analogy alike, Guildenstern arrives at the only honest formulation available – a negative definition, a definition by exclusion. Death is not a state but the privation of all states; not an experience but the termination of the capacity for experience; not a presence but the absolute withdrawal of presence. Death, on this account, occupies a unique philosophical position: it is the one certainty that is simultaneously the one absolute unknowable – appropriable neither in experience nor in representation, always the Other's event, never one's own in any but the most formal sense. What makes this formulation philosophically remarkable is that it arrives, by theatrical intuition rather than philosophical training, at the same impasse Derrida identifies in *Aporias* (1993): death as the *aporia par excellence*, the one border that cannot be reported from the other side, the one certainty that destroys, in the very act of its fulfillment, the subject who might have spoken of it [cf. Derrida 1993]. It converges equally with the Heideggerian insistence that *Sein-zum-Tode* can be confronted only in the mode of anticipatory anxiety – never objectified, never known from the outside, never possessed except as a horizon that recedes at the very moment of approach.

The play's final image translates this philosophical impasse into pure theatrical form. In the original National Theatre production, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern stood on opposite sides of the stage, each lit by a single spotlight, and delivered one half of their final line before the lights simply went out: "Now you see me, now you ...". The ellipsis marks the inarticulability of death – the moment at which language, already defined throughout the play as unstable and

insufficient, fails entirely. Their departure was not dramatized but erased: registered not as an event but as a perceptual void, an absence where a presence had been. This is staging at the level of philosophical argument. The audience experienced their deaths not as spectacle but as silence, as loss – as, precisely, the absence of presence. Stoppard does not represent death; he removes representation itself, and in doing so enacts, rather than merely illustrates, the ontological claim his play has been building toward throughout. The lights go out. The stage is empty. The ellipsis remains.

Conclusion

The central argument of this study is that Stoppard's theatre constitutes a remarkably coherent philosophical-poetic programme, not a collection of brilliant surface effects. The five principles examined throughout are not separable traits but mutually reinforcing operations of a single aesthetic intelligence; and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is the point where that intelligence is most fully concentrated and articulated.

At the formal level, *exuberance of invention* and *parody as structural critique* together constitute what might be called Stoppard's epistemological method. To construct a play within a play within a play, to filter history through an unreliable and parodic narrator, is to assert that all narrative is inherently perspectival, provisional, and constructed. Parody in his theatre is not a diminishment of prior texts but their philosophical auditing – a procedure that isolates, under comic pressure, the assumptions those texts have naturalized. The coin-toss sequence enacts this lesson in the body of the actor: the collapse of probability is not a trick but a demonstration of the world's radical contingency. The audience of *Jumpers* or *The Real Inspector Hound* is compelled to recognize not only the conventions being parodied, but also the ideological investments those conventions carry.

At the philosophical level, the *semiotics of language*, *theatrical spectacle as ontological medium*, and *the staging of ideological collision* together establish that Stoppard's theatre does not illustrate ideas but produces them. The linguistic games his characters play are not diversions from the philosophical argument but enactments of it: when Rosencrantz asks "How do you know?" in the Act III darkness, the question is not merely rhetorical – it is the most accurate formulation of the play's epistemological crisis, language reduced to its irreducible function of exposing what cannot be known. The same logic of instability governs *The Invention of Love*, where the unbridgeable gap between what is said and what is felt, between classical Latin and Shropshire longing, between the scholar's precision and the lover's inarticulate grief, becomes the very medium through which Housman's divided self is made legible – and an entire life's tragedy rendered not in action but in the space between words. The philosopher's pyramid in *Jumpers* does not metaphorize the precariousness of moral philosophy: it is that precariousness, made flesh before an audience that must hold simultaneously the comic spectacle and the serious argument it bodies forth.

¹ Guildenstern's formulation invites comparison with Heidegger's concept of *Sein-zum-Tode* in *Being and Time* (1927). For Heidegger, death is not a biological terminus but an ontological condition that discloses the authentic structure of *Dasein* from within – the possibility that cannot be delegated, shared, or represented by proxy: "the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all" [Heidegger 2010: 294]. Guildenstern's refusal to accept theatrical simulations as adequate models for death is the half-articulate recognition that death resists objectification – it is not a fact to be known from the outside but a horizon confrontable only from within, and only in the mode of anticipatory anxiety. That he reaches this formulation in a play whose central conceit is the confusion of names and the interchangeability of persons gives it a peculiar and devastating force: the man who cannot determine who he is has nonetheless grasped the one thing that will be irrevocably and exclusively his own.

These formal and philosophical dimensions converge with particular intensity in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Guildenstern's characterization of death as "the absence of presence" exceeds the status of a memorable theatrical aphorism and emerges instead as a philosophical proposition: it situates Stoppard's theatre within a lineage of Western reflections on mortality extending from Heidegger's *Sein-zum-Tode* to Derrida's insistence that death is always the Other's experience, never the subject's own. And yet – this is the qualification that separates Stoppard's postmodernism from nihilism – his philosophical pessimism is never unrelieved. The mutual affection of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern constitutes what may be called an *ethics of contingency*: a human connection whose value is not diminished but intensified by the acknowledgment that it must end. The blood may be compulsory. But as long as life endures, so too does

the imperative of love.

The development from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* through *Arcadia* to *The Invention of Love* traces a deepening of this core position. In *Arcadia*, the temporal palimpsest – past and present coexisting on a single stage – enacts the thesis that knowledge is always incomplete, always arrived at too late, always shadowed by what is irretrievably lost. In *The Invention of Love*, the encounter between the ageing Housman and his younger self stages the ultimate collision between intellectual mastery and emotional self-denial. Across this arc, Stoppard affirms the theatre as an irreplaceable arena for philosophical inquiry – while insisting that all such inquiry must remain, at its innermost core, traversed by the irreducible fact of human mortality and the redemptive contingency of human connection.

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