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The "Opposite of People": Theatrical Doubling and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

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**The “Opposite of People”: Theatrical Doubling and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
are Dead***

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Theatre from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for _____
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Abstract

Tom Stoppard is a modern playwright who is concerned with absurdism, metatheatricality, and language as tools to explore the nature and definitions of reality. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard's first major work, focuses on all of these themes—and is specifically one of Stoppard's most theatrical plays. Doubling is a longstanding theatrical tradition in which one actor portrays multiple characters within a dramatic work. Doubling began as a practical method to stage large-cast productions with reduced economic cost, but was also used in more conceptual ways—a practice that disappeared in the Victorian era. Over the past century, various directors have rediscovered thematic ways to use doubling, making daring implications about politics, sexuality, and history and offering alternate interpretations to classic works. However, I strongly believe that since doubling is intensely metatheatrical, it can be used on its own, not only to illuminate other concepts, but to point out its own theatrical implications. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a work that traditionally “requires” anywhere from twenty to forty actors, yet its metatheatrical implications could be greatly strengthened by the use of doubling. For that reason, this thesis, in conjunction with the process of directing a production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, will examine how Stoppard's first masterpiece could be thematically strengthened by the use of doubling.

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Introduction

Tom Stoppard is a playwright with diverse interests, but he is primarily and consistently concerned with human understandings of reality: what is reality? How do different people interpret and understand reality? Are there multiple realities and if so, can they happily coexist? Stoppard tries to unravel and understand reality through the use of absurdity, language, and metatheatre. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a prime example of these Stoppardian interests—the play mostly focuses on questions of reality, agency, and perception. As in his other works, Stoppard uses absurdity, language, and metatheatre to examine these questions. However, it is this final preferred method for exploring reality—metatheatre—that is most on display in this work. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is brimming with metatheatrical comments on the relationship between theatre and real life. Stoppard uses familiar devices such as the play-within-a-play, direct appeals to the audience, and references to the theatrical act itself to completely destroy the concept that the world of the stage is a separate and different reality from “real life”—or the world of the spectator. He makes no attempt to create an alternate, separate, “fourth wall” reality—for example, this play opens in a location without “any visible character” (11). As a director, I am always interested in finding new and exciting ways to force audiences to consider those things they take for granted. I have always been greatly interested in metatheatre, and I was drawn to this play for its witty and heart-wrenching use of metatheatre to ask very substantial questions about our understanding of life, death, and art.

Stoppard has frequently emphasized that his works are open to interpretation and restaging—and that he believes no one author, director, critic, or artist should have a

definitive and final viewpoint on what their art “should be.” In studying *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in various classes over the years and seeing it performed in multiple productions, the large cast size of the play always bothered me¹. To me, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* could be much more dynamic if it was a smaller ensemble piece instead of a large-cast production. As written, the play has a central focus on a few main characters, but a large amount of its action is driven by the scattered entrances and exits of the ensemble. The more minor characters appear and disappear, making demands and wreaking havoc—and in the process, create chaos and confusion for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Traditionally, this ensemble is enormous, but the lines per part are few and the appearances of the ensemble parts are evenly spread out. The show could, therefore, be very easily consolidated via doubling, which led me to realize that such a double-casting could be very tactically useful to enhance the metatheatrical themes of the play. Double-casting an already intensely metatheatrical work helps remind the audience of the cracks in the theatrical illusion by pointing out that the characters are not “real,” but performed by actors. In addition, doubling could be used in a rich variety of ways within *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* to create confusion over identity and highlight the idea of taking various “roles.” Therefore, doubling would provide more stage time for the actors performing secondary characters in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, create a unified ensemble, and inherently emphasize the play’s focus on metatheatre by creating moments of fluid identity that constantly remind the audience that the characters are not “real.”

¹ My great love and interest in Tom Stoppard was fueled greatly by my freshman seminar, which was focused on his plays. In fact, this thesis is in many ways an expansion of some ideas I first began to explore my freshman year. Chapter One in particular draws on several themes I first explored in my freshman seminar research paper: *The Perception of Reality in Tom Stoppard’s Early Plays*.

Doubling, or double-casting, is a long-standing theatrical tradition in which one actor portrays multiple characters within one performance. Historical cultures, especially Elizabethan England (the authors and actors of this era perfected the practice of doubling and made it almost an art form), made great and continual use of doubling to keep their cast lists small. The benefits of doubling were both economical and conceptual. Economically, acting troupes could pay fewer actors (usually ten or twelve) yet still write plays of twenty, thirty, or more characters. Conceptually, doubling allowed playwrights to draw the audience's attention to thematic links or relationships between various characters. Doubling disappeared for a time with the advent of high production budgets and cultural demand for large casts, but it has begun to reappear in modern works. Frequently doubling is used to make thematic, political, or societal comments on the production or modern culture. Rarely is doubling used solely to enhance metatheatrical implications of a text—generally doubling and metatheatre are used as aids to make a “bigger point.”

Thus, I was presented with a play—*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*—that seemed desperately in need of doubling, and a theatrical tradition—doubling—that deserved to be used as its own focus rather than the means of achieving an entirely different concept or theme. This thesis, in conjunction with an actual production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (which I directed), is an attempt to use doubling to enhance the themes of the play while simultaneously proving the power and potential of doubling to ask questions about metatheatre and reality. Specifically, I chose to double-cast the roving group of tragedians with the characters from *Hamlet* that are sprinkled throughout *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. This choice was made to

further collapse the lines between the different “worlds” presented in the play. In a traditional theatrical experience, there are generically two “realities”—the reality of the audience/spectators and the reality of the actors on stage. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* makes this relationship much more complicated by adding in additional realities—the reality of Elsinore, the reality of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the reality of the tragedians, etc—and by having all these realities comingling and colliding. By doubling the tragedians and the *Hamlet* characters, I am pushing this metatheatrical mix of realities even further by using theatrical identity in a very literal way—which actor is playing which part—to confuse and question the audience’s understanding of theatrical reality in a way that mirrors Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s mounting anxiety.

Therefore, my production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and this thesis are conjoined in an effort to explore whether Stoppard’s metatheatrical examination of reality can be enhanced with the tradition of doubling. This thesis studies Stoppard’s interests as a playwright, the themes and critical reception of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the history of doubling, and culminates with an in-depth analysis of my director’s concept and a post-production interpretation of its successes and shortcomings.

Chapter 1

An Introduction to the Plays of Tom Stoppard

Few playwrights have covered as many diverse topics as Tom Stoppard—his plays explore the themes of science, philosophy, art, love, politics, literature, math, music, culture, history, journalism, and war. This range of fascinations reveals Stoppard's insatiable curiosity about how our world works. He is the great examiner of the fibers that hold together our astounding universe, or as John Fleming writes in *Stoppard's Theatre: Finding Order Among Chaos*: "Cumulatively, Stoppard's work has been concerned with the social, moral, metaphysical, and personal condition of being human in an uncertain world" (2). His continual probing into almost every aspect of our human existence has astounded theatre goers since the Sixties and forced us to question the rules by which we live our lives. While there may be no way to completely explain the rationale behind the manner in which Stoppard jumps from one topic to the next, there are certain common threads among all his works: the inherent randomness and absurdity of life, the value of theatre in revealing this absurdity, and the awesome power of language to both cloud and clarify the truth of our subjective realities. At the heart of Stoppard's plays, these three common threads combine to ask one massive question: how does one define reality? Despite Stoppard's claims that his plays have "no single, clear statements," his magical and mysterious "high comedies of ideas"² certainly focus on this overarching question.

Stoppard's path to playwriting is a very intriguing one. His first language was Czech, having been born in Czechoslovakia in 1937. On the eve of the Nazi invasion, the

² A quote from Tom Stoppard referred to in Rusinko, Susan. *Tom Stoppard*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986. Print.

young Stoppard and his family fled to Singapore. When the Japanese invaded Singapore, the Stoppard children and their mother were evacuated to India—his father stayed behind and was killed (Londré, 2). Even though the thematic elements of his plays are incredibly intellectual, Stoppard never attended university. In fact, he left school when he was seventeen after completing his “O” levels, and then worked as a newspaper reporter in Bristol, where he began covering theatrical performances and films. While working as a reviewer, Stoppard met and befriended a then relatively unknown actor named Peter O’Toole—a friend who sparked Stoppard’s interest in theatre. In July of 1960 at the age of twenty-three, while on vacation in Capri, Stoppard decided to become a playwright, and in 1962 he moved to London to further his career (Fleming, 11). Over the next few years, he wrote the unsuccessful plays *The Gamblers* and *A Walk on the Water* as well as some plays for television and radio. While these plays were unsuccessful, they reveal an early budding interest in the semblance of truth and humankind’s desperate attempt to categorize it.

One example of the early development of the quest for the “real” that would come to define Stoppard’s career is the radio play *M is for Moon among Other Things*, which specifically highlights “the attempt of human beings to find some pattern or scheme that will somehow shape and explain the meaningless flux of existence” (Billington, 22). This radio play focuses on the philosophical and arbitrary concept of Time, and probes the question of how we should “seek to be its masters rather than its slaves” (Billington, 24). This minor work in the very beginning of Stoppard’s career reveals an early preoccupation with how even the most seemingly unquestionable aspects of our routine—such as Time—can be massively reconstructed and reconsidered by a few

theatrical questions. He was, even in the dawn of his career, “conducting a play-by-play debate about how we should order our lives” (Billington, 26).

A subsequent radio play, *A Separate Peace*, also focuses on the subversion of reality. The main character, John Brown, is a “fugitive from reality” (Billington, 27) who wants nothing more than peace and privacy from the world of the “real.” He is a kind of “existential cipher” (Billington, 27) and while the play is not Stoppard’s finest work, it depicts a character who panics about the tyranny of reality in a way that is somewhat similar to the continual anxiety prevalent throughout *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard’s first commercial success.

In his early ventures into writing, many of Stoppard’s plays represent recurring themes that can be traced from the very beginning of his career up to his current fame and renown. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Meet King Lear*, a first draft for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, focuses intensely on the ideas of role-reversals, masks, and the ambiguity of identity—themes that are not only critical in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, but in many other works such as *The Real Inspector Hound* or *The Real Thing*. Another early play, *The Gamblers*, discusses “fate, role-playing, identity, theological doubt, and the idea that life is a gamble” (Fleming, 37)—all major ideas that Stoppard returns to frequently. Therefore, by the time Stoppard had catapulted to fame with the success of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, there were certain key themes he had already developed: a “bizarre central conceit” or central situation; a subversion of the traditional realism of the British stage, and a love for “flair” and “verbal wit that sometimes shade[d] into whimsicality” (Billington, 38). These early styles would morph over the decades into a more politically conscious writing with an increasing scope of

topic—but in their larval state, they still indicate Stoppard’s most basic interests in attempting to answer his favorite and most elusive question: what is reality?

Since the first production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in 1966 made Tom Stoppard famous, he has had an illustrious career, writing dozens of plays. In contrast to the early and potent but somewhat random intrigue Stoppard had with the nature of reality in his early works, his growing canon has solidified a method of exploring this interest. This method is founded upon the three specific themes I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: absurdity, the value of theatre, and the power of language. Despite the wealth of other themes explored in his play, these three themes are Stoppard’s best and most frequently used tools to examine his unease with society’s illusions of reality.

Stoppard adopts an absurdist viewpoint in many of his works³—particularly his early works⁴—in order to highlight the transitory and elusive natures of our own perceptions of the world in which we live. In many of his plays, inexplicably bizarre events take place in an otherwise seemingly normal environment, and the characters living in that environment are forced to reconcile these events. For example, the one-act play *After Magritte* is dominated by incredibly peculiar behavior: a light fixture is held up by a fruit basket-counter-weight system; the Mother takes naps on an ironing board; one hundred fifty lead slugs from a .22 caliber pistol are carelessly tossed into a wastebasket;

³ As mentioned in my introduction, my interest in Tom Stoppard was ignited my freshman year in Dr. Richard Palmer’s Introduction to Theatre seminar. My work in that class was the launching pad for much of the work done in this thesis. While my opinions on Stoppard have grown and changed over the years, that class has proved an invaluable help to me. My analysis of the use of absurdity in *Jumpers* and *After Magritte* in particular, draws from research I did for my Introduction to Theatre research paper.

⁴ For the purpose of this thesis, I define “early works” as being everything Stoppard wrote up until 1982, when *The Real Thing* debuted. While all of Stoppard’s works have core commonalities, his “early works” exhibit a more absurdist style and philosophy. His “later works,” by contrast, tend to use a combination of art, science, mysticism, historicism, and politics to explore reality.

and characters take their clothes off and crawl around on the floor. The play's main "plotline" consists mainly of the characters arguing about a sight they witnessed on the way home from a Magritte exhibit. According to the character Harris, the strange spectacle on the side of the road was a one-legged, elderly blind man wearing pajamas and carrying a tortoise under one arm. To his wife, Thelma, this man was a one-legged football player wearing the team colors for West Bromwich Albion with shaving cream on his face, carrying a football under his arm, and swinging an ivory cane. Thelma's explanation makes no sense to Harris and Harris' explanation makes no sense to Thelma: and objectively, neither explanation sounds particularly plausible. However, each member of the bickering couple absolutely subscribes to his or her belief that what he or she saw was "real"—Harris in his frustration shouts that "I am only telling you what I saw!" (Stoppard, 55)⁵ This outburst undercuts the normally accepted belief that sight and truth are synonymous. In the conclusion of the play, it is revealed that the man on the side of the road was Foot, the Detective Inspector, who suddenly realized that he had to move his car. He ran outside halfway through shaving, grabbing his wife's handbag and white umbrella on the way out, and hopping along the sidewalk because he had put both of his feet into the same leg of his pajamas. The "truth" of the situation is completely different from both of the assumptions made by Thelma and Harris, making the point that we tend to assume that our individual perception of reality is the absolute truth—despite what might have actually occurred. This concept is further emphasized when Foot first bursts into the apartment, claiming that he has interpreted the family's peculiar behavior as proof of their culpability in a crime. In that instance, the characters

⁵ The citations for *After Magritte* come from a collection entitled Tom Stoppard: Plays 1. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993. Print.

who had been arguing about the man on the sidewalk find themselves the subject of a misguided interpretation. In fact, in the conclusion of the play, Foot defends his mistake by saying that his “error was merely one of interpretation” (Stoppard, 70). The absurdist plotline of *After Magritte* thus suggests several important questions about perception and reality: no two people see reality in the same way; our personal perceptions can be completely wrong; and that just because someone’s personal understanding of the “truth” might be inaccurate does not make that personal understanding any less “true” to that individual person.

Jumpers (1972), one of Stoppard’s most philosophical and daunting plays, also utilizes absurdity to emphasize the idea that nothing is what it seems to be. Identity in this play is malleable and our perceptions of the characters can change in a split second: for example, the grim, taciturn secretary is also a stripper. Dotty, the play’s heroine, is obsessed with a [fictional] lunar expedition in which one of the astronauts was left on the moon in order to save the rest of the crew. In the wake of this expedition, she becomes increasingly fascinated by the “reality” of the moon:

It’ll be just you and me under that old-fashioned, silvery harvest moon, occasionally blue, jumped over by cows and coupleted by Junes, invariably shining on the one I love...Keats’ bloody moon!—for what has made the sage or poet write but the fair paradise of nature’s light—And Milton’s bloody moon! rising in cloudy majesty, at length apparent queen, unveiled her peerless light and o’er the dark her silver mantle threw—And Shelley’s sodding maiden, with white fire laden...(41).

Dotty’s exploration of different concepts of the moon reveals how something seemingly mundane can assume many different forms and representations—and how difficult it can be to comprehend the shifting nature of our perceptions. The various definitions of the moon are all correct in the eyes of their respective creators—the question is in which perception lies the ultimate truth? In this monologue and throughout multiple moments

in *Jumpers*, Stoppard shows how point of view is arbitrary, but regardless, point of view forms our personal reality: “Of course, to somebody on it, the moon is always full...” (38). Only from our point of reference on Earth does the moon have “phases”: a person who lived on the moon would never be able to perceive the moon’s phases, and would instead see the “phases” of the Earth. Personal perspective intensely influences truth—truth cannot exist on its own in an absolute state. Therefore, truth itself becomes questionable—we normally think of truth as absolute, but as Stoppard suggests, the definition of truth is entirely changeable depending on perspective.

However, like all things with Stoppard, his use of absurdism is not absolute, and does not offer absurdism as the definitive answer to the randomness of the world—it is merely another way to evoke and explore that randomness. As Thomas Whitaker writes in “Logics of the Absurd,”⁶ these plays “embody Stoppard’s recognition that the frequent avant-garde attempt to absolutise ‘absence’ and the ‘absurd’ is quite fallacious” (110). In other words, to make the ideals of absurdism absolute would be to negate the purpose of absurdism, which states that nothing is absolute. Stoppard recognizes this logical fallacy of absurdism, and, therefore, instead of just stating that the world is absurd, he uses an absurdist mindset as a kind of playground to explore—but not dictate—the truth about our world. And in his personal philosophy, nothing provides a more suitable absurdist playground than the theatre.

At this juncture (before moving on to other topics), it would be best to define the Absurd as explained by Martin Esslin—and how I believe Stoppard modifies the Absurdist movement for his own purposes. Ionesco defined the Absurd as “that which is

⁶ Jenkins, Anthony. *Critical Essays on Tom Stoppard*. Pgs 110-121. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1990. Print.

devoid of purpose...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost: all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Esslin, 5). The Theatre of the Absurd therefore has a great awareness of the anxiety and existential crises facing the modern era and tends to use a very specific linguistic tactic for approaching feelings of uselessness: it “tends toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself...what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters” (7). In addition to its distinctive use of devalued language, the Theatre of the Absurd is marked by abstract scenic effects, clowning, fooling, and the potency of dreams and fantasies (282). The Theatre of the Absurd recognizes that the world has lost its “central explanation and meaning” (350) and so it uses these thematic devices to try and find ways to express and comprehend this loss. However, despite its apparent randomness and even grotesqueness, the Theatre of the Absurd “represents a return to the original, religious function of the theatre—the confrontation of man with the spheres of myth and religious reality” (353). However, in a post-nuclear secular world, the attempt to return to myth and “religious reality” is seemingly impossible. The Theatre of the Absurd cannot fully explain the ways of the universe to man, but it can:

...merely present, in anxiety or with derision, an individual human being’s intuition of the ultimate realities as he experiences them; the fruits of one man’s descent into the depths of his personality, his dreams, fantasies, and nightmares (353).

Ultimately, in the Theatre of the Absurd, the “spectator is confronted with the madness of the human condition...by seeing his anxieties formulated he can liberate himself from them” (364). Stoppard clearly borrows from the tradition of the Absurd, but with his own unique twists and perspective. He does make great use of dreams, fantasies, fooling, and

different realities coexisting. Stoppard fully recognizes the randomness and occasional solitude of modern life—and the anxiety it produces. He knows that the life of a modern human is often nonsensical and occasionally terrifying. However, on the whole, he is more hopeful about the human condition and is more interested in using the Absurd as a launching pad for exploring reality, instead of using the Absurd as the definitive way to categorize modern life. Also, Stoppard is fully aware of how language is not a concrete method for explaining reality, but on the whole, he is far too in love with wordplay and wit to use devalued language with any frequency (this aspect of his playwriting is addressed later in this chapter.)

Stoppard's clever ability to draw on and borrow from the Absurd and the inherent absurdity of our lives brings us to the second tenet of the Stoppardian philosophy—the self-sufficiency of the theatrical realm as its own universe, and its ability to commingle with our more tangible realm. Art, specifically theatre, allows us to take intangible ideas and present them in a tangible exploration: “We can articulate the ‘absurd’ only because our relative control over the artistic medium and the world itself enables us to formulate the paradoxes that finite thought must always produce” (Whitaker, 110). Art, and more specifically, theatre, picks up where our brains leave off, by articulating thoughts that before we sensed but could not comprehend. Stoppard's art “is for launching ideas” (Delaney, 152)⁷—specifically big ideas about the very nature of our existence, identity, and agency. Stoppard's theatre carefully hovers between the world we recognize as our own, and a world slightly beyond our grasp: “...the play seems to suspend itself between ‘logic’ and ‘absurdity,’ asking us to regard them as mutually sustaining delights” (Whitaker, 110). It is the interaction of these two worlds that makes Stoppard's theatre

⁷ IBID, Pages 147-164.

so fascinating and thought-provoking. In his work, the world of dreams and absurdism come together with the banality of day-to-day life in unexpected ways. His plays create the possibility that perhaps our world is not as separate, self-sufficient, and logical as we like to think it is, or as Paul Delaney writes, “At the heart of the extraordinary...we find a celebration of the merely ordinary” (148).

Stoppard’s ability to use theatre as an alternate universe to reflect the absurdity of our attempts to create order in a chaotic world is brilliantly described by Thomas Whitaker as a “game of mirrors” (114). In Stoppard’s plays, we see ourselves reflected—but in a distorted, uncomfortable way that forces us to question the things we take for granted. When faced with the insignificance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s identity, for example, what kind of conclusions is an audience forced to draw? His style of metatheatrical writing “invites us to recognize the anxious and inhumane pretensions of our usual ego-life, to relish their absurdity as we slough them off, and to identify ourselves for the duration of the performance with that playful process of liberation” (Whitaker, 114). The absurdity of Stoppard’s worlds forces us to recognize the absurdity of our own values—but also to revel in this uncertainty and to “liberate” ourselves from the oppression of societal normalcy.

This “game of mirrors” has another important effect—to establish specifically the world of the theatre as being the best medium to force modern day people to re-evaluate the world in which they live. The theatre is an alternative universe that presents different worlds with different rules—but also has the uncanny ability to reflect our own universe back to us in an uncomfortably recognizable way. Stoppard examines this relationship in many of his plays, and often takes it one step further by utilizing the device of the play-

within-the-play to not only prove the compelling power of theatre, but also to show that these two universes are not distinct entities. In plays such as *The Real Thing*, *Dogg's Hamlet*, *Cahoots Macbeth*, and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard examines the collision of theatre and real life—proving that while theatre may be contrived; it is no less “real” than the “reality” which it mimics. Paul Delaney writes: “And in *The Real Thing* (1982) the interstices come between art and life. Stoppard’s attempt, a breathtakingly ambitious one, is to deal at once with what is real in life, what is real in art, and what the real differences are between art and life” (147). *The Real Thing* is a particularly good example of Stoppard’s frequent suggestion that the world of the theatre and the “real world” are both equally potent, believable, and that these two worlds can almost supplant each other. This is established from the very first scene, which at first seems to be a “realistic” domestic scene between the character Charlotte and the character Max. In the second scene, we see Charlotte and Max conversing with Charlotte’s husband, Henry—a playwright. For several minutes into the second scene, there is no reason to think of the first scene as being something separate from the “main action”—but then Henry starts referring to the sensitivity of actors, and asking questions about his play. Slowly the audience is forced to realize that “the seemingly real [the first scene] is in fact imaginative, is a play within a play” (Delaney, 148). Throughout *The Real Thing*, Stoppard inserts scenes from plays the characters are working on—and each time, there is a certain blending of what is supposed to be happening in the “play” and what is happening within the reality of *The Real Thing* characters. For example, when Annie begins to have an affair with the actor Billy, it is during a rehearsal—a rehearsal in which they are supposed to be lovers. It is not entirely clear until the very end of the

scene whether Annie and Billy were just acting—or if they are actually falling in love. By tricking the audience into believing the “truth” of one scene only to learn it is “pretend,” Stoppard expertly emphasizes that plays themselves are perhaps “real things” just as legitimate as our own lives. The love Annie and Billy feel for each other is very different circumstantially from the scene they are rehearsing, but the underlying feelings in both “scenes” are the same. Delaney describes the legitimacy of the reality of theatre by writing:

But eventually we should come to see—whether we begin with the seemingly unreal and then learn that it is the real thing or whether we begin with the seemingly real and then subsequently encounter the real thing—that Tom Stoppard has been writing about real things for quite some time now. (148)

Despite their seeming differences as separate entities, the world of the theatre and our own personal world violently collide in Stoppard’s plays—“however distinct the plane of imaginative reality may be from reality, there are, finally interconnections between them” (Delaney, 153). Stoppard proves this idea with a “real” scene in *The Real Thing* that almost exactly parallels the events of the play-within-a-play that began *The Real Thing*—a woman may or may not be cheating on her husband, and the husband uses almost exactly the same dialogue to glean the truth of the situation.

Throughout these situations, Stoppard seems to be suggesting that life and art are, in fact, co-existing entities—and that it is his duty as an artist to use the connection his art has to the world around him to provoke discussion, questioning, and contemplation. As Delaney writes, “the evanescent beauty of art can only blossom from the ordinary mundane soil of real life” (154). Stoppard’s plays, as fantastical as they may be, have to be based on real life—or they could not exist. And, according to Stoppard, the inverse may also be possible—we might borrow experiences, emotions, and perceptions from

plays. Therefore, it is impossible to dismiss the theatre as a separate, detached reality. Instead, Stoppard asks us to think of theatre as an outcropping of our real world, retaining elements from our “reality” that can be thrown back at us to witness and contemplate. It is through Stoppard’s theatre that we understand life, and through life that we understand Stoppard’s theatre. In his rather brilliant analysis of theatre, “Stage as Mirror: Tom Stoppard’s *Travesties*,” Howard Pearce uses the concept of mimesis to point out that we are already predisposed to compare what we see on the stage to what we see in our life: “the mirror is not merely an object reflecting but serves as our means of gaining perspective on reality” (1144). Therefore, according to Pearce, when we go to the theatre, the play serves as a mirror not only in which we recognize ourselves, but as a mirror that distances us and places us in a context in which we can understand ourselves. The mirror “plays us up as interpreters” (Pearce, 1145)—by watching a particular reality unfolding in front of ourselves, we are able to interpret our own personal realities. We want to make connections between the alternative universe of the theatre and the own universe of our quotidian existence. He later writes:

We may look for and discover the ironic inversion of dream and reality, life becoming dream, dream becoming reality. Then the problematic of dream within dream, play within play, multiplies the images, and our meeting with the question of reality becomes manifold reflection... We always operate metaphorically, always stand ready to relate the new to the familiar... We already have the dream and the reality, the stage and life, and if one refers itself to the other, the two together nevertheless manifest a dimensionalizing activity and a dimensionized world. Together they present an element of the structure of experience... Theater and dream are reflective of the real waking world we take for granted, and they function to call our attention to the question of its reality (Pearce, 1139-1140).

Stoppard is incredibly adept at manipulating this concept of mirroring by combining the stage world of the “dream” with our own concept of reality—forcing us to question the constructs of what we accept as being “real.” For instance, the character Ruth (in a

staged moment of fantasy) literally steps out of her body in *Night and Day* to have a sexual encounter with the character Milne—an absolutely impossible act in a “realistic” sense. But the audience just saw it happen—and because it is a theatrical performance, it matters less whether it is “real” within our own understanding of the ungovernable laws of science. However, does not that moment hit on something familiar? Have not we all wished at one time or another to have the ability to step out of our own bodies to satiate our most secret desires? In this moment, Stoppard takes Pearce’s idea of the dream and reality and beautifully manipulates it. Stoppard acknowledges that such a thing in our world is impossible—but what if there was an alternate reality where such a thing was possible? What would happen? Stoppard thereby takes the things we consider impossible—out of body experiences—and using theatre, gives us a glimpse at what would happen if the ungovernable laws of our reality were destroyed.

One favorite method Stoppard frequently uses to emphasize the connection between the world of theatre and our own world is the play-within-a-play setup. In *Dirty Linen/New-Found Land* (1976) the first and second scenes of *Dirty Linen* are separated by a second play, *New-Found Land*, which is set in the same room as *Dirty Linen*. Then, the second scene of *Dirty Linen* begins with an argument about which characters from which play are supposed to use the meeting room. A similar moment occurs in *Dogg’s Hamlet, Cahoot’s Macbeth* when Easy, a character from *Dogg’s Hamlet* stumbles into *Cahoot’s Macbeth*. These scenes establish Stoppard’s concept that onstage stories actually belong to a separate, but equally legitimate realm of existence—that the world of the theatre is just as “real” as our own personal realities. In this environment, plays are not separate and insular experiences—characters are full-bodied people who can have

interactions with other characters from separate plays, even outside the confines of their theatrical performance. In Stoppard's plays, these two planes of existence—reality as we see it and the reality of the theatre space—interact with each other and coexist.

Stoppard's delight in creating metatheatrical situations can become increasingly complex in his works. For instance, in *The Real Inspector Hound*, the critics Moon and Birdboot leave their seats and enter the world of the play they are analyzing and are immediately thrown into the action of the performance—which is no longer a performance for them, but very, very real. In their confusion, they look back to their seats and find that the seats have been filled by two characters from the play. The play-within-a-play is extremely important and immensely complex in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as well. In fact, the entire setup of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a kind of play within a play, since it focuses on the fate of two characters within the already existing constructs of the play *Hamlet*. This metatheatrical environment is further complicated when the roving troupe of players rehearse their performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*—creating a play within a play-within-a-play. *The Real Thing*, mentioned before, is entirely focused on the relationships between actors—and how being “onstage” or “offstage” with a partner or friend may influence these relationships. Scenes that are supposed to take place “onstage” and scenes that are supposed to take place “offstage” are overlapped to the point that sometimes it is difficult to distinguish what is happening in “real life” and what is happening “onstage.” In all these works, no matter how complex or straightforward, Stoppard uses theatre as a physical example to show the audience the existence and potency of alternative ways of looking at reality, and the legitimacy of other worlds.

Stoppard also frequently creates these metatheatrical experiences by injecting the real-life audience into the performances of his plays. For example, in the *Cahoot's Macbeth* section of *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth*, the inspector patrols the audience, searching for insurgents and rebels—and therefore immediately forces the audience to become part of the realm of *Cahoot's Macbeth*. Such behavior prevents audience members from being detached and existing happily in their own personal reality—they instead must engage in the world of what they are watching. This metatheatrical invasion of the audience's personal spaces reveals the foolhardiness of thinking of ourselves as isolated within our own self-awareness—there is a much greater universe out there, with many parallel and simultaneous planes of existence, and Stoppard uses the plays-within-a-play to point out how myopic and limited we often become if we stubbornly stick to the perspective “truth” of what immediately surrounds us.

The final main tactic Stoppard uses to explore the subjectivity of reality is his brilliant use of language and wit. Stoppard's language, like the themes of his plays, manages to escape the conventions of daily speech and multiply in unexpected ways. As Paul Delaney writes, his plays are “a celebration which extends Stoppard's previous concern that language not be subject to the abuse of pedestrian cliché, political cant, or totalitarian obfuscation” (150). Stoppard's language consists of words existing because they can, because linguistic creativity is fun, because they should not be bound to the regulations of politics, government, or the banality of common interactions. However, despite the claims of some Stoppardian naysayers, Stoppard is not clever just for the sake of being clever—his linguistic dexterity also ironically points out the inability of words to

fully explain the more unexplainable aspects of our universe. Words, to Tom Stoppard, are immortal; they have a mind of their own—and sometimes become as absurd and confusing as the world of his plays. Frequently, Stoppard uses wordplay and puns to emphasize the elusiveness of “truth”—if words can have double meanings, then why cannot the same rule apply to perceptions of our life? Miscommunication between characters is one way of misperceiving a reality, and Stoppard uses this linguistic form of misperception to point out the subjective nature of reality. As Hersh Zeifman points out, language “may be equally elusive, equally ambiguous” (179) as life itself. This aspect of Tom Stoppard’s wordplay appears in many of his plays. In some cases, the duality of the elusiveness of words and the multi-functionality of words are played out throughout entire scenes, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s games of questions. In other cases, it is a more specific instance: In *After Magritte*, for example, the word “lute” is constantly confused for the word “loot” (Stoppard, 56). In *The Real Thing*, Henry says to Annie (207)⁸ that “I don’t think writers are sacred, but words are”—a personal opinion of Stoppard’s that we see time and again in play after play. His work reverberates with his respect, delight, and love for the powers of words. This love, however, is always followed up by the disarming question: what happens when words are not enough to explain the universe?

One of the more drastic examples of Stoppard’s manipulation of the English language⁹ is the play *Dogg’s Hamlet, Cahoot’s Macbeth*. In this play, Stoppard proves that just as we can interpret or explain visual or auditory stimuli in wildly divergent ways, there can be multiple understandings of words. The play depicts the conflict between a

⁸ My citations for *The Real Thing* come from the page numbers in the collection *Tom Stoppard: Plays Five*.

⁹ This analysis of Stoppard’s use of language was also greatly inspired by my studies and observations first made in my freshman seminar and then developed over the years.

group of schoolboys who speak “Dogg”—a nonsensical variation of English—and those who speak the version of English we are all familiar with. In one particular instance, Abel, a young boy speaker of “Dogg,” is continually struck by Easy (a man who speaks our version of English) for calling him a “Git.” Abel never realizes that the word “Git” to Easy is an insult and Easy never comprehends that the word “Git” to Abel is a word of respect (comparable to “Sir”). This miscommunication occurs directly as a result of the characters understanding their singular definition of a word without stopping to consider alternative definitions. This extreme situation reveals Stoppard’s belief that language is an outcropping of the set of explanations we give to reality, explanations that we believe to be absolute. As the inspector in *Cahoot’s Macbeth* rather chillingly states: “Words can be your friend or your enemy, so watch your language” (191)¹⁰. To Stoppard, words are both a blessing and a curse: they give us a method of attempting to explain the world and the opportunity for wit and linguistic dexterity, but they can also cause issues of misinterpretation.

In *Dogg’s Hamlet*, *Cahoot’s Macbeth*, the characters’ misinterpretation of each other can be explained by the clash between essentially different languages. However, in Stoppard’s plays, massive misunderstandings can occur even when characters are speaking the exact same language. One of Stoppard’s frequent linguistic maneuvers to prove how easily miscommunication can occur is the inversion—when characters say the opposite of what is expected. For example, in *Enter a Free Man*, the character Riley is discussing whether or not the character Brown is a spy. Riley explains to a confused bartender that “You don’t know the first thing about observation. A good agent must be inconspicuous—without that he might as well go home. Now *I’m* not inconspicuous.

¹⁰ This particular page citation refers to the page in *Tom Stoppard: Plays One*.

You're not inconspicuous. But he stands out a mile" (20). In this bit of wordplay, Stoppard exchanges the generally accepted meaning of "conspicuous" with the general accepted meaning of "inconspicuous"—in standard conversation, calling someone inconspicuous would imply that person does not stand out. Another linguistic device frequently utilized by Stoppard is the reciprocal interference of series—a linguistic confusion created when two or more people converse about completely divergent topics—while remaining convinced they are talking about the same thing. A particularly wonderful example of this device occurs in *The Real Inspector Hound*: the critics Moon and Birdboot have a conversation in which Moon spends the entire time talking about his personal life, and Birdboot spends the entire time talking about the play, while remaining completely convinced that they are talking about the same subject. These linguistic devices¹¹ suggest that (according to Stoppard) language is an attempt to organize and categorize our daily experiences, but since each person's interpretation of the daily experience is different, it is impossible to obtain a single definition for a single experience. As George of *Jumpers* states, "...language is an approximation of meaning and not a logical symbolism for it" (24). Truth and meaning are ideas that can never be fully illustrated by language alone, because language is often just as unreliable, changeable, and subjective as personal perception¹².

There have been critics who have argued that Tom Stoppard's theatre is (ineffectively) random, nonsensical, and merely copies the works of other playwrights

¹¹ I used the same examples for inversion and reciprocal interference of series in my paper *The Perception of Reality in Tom Stoppard's Early Plays*. I have returned to these specific moments three years later because I believe they are particularly good examples of Stoppard's signature wordplay.

¹² It is possible that Tom Stoppard's continual relocation (and exposure to various languages and cultures) as a child made him more aware of the impossibility of language to be universal, and its frequent inability to accurately describe reality.

such as Beckett and Pinter. However, while Stoppard does clearly borrow from other playwrights, he should never be belittled as merely riffing on other works for “fun.”

From the beginning of his career, while recognizing the confusing and varied interests his plays are about, Stoppard has emphasized that good theatre should always have a “point.”

For instance, in his review of the 1962 opening of *Next Time I'll Sing to You* by James Saunders, Stoppard:

“laid out three fundamental artistic principles: (1) everything should count; nothing should be arbitrary; (2) plays should have artistic unity, with no unnecessary digressions; and (3) plays should have a point; presenting too many random bits or treating everything as having the same significance only diminishes the play’s intended impact.” (Fleming, 13)

While Stoppard’s plays have fluctuated vastly in tone and topic, this basic principle that his plays should have a point has not been deserted. These rules for good playwriting prove that despite what some critics have said, Stoppard is not trying to be arbitrary in his work—even the most random and confusing of his plays strive to have a thematic point and an artistic unity. If his plays are confusing or seemingly nonsensical, there is some sort of reason for Stoppard to use apparent nonsense to prove a point. And this inherent “point” in all of his plays, no matter what they are about, is that reality is subjective—and we are kidding ourselves to think we can easily label or understand it.

Tom Stoppard is a playwright who primarily concerns himself with exploring the nature of reality—and in essence, proceeds to do so by examining almost every aspect of our human universe. He seems to encompass all aspects of our life—banal or exciting—in his plays, and ironically depicts these details to subvert our most firm convictions. He:

... writes cavortingly clever plays which wittily expose as effete the merely clever. He writes exuberantly risqué plays which ruefully reflect on human experience as ineluctably moral. He writes disarmingly stylish plays which expose the danger of mere style. He writes extraordinary plays which celebrate the ordinary

mundane human beings. He writes seemingly surreal plays that affirm the existence and the value of the real. In a farrago of words he affirms that the essential truths are simple and monolithic and precede language. And in one of the surpassing ironies of his paradoxical plays, Stoppard creates a self-referential art which celebrates only that art which is not merely self-referential, celebrates that art which is mimetically rooted in its representation of ordinary human experience, art which eschews the surreal for the real. (Delaney, 155)

But despite this massively impressive ability to entertain, delight, sadden, and confuse, the common denominator of Stoppard's philosophy is the subjectivity of reality. He forces us to re-examine our existing theories on life and death by using the absurd, by manipulating language, and by examining what is real and what is an illusion through the medium of theatre. Stoppard's plays force us to realize the illogic of taking things for granted. Our perceptions cannot be trusted, and our grasp on the true reality is minimal at best. This uncertainty created by being faced with a world without absolutes causes George of *Jumpers*, at one point, to exclaim in frustration: "How the hell does one know what to believe?"(71). How does one know what to believe, or what to think? Guildenstern says in one of his philosophical moments that "the only beginning is birth, and the only end is death—if you can't count on that, what can you count on?"(39). As far as Stoppard is concerned, the only givens in this life are birth and death—everything else is up to interpretation. But that is no cause for alarm. We are humans with a deep intellect: it is our nature to query and ponder. We will never understand everything, and in fact will probably ever only understand very little. The best thing we can do in this world is understand that the truth of anything "given" is probably debatable, and that we live in an absurd and perplexing universe. Tom Stoppard expertly allows us to ponder these questions by a carefully crafted and deliberate philosophy centered on absurdism, metatheatre, and language.

Chapter 2

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Tom Stoppard's first major work, is thematically focused on the anxiety of uncertainty, the inexplicable powers that govern our world, the impossibility of personal agency, and the mystery of death. As mentioned in Chapter One, Stoppard makes great use of the Absurd, language, and metatheatrical devices to explore ideas about the fabric of our universe and man's place and purpose within it. Specifically, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is one of Stoppard's most blatantly metatheatrical works. The play is centered on the "offstage" lives of two minor characters in *Hamlet*—and their continual search for purpose in a world where their fates and death have already been "scripted." The world in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist is impossible for them to comprehend, but their plight to try to categorize and explain it is immensely—and sometimes disturbingly—familiar to any audience member who has ever had a personal crisis of identity or felt that outside events were dictating the direction of his or her life. As John Fleming writes, the play explores "significant philosophical issues: the nature of truth, role-playing versus identity, human mortality, and whether life and the universe are random or deterministic—does change or logic rule the world?" (53) In this early masterpiece, Stoppard uses a very specific, absurd, and metatheatrical setting to examine these heady philosophical issues.

The world of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* opens in "no discernible location" (Stoppard, 10), and this vague set description is, in fact, a highly effective backdrop for the metatheatrical approach to agency, identity, and mortality that is the central thematic focus of the play. As many critics have pointed out, the illogic and mystery of the world of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is very similar to the

world of *Waiting for Godot* and Stoppard clearly used Beckett's masterpiece as inspiration for his own play. Like Estragon and Vladimir, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spend their free time playing games, telling stories or jokes, and waiting around for something more interesting to happen to them. Both of these plays are set in a vague location, but there is still an overwhelming sense that the main characters could never leave their current spot, no matter how hard they try. And like Estragon and Vladimir, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have an unbreakable yet also inexplicable bond—they have clearly been friends forever, but it is not clear exactly what their relationship is or how their relationship started. There is a sense that none of these men have changed much as individuals over the courses of their lives: "They all change. Only we can't" (Beckett, 32). The similarities of the two plays extend beyond the main characters—the rules that govern both universes are not clear cut and are occasionally even entirely improbable.

The implausibility of the world into which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are thrust is immediately set up in the opening scene. The play begins with the titular characters passing time by flipping coins and betting on whether a coin will land heads or tails—and "the run of 'heads' is impossible" (11). Rosencrantz, who is betting on 'heads,' has won seventy-six times: a stroke of luck that defies the laws of probability. This amusing and seemingly banal action establishes an important theme at the onset of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*—that the scientific laws and logic we normally consider to be absolute, obvious, and dependable may not be as consistent as we would like to believe. In this case, the mathematical law of probability, which should theoretically hold up in all situations, is failing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Physical laws are not the only normally trustworthy things that lose their legitimacy within the world of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The validity of memory is strongly subverted in this play. Memory, while a mysterious phenomenon, is normally considered to be relatively reliable on a personal level. Different people might remember shared experiences differently, but normally we are able to rely on our personal memories to organize the recollections of our past, our connections to others, and our sense of identity. However, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem unable to remember anything of consequence, creating a persistent confusion and anxiety in their discussions of past events and what to do next. The failure of memory to aid Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in their general confusion is established early in the play:

Rosencrantz: Oh no—we've been spinning coins for as long as I remember.

Guildenstern: How long is that?

Rosencrantz: I forget. (15)

Rosencrantz's inability to remember how long he and Guildenstern have been friends does not at first seem particularly alarming, but the play continues and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to remember even more basic things: how they got to Denmark, the rules and customs of the court, and even their own names. Their inability to remember any basic information that could be helpful instead disorients and frightens them. This failure to remember basic details is another theme that links Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to Vladimir and Estragon and other characters of the existential tradition. Rosencrantz's befuddlement about how long he has been spinning coins is a similar and exaggerated version of Estragon's attempts in Act 2 to remember what had happened the day before (Beckett, 39).

Even language, the labeling system we use most often to establish some sense of order over the elusive forces governing our universe, is completely ineffective in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The play is, of course, full of Stoppardian wit and love of language—but even though Rosencrantz and Guildenstern toy with words with an intellectual ardor, language continually fails them. Within the first page of the script, Guildenstern, desperate to explain the mystery of how all the coins he flips turn up heads, says “Though it can be done by luck alone...If that’s the word I’m after”(12). The doubt created by the illusiveness of language immediately establishes the fact that while words are sometimes fun—one of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s favorite games is “questions,” where they attack each other verbally with questions until one of them commits a grammatical or syllogistic “foul”—they are sometimes not enough to explain the bizarre events of the play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s inability to correctly use words to communicate or uncover intent is reaffirmed in their interactions with Hamlet—a man who deliberately manipulates language to appear insane. Rosencrantz says of Hamlet that “half of what he said meant something else, and the other half didn’t mean anything at all” (57). This quote reveals the untrustworthiness of language to reveal truth—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been trying to understand what is afflicting Hamlet through carefully worded and practiced questions, but their linguistic detective work has only produced more confusion. Their impasse with Hamlet is indicative of the continual failure of words to clarify a situation. The characters of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* are “simultaneously so liberated as to be able to communicate with such an abundance of word choices, and so limited as to only be able to communicate with those words limited to language” (Banks, 8). Words simultaneously

feed and starve them, providing endless amusement but utterly failing them in terms of effectively revealing any sort of clarity or truth. This questioning of language—the one seemingly dependable method available to human beings to plumb truth—is a crisis that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are frequently confronted with. How can they know what is true or real if they cannot rely on language to reveal or indicate that truth? A similar confusion about language occasionally occurs in *Waiting for Godot* as well—for example, when Estragon hears Pozzo introduce himself and is convinced that Pozzo is Godot (Beckett, 16).

Against the backdrop of an implausible world, Tom Stoppard uses the confusion created by such an environment to delve into the subjective nature of reality, and uses Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as stand-ins for our own existential terrors. How trustworthy are the laws of physics (or luck), the veracity of memory, and the assumed precision of our language? These laws, socially considered to be unwavering and reliable, are repeatedly subverted by Stoppard. By systematically undercutting scientific laws and culturally accepted norms of divining truth that we normally use to govern our behavior and assumptions, Stoppard asks us if there is really anything legitimate or reliable on which we can base our experiences. If not, how can we establish reality as absolute? Guildenstern attempts to describe reality as “the name we give to the common experience” (21), but how complete is this definition? If reality is as subjective and confusing as this play suggests it is, then there is nothing “common” about our reality. It is instead a terrifying, nonsensical, invisible force that we cannot explain, no matter how much we try. The Player tries to soothe Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by telling them: “Oh yes. We have no control” (25). His relaxed philosophy regarding our inability to

predict and control life, repeated constantly throughout the play, does not soothe Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Instead, it only contributes to their mounting terror. And while those of us viewing the show are not trapped within a Shakespearean tragedy, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's continual state of existential crisis (while exaggerated and at times absurd) is not unfamiliar to a modern audience faced with an increasingly violent, capricious, and baffling world. Or, as Zeifman writes:

Life is like the play *Hamlet*, and we find ourselves cast as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, secondary characters who are expendable in more ways than one (many productions of *Hamlet* omit them entirely), insignificant little ciphers who never really understand what is going on (176).

Once Stoppard poses these questions about the validity of the “laws” governing our universe, he commences to examine them thoroughly through one of his favorite topics: the theatre itself. It is this intense use of metatheatricality that separates *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* from *Waiting for Godot* and other iconic plays of the 60s and 70s—and in my opinion, makes Stoppard's play both intellectually more provocative and dramatically entertaining than Beckett's masterpiece. Throughout *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Tom Stoppard never lets the audience forget that they are watching a play. He does not for a minute allow the audience to be fooled into thinking that the production is “real life”—that is, the same reality that the audience members experience in their daily lives and in their interactions with each other. The characters they are watching are not “real” people—they are actors performing people. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves seem to be constantly aware of the fact that the area they are occupying is a performance space. Rosencrantz says to Guildenstern at one point: “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” (41).

While Rosencrantz may feel like a “spectator,” this line also reinforces the idea of watching a performance, and therefore reminds the audience that they are also “spectators.” This careful allusion to being a spectator, therefore, creates a parallel between Rosencrantz and the audience. The phrase “will come on in a minute” fleshes out Rosencrantz’s metatheatrical statement by specifically referencing the entrance of an actor into a performance space. This statement establishes the setting of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* as being just that—a playing space. The Player also gleefully welcomes the audience into the play when he shouts “An Audience!” (Stoppard, 21). The ambiguousness of this statement—is the Player addressing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or us?—presents both an entrance into the world of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and an “opportunity to voice all the joy, fear, and anticipation that accompany his first step into our presence” (Egan, 62).

While he continually points out the illusionary and “unreal” devices of a theatrical event, Stoppard also continually reinforces that the theatre is an alternate universe with its own legitimate reality just as potent as our own. In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Tom Stoppard is particularly adept at blending the theatrical world with the “real” world of the spectators. Within this particular play, Stoppard portrays many worlds at work, all comingling with each other. There is the world of the audience witnessing *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. There is the “scripted” world of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. There is the “behind the scenes” world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves occupy multiple theatrical roles: “they exist both inside and outside the text of *Hamlet* and at times they also acknowledge the presence of the theatre audience” (Fleming, 53). Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are minor

characters within the play *Hamlet*, major characters within *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, and actors who frequently address the audience for help or guidance in their plight. Added into this metatheatrical mix is the world of the players—sometimes “in character” performing bits of other plays and sometimes “themselves” (and in one particularly disturbing moment, depicting the eventual deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.) The continual movement between multiple planes of reality—theatrical or otherwise—is disconcerting both to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the audience. It is apparently only natural to the Player, who is very accustomed to moving back and forth between the world of the theatre and the “real” world. He tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they should “look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else” (28). That particular quip from the Player implies that to him, all these different worlds are not separate entities—it is entirely possible to leave one and appear in the other if you have the theatrical ability to change your personal identity.

The Player, the ringleader of the bedraggled troupe of tragedians, is a particularly interesting tour-de-force within the play. He is a kind of Brechtian narrator, who unflinching points out the “conventional modes of production and reception” (Bennett, 22) by reminding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that “audiences know what to expect” (Stoppard, 84)—and what they expect is often perverted or unrealistic (such as a morbid fascinations with melodramatic deaths). His cold, wry commentaries on the action surrounding him are both uncomfortably hilarious and emotionally disquieting. For example, shortly before the end of the play (and the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), the Player bluntly remarks “so there’s an end to that” (Stoppard, 124). He has no empathy for others (he has particularly little patience for Rosencrantz and

Guildestern's anxiety), and while he claims to be a tragedian, he also places little value on emotional depth in his art form. The fact that the Player's acting troupe is also a "rabble of prostitutes" (Stoppard, 27) suggests that the Player is fully aware of the seedier potentials of theatrical art—"playacting" can be an incredibly complicated and impressive art form, or a sexual game. He is essentially milking the voyeurism of both theatrical and sexual performances for the most amount of economical gain. Yet the Player does not just serve to undercut pre-existing theatrical ideas or beliefs about the nobility of art. In fact, he solidifies one of Stoppard's most central themes—that our understanding of the boundaries of reality (such as art being separate from life, or at best, a reflection of life) is all a sham. His sarcasm and awareness of the limitations of "real life" and theatrical performance allows him to greatly manipulate, challenge, and expand the audience's understanding of reality.

Throughout the play, the presence of the players reminds the audience of the permeability of our world and the tangible and real possibilities of the alternative universe of theatrics. In one scene, Rosencrantz puts his hands over the eyes of who he thinks is Gertrude and says "Guess who?"—but then he realizes it is Alfred dressed in a similar outfit. This gag "reinforces the theme of blurred boundaries between art and life, and it plants the notion of the interchangeability of the tragedians and the court royalty" (Londré, 28). For a split second, Gertrude and Alfred become interchangeable, allowing a young boy actor to become the Queen of Denmark (at least in the eyes of one individual). This permeability of movement through different worlds allows Stoppard to invite us to consider the nature of personal agency—how firm are our identities in a world where a prepubescent boy can become a middle-aged Queen?

The metatheatrical insignificance of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is the major source for their anxiety and confusion. They are only minor and relatively unimportant characters within the scope of the originating play *Hamlet*, existing solely to facilitate Claudio's plotting against Hamlet and Hamlet's return to Denmark. As minor characters in a major Shakespearean tragedy, they are "scripted" to be unimportant. When they are not needed as plot points, they have no clear-cut purpose. This "unimportance" renders them incapable of being able to live out individual lives—they can only focus on the few tasks that have been given them (and cannot even complete those tasks particularly well). They are continually in search of some task that will give their lives meaning; but they have been created solely to serve the function of *Hamlet's* plot: "the script that will culminate in the apotheosis of Hamlet has foreordained them to manipulated lives and obscure deaths" (Egan, 60). When the more important characters of *Hamlet* do not require Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to deliver messages or spy on Hamlet, they have nothing to do. They cannot think for themselves because they have not been created to think for themselves. This complete lack of self-awareness is represented by their inability to remember their own names—and which one of them is which. Their marginality as characters has rendered them incapable of keeping track of who they are relative to each other:

Ros: My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz.

Guil confers briefly with him.

Ros: I'm sorry—*his* name's Guildenstern, and *I'm* Rosencrantz. (22)

Stoppard plays an interesting game with this confusion of identity by breaking the theatrical convention of characters referring to each other early in the play to orient the audience, and so even the audience is not sure which actor is playing which character.

This quote is the first time the audience hears their names, and it is in a jumbled introduction, “allowing only the alertest of spectators to figure out which is which” (Londré, 22). Generally in our society, we may have a relative amount of confusion about who we are in a metaphysical sense and how we relate to the “bigger picture.” However, we normally consider ourselves to have a relatively good grasp on who we are at a very basic informative level: what our names are, how old we are, where we live, where we have geographically come from, and other personal facts. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been stripped even of these most basic concrete facts, because in regards to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, those facts are of no importance.

Because they are not able to rely on basic information or trust their own reality or identity, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves increasingly stripped of personal agency. This inability to control their destinies is critical to the determinism of the play. As Felicia Londré writes, “after their audience with the King and Queen, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize that they are caught up in a sequence of events that they are powerless to understand, much less to alter so as to control their own destinies” (24). Without any understanding of the conventions guiding the world into which they have been thrust, without any sense of their own identity, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are completely unable to act. Guildenstern cries out to the Player that “we don’t know how to act” (Stoppard, 66). This statement reveals a deep metatheatrical anguish: Guildenstern does not know how to act as a human being, nor does he know how to “act” as a character cast within *Hamlet*. In both environments, the rules of the game are unclear and absolute truth is virtually impossible to establish—“truth is relative, not absolute. Since life only offers assumptions, not certainties, the protagonists can never be

sure about the relative truth of what they hear” (Fleming, 59). Nothing in Stoppard’s *Elsinore* is certain. There is no logic within this universe constructed out of the “onstage” world of *Hamlet* and the “offstage” world of the Players, causing massive panic to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are “at seas on a tide of incongruities” (Cave, 67)¹³. Zeifman also expertly points out this lack of logic to guide the main characters in his essay “Tomfoolery: Stoppard’s Theatrical Puns” by writing:

“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are living out the actor’s traditional nightmare with a vengeance: thrust on to the stage, they are forced to take part in a play of which they are totally ignorant, their lines not simply forgotten but never learned. Their response is, not surprisingly, panic, but it is panic of a specifically metaphysical kind, for it quickly becomes clear that what Stoppard is offering us here is a metaphor of life” (176).

Eventually, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will die, and metatheatrically stripped of any form of personal agency, there is nothing they can do to alter this fate.

A crucial aspect of this metatheatricity has a great deal to do with the relationship between the stage and the audience, and, therefore, a brief foray into reception theory as it relates to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* must be made. This play relies heavily on the audience-actor relationship in that there is no attempt to portray the world of “Elsinore” as real and separate from the world of the audience. Instead, all focus is given to merging the two realities into one shared experience. Therefore, the audience must cooperate with this idea and be willing to accept the strange crossover between “reality” (the world which the audience perceives as being real) and “theatrical reality” (the world which the characters perceive as being real). One of the purposes of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is “to demystify theatre practice” (Bennett, 27). Within a theatrical work, Stoppard goes to great lengths to point out the

¹³ Jenkins, Anthony. *Critical Essays on Tom Stoppard*. Pgs 62-73. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1990. Print.

inner workings of theatrical performances. Different groups of people will understand *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in various ways—“a performance is, of course...always open to immediate and public acceptance, modification or rejection by those people it addresses” (Bennett, 72)—but regardless of the particular outcome on any given performance night, it is vital that this play establish a direct connection between the audience and the actors. By highlighting and directly addressing the audience-actor relationship Stoppard begins to break down the boundaries between reality and theatrical reality. This idea of altering the audience-stage dynamic is a theme Stoppard returns to frequently in his works. As Susan Bennett points out, a particularly good example of this occurs in *The Real Inspector Hound*:

In a play which remorselessly parodies the genre of the dramatic thriller, the presence of a dead body on the stage acts as an irresistible lure for the audience. They are drawn to speculate as to whether the body is real or not (an actor or a dummy) and to construct elements of plot to explain this opening frame (143).

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the emphasized theatricality and shattering of “perfect illusion” (Bennett, 143) is not as immediate as the curtain rising on a “dead body.” However, the audience is quickly made aware of the atypicality of the *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* audience-actor dynamic by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s frequent addresses to the audience and the idea that they are waiting for “somebody interesting to come on” (Stoppard, 41).

The audience-actor relationship is especially important in establishing a self-awareness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s mortality. From the title alone, the audience is fully aware of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s ultimate fate, and the unfolding of the play is a steady progression to their eventual death: “Ros and Guil have long been living dead, as the title has proclaimed even before they make their entrance in

the story” (Fei, 99). The continual audience awareness of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s fate makes their death intensely metatheatrical in its own right. The mystery surrounding death is one of the major causes of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s anxiety, but as audience members we acknowledge their impending deaths in a very self-aware manner: “In Stoppard’s play, death is an abrupt exit from one’s own drama into a place incomprehensibly other, and the theatre itself becomes a metaphor for that” (Berlin, 56). Their eventual death gives them another connection to the audience: “[their death is] a metaphor of the human condition showing how we are sent into this world with free will but find ourselves the victim of arbitrary circumstances which lead to our inevitable extinction” (Billington, 33). Like the rest of the play, death itself is something confusing, terrifying, and not easily understood:

Death is terrifying because it rarely makes sense...when death seems arbitrary we can only react with a sense of injustice and fear at the reminder of our own vulnerability. We know all this, and Stoppard does not pretend to teach us anything” (Jenkins, 42)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s inability to “act” eventually causes their death. Discovering the contents of the letter they carry (that the bearers of the letter will be put instantly to death), they continue on to England, knowing that their own execution awaits them. They have no other choice—unable to change identities to flee persecution like the players, they perish. The metatheatricality of death is particularly highlighted at the end of the play. We never see Rosencrantz and Guildenstern physically die—instead we watch them, for the first time in the play, step “offstage.” In this particular staging, their death becomes a metatheatrical act—instead of “dying” onstage, they exit into another world. Instead of the audience witnessing a “death,” the audience experiences their death as a loss of presence or severing of a connection, as the characters they have interacted

with for the past two hours disappear offstage. As Guildenstern so poignantly points out, death is “the absence of presence” (Stoppard, 124).

In Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s death there seems to be a distant Stoppardian lesson to those of us watching or reading the play: that perhaps it is not always such a good idea to be steadily locked into one identity or another. Perhaps we should not follow fates and destinies and other incomprehensible forces beyond our controls. Perhaps we should be more like the Player—aware of alternatives, sardonically aware of life’s shortcomings, ready to accept the illusionary nature of our own existence, and relax into a comfort with traveling in between worlds. However, the irony and tragedy of this wish is that discarding identities and putting on new ones is not an option that is available to many humans—including Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It is only available to the players—the “opposite of people”—who have the theatrical ability to shape-shift. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, however, are decidedly people with a prescribed identity that they cannot change.

Despite their inability to act decisively or with any semblance of self-direction, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern still have integrity as characters—their inability to act and metatheatrical anxiety is intellectual and at many times hilarious, but it also gives them a certain emotional pathos. Part of the tragedy of their untimely deaths is that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are fully aware that they have no control: “We have no control. None at all” (Stoppard, 71). It is this self-consciousness of their own lack of agency that causes their panic. They have been thrust into a situation where they have lost everything that gives them potency as human beings—choice, agency, the reliability of the laws of their universe—but they are still human beings with all the pathos, terror, and joy that fills the

lives of mankind. They are, in fact, very individualized in their understandings of existence. Rosencrantz understands reality at a tangible and tactile level. He is, in a way, the Id of the play. He is concerned with the reality that he can directly experience. He is the only character to ever bring up eating—"Are you hungry?" (Stoppard, 69)—and he frequently remarks on physical aspects of their surrounding environment: "*Rosencrantz considers the floor: slaps it. Ros: Nice bit of planking, that*" (Stoppard, 100). However, despite this awareness of his surroundings, Rosencrantz is incapable of extrapolating any higher meaning or understanding from these physical details. Guildenstern, on the other hand, understands reality on an entirely conceptual level—his character at times suggests a representation of the Super-ego. He frequently relies on scientific proof and metaphor to attempt to understand his reality, without paying any actual attention to the tangible reality around him. In the face of an unforeseeable and frightening voyage to England, for example, Guildenstern compares his fear of death to autumn: "Autumnal—nothing to do with leaves. It is to do with a certain brownness at the edge of the day...Brown is creeping up on us, take my word for it" (Stoppard, 94). The first act of the play is dominated by his intellectual games and desperate attempts to figure out the mystery of the improbable streak of "heads": "the scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defense against the pure emotion of fear" (Stoppard, 17). However, despite all his rationalizing and creation of beautiful metaphors, Guildenstern is ultimately unable to apply his theories to anything concrete. We, therefore, have in the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern a completely opposite and particular sense of personal existence that individualizes them in a way that is entirely different from the transitory and chameleon-like identities of the players. They cannot change who they

are, nor can they better their situation, but that does not imply that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are somehow sub-human or mere representations of some sort of Stoppardian intellectualism. They have fully developed personalities with distinct perspectives and proclivities with which we can emphasize. Their comedic journey to a tragic death is a very human one.

In addition to its themes, an analysis of the critical and popular reception of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* must be made when studying the play. Many critics, even those who admire Tom Stoppard's work, describe *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as a "flawed play" (Londré, 43) or as an inferior imitation of Beckett. The comparisons to *Waiting for Godot* are particularly and justifiably numerous. The arguments for Stoppard being some sort of copycat can be seen in multiple essays, such as Billington's complaint that "I can't help feeling that all Stoppard has done is take the commonplaces of the Absurd and transfer them to a new setting which is the outer fringe of an existing play" (37). The response to the first Edinburgh production of the play was "mixed to less than flattering" with comments such as: "as off-putting a piece of non-theatre as has been presented at the festival for many a year"¹⁴ (Fleming, 43). However, Ronald Bryden's review for the Observer was remarkably positive: "an erudite comedy, punning, far-fetched, leaping from depth to dizziness...It's the most brilliant debut by a playwright since John Arden's" (Fleming, 46). This one review helped establish *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as a legitimate production, turning Stoppard's career around in the process: later that year (1966), the National slated the play for production.

¹⁴ The Glasgow Herald.

Despite the eventual success of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, critics and essayists have continued to complain about the flaws of the play. Felicia Londré accuses the dialogue of having a “lack of color” and that it “dissipate[s] the tension needed to sustain interest” (44). Normand Berlin describes it as being “brilliant” but that it only “touches the mind, not the heart” (44)¹⁵. Many critics complain that the play is just too long: “I feel that the wordplay is overstretched, that a one-act idea is being teased out and that the essential innocence of truly great drama is missing” (Billington, 38).

A famous revival of the play in 1995 at the National Theatre in London specifically provoked great discussion about the merits of the play. Thirty years later, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* had worked its way into the modern canon, and so several reviewers begrudgingly praised it: “Stoppard has gone on to write yet better plays. Nonetheless, this play seems more assured of a place as a modern classic than anything else he has written” (Macaulay, 1710)¹⁶. Other critics feel the need to mock its fame: “Does it really merit the classic status that nearly thirty years of upmarket exposure have conferred on it?” (Nightingale, 1711) Many comments were strikingly similar to the earliest receptions of the play. Many reviewers in 1995 felt the need, once again, to draw parallels to other works of literature, especially *Waiting for Godot* and “the theatre as life of Pirandello” (Coveney, 1713). Despite its own fame, Stoppard’s first major work seems incapable of escaping comparison to other playwrights. In the *Evening Standard*, before he wrote anything else about them, Nicholas de Jongh compared Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to “the tramps in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*,” (1710) preventing any original analysis of the titular characters. Alastair Macaulay describes the

¹⁵ Jenkins, Anthony. *Critical Essays on Tom Stoppard*. Pgs 43-50. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1990. Print.

¹⁶ The page numbers from the 1995 reviews come from the Theatre Record, Volume 15, Issue 26. The primary sources for these reviews are listed in the Bibliography.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead revival as being “Prufrockian”, and then writes that Stoppard’s style “owes a vast amount to Beckett and especially to *Waiting for Godot*” (1710). The comparisons to Beckett sometimes get vicious: “[it] cannot camouflage its Beckett-like overtones or the smart-ass undergraduate preening that occasionally characterizes it” (Hirschhorn, 1711). Sometimes, the comparison is positive: “Stoppard jokes are far funnier than Beckett’s laborious vaudeville routines” (Spencer, 1712). Despite the differences in opinion over the merits of such comparison, it is clear that it has been incredibly difficult for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* to stand on its own two feet without a barrage of other (mostly negative) comparisons. Other familiar complaints were aired in the reviews of this revival. The complaints about the length of the play were also all reiterated: “[it is] still longer than it needs to be” (Macaulay, 1710); “the evening seemed well, awfully long” (Nightingale, 1711); “the sheer length of the play begins to conspire against its ingenuity” (Coveney, 1713). The stylistic wordiness of Stoppard was also attacked by Robert Hanks:

it’s words and ideas that are the engine of the drama, and what’s happening on stage can often seem like a footnote to the real action contained in the language...it’s fashionable to decry Stoppard as essentially a radio playwright, someone with no real sense of how theatre works (1711).¹⁷

Despite its brilliancy, comedy, and poignancy, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is admittedly, an imperfect play. One of the most obvious challenges it poses is how to create a dynamic show that avoids becoming solely about the two actors—or how to avoid the tendency to superimpose *Waiting for Godot* onto a very different play. Therefore, as a director working on what I consider to be a fascinating, funny, and

¹⁷ The film version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* was also met with heavy criticism. The characters were accused of “droning” and that their word games “no longer seem all that provocative or even entertaining” (Cranby, 1).

thought-provoking if “flawed” piece, I wanted to do something original with my production—to dust it off and present it in a new fashion, creating new ways of thinking about a play that I personally believe to be a masterpiece. I wanted to find a way to experiment with the themes of personal agency, identity, and metatheatre in a way that has not been tried before. I believe that previous productions of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* have been somewhat unsuccessful because they emphasize the aspects of the play that *are* strikingly similar to other existential works, especially *Waiting for Godot*—without emphasizing the aspects of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* that are uniquely Stoppardian. In my opinion, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is a fascinating work because although it has similarities to *Waiting for Godot*, it superimposes a further intellectual exercise onto familiar ideas by cleverly and poetically experimenting with the nature of metatheatre. For a production of this difficult play to be truly successful and to set it apart from other works, it must focus on its inherent metatheatricality.

This interest in refurbishing the focus of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* led me to introduce doubling into my production. Very few major professional productions of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* have utilized small ensembles. This concept arose from my realization that the show can easily be turned into an ensemble show, instead of it just being “two guys talking” amidst a sea of other actors with relatively few lines. In the spirit of Stoppard’s works—creating intellectual playgrounds for ideas that challenge our ways of thinking—I began to realize that the paramount themes of identity crisis and the effectiveness of theatre could both be explored in new

ways in a production utilizing doubling. In the next chapter, I will examine the history of doubling and in my fourth chapter; I will further explain my particular director's concept.

Chapter 3

An Overview of Doubling

My particular concept for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* relies on the use of doubling. Before a discussion of how doubling applies to Stoppard's play can be made, I must first discuss the historical merits and implications of the use of double-casting. Doubling is an old tradition within the theatre in which one actor plays multiple parts within one play. While it is less often the object of analysis or the focus of a production as are other metatheatrical devices (the play-within-a-play, etc), the device of doubling has great metatheatrical potential because it inherently reminds audience members that they are watching a performance and that the people onstage are not "real," but playwright-created characters portrayed by actors.

Historically, doubling is a tradition as old as Theatre itself. The ancient Greeks used doubling in both their tragedies and comedies—three actors (all male) would often play all of the main characters within a performance (Brown, 18). Roman pantomimes and early African theatre also relied heavily on the use of doubling (Brown, 95). It was a well-known and necessary practice within Elizabethan and early modern drama—the Elizabethan play *The Book of Sir Thomas Moore*, for example, contains a joke about one boy having to play three different female characters (Melchiori, 790). In the cast list of the interlude *Lusty Juventus*, after enumerating nine characters, there is a note that: "four may play it easily, taking such parts as they think best, so that any one take of those parts that be not in place at once"¹⁸ (Melchiori, 790). Plays of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century would be written with the concept of doubling in mind—playwrights

¹⁸ *Lusty Juventus*, edited by J.M. Nosworthy, with A.Brown and G.R. Proudfoot, Malone Society Reprints (Oxford, 1971)

seem to have organized their stories based on the limited number of actors in their company. Having the same actor play multiple parts enables “an acting troupe to stretch its resources” (Adams, 111)—by using doubling, a down-on-its-luck theatre could manage to write thirty or forty characters into a play while only having to pay ten actors. Doubling was frequently done in Elizabeth theatre for “the desire for economy in presentation” (Adams, 113). A theatre company at that time was required to be versatile and adaptable, and the more consolidated and multi-talented the troupe, the easier it was (both financially and artistically) to put on plays—sometimes with actors playing up to eight different parts (Bentley, 213). While performances at the queen’s court had the funding to only use doubling “when it was necessary,” doubling was an absolutely critical component of Elizabethan popular theatre (Bevington, 73). Because of doubling, Shakespeare’s company of a dozen men could perform plays containing twenty-five or more parts. This tradition of doubling seemed to have continued into the Jacobean and Caroline eras, even though companies became richer and larger (Bentley, 229). Instead of eliminating the practice altogether, Jacobean and Caroline playwrights seemed to have hired more actors for larger-scale productions, but still used doubling to maximize the amount of stage at the cheapest rate, bloating cast lists to include a massive amount of characters. For example, the prompt manuscript of the 1631 play *Believe as You List* contains twenty-nine assignable roles, with nineteen additional parts that seemed to have been doubled with those twenty-nine actors (Bentley, 231). Therefore, while the King’s company would have had the resources to hire more actors than its predecessors, they continued to use doubling to create influxes of a variety of minor characters.

King Johan (also called *King John*), written by John Bale, has particular historical and literary significance by virtue of being one of the few scripts from the Tudor or Elizabethan times that indicate how its characters were doubled. As such, it has been critically important to researchers studying the historical use of doubling. One stage direction, for example, denotes that the character Nobility should exit the stage and change into the Cardinal costume while another stipulates that the Clergy needed to change into the costume of England (Sider, 362). A careful study of the character list reveals the “care with which the dramatist anticipating the necessity of doubling roles must manage the comings and goings of his *dramatis personae*” (Adams, 112). The largest scene in the play consists of only five characters (King John, England, Sedition, Private Wealth, and Treason), so it is entirely possible for five actors to portray the fourteen different characters that appear in *King Johan*. Another dramatic example of doubling in the pre-Shakespeare Elizabethan era is the 1578 play *All for Money* in which four actors depicted thirty-two characters (Sider, 379).

Shakespeare also clearly used doubling to the greatest advantage possible—“in his hands the practice of doubling was an art” (Melchiori, 789). For most of his career he was writing for “a stable company of around ten men and three or four boys” (Thompson & Taylor, 112). Therefore, even though many of his plays contain dozens of roles, all of Shakespeare’s plays can be done with a relatively small number of actors. *Hamlet*, for example, could be acted by a company of eight adults and three boys. Without doubling, there is no conceivable way Shakespeare could have economically staged productions such as *Henry VI Part 3*, which contains sixty-seven different roles. There are many hints as to how Shakespeare mastered the art of writing for doubling. Many of his plays

contain huge shifts in location—the most pronounced being the jump from Sicilia to Bohemia in *The Winter's Tale*, which would have allowed his small ensemble to not only take on new parts, but to depict an entirely different nation of people. His plays almost always contain the emergence and then disappearance of minor (or even major) characters in the first half of the play coupled with the emergence of different minor characters in the second half of the play, which suggests that such actors could switch parts mid-play. This phenomenon is particularly evident in *The Winter's Tale*, in which an entirely different nation of people appears in Act Four, but occurs across the board in Shakespeare's plays. We see Shakespeare utilize this idea with minor but important characters such as Marcellus in *Hamlet* (disappears after Act One) or the apothecary in *Romeo and Juliet* (does not appear until Act Five). He also uses it with more important, key roles: Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra* (kills himself in Act Three), Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* (dies in Act Three), Diana in *All's Well that Ends Well* (appears for the first time in Act Three), and Mariana in *Measure for Measure* (appears for the first time in Act Four). Shakespeare also probably used this device to create multiple “armies” in his history plays and the majority of his tragedies. This method of writing is “a principle of organization, not fixed plan of allocation” (Berry, 205)—meaning that while Shakespeare's writing does not demand that a certain actor be doubled a certain way, his plays are laid out in such a way that an ensemble of actors can easily be doubled as necessary. *Hamlet*, for instance, was “designed for productions in which the actors appear and reappear in different guises, hauntingly reminding the audience of what was said and expressed earlier in similar voices, other habits” (Berry, 204). For example, the gravediggers could easily be doubled with any of the noblemen or soldiers in the earlier

part of the play—or possibly even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The ghost of Hamlet's father could possibly be doubled as well, since he only appears in a limited number of scenes.

While there is no consistent history of specific parts in Shakespeare's plays being doubled in prescribed ways, it is suspected that certain doubling combinations that are uncommon now were made rather frequently in the Elizabethan age. For example, it is almost certain that the same actor in *Hamlet* played Voltmand and Marcellus (Berry, 204) and that many of the servant or "clown" roles in *Romeo and Juliet* (such as Sampson and Peter, both Capulet serving men) were doubled (Melchiori, 778). The use of doubling in *Romeo and Juliet* can specifically be seen in the similarity of the text between various servants. Giorgio Melchiori writes that "Shakespeare...deliberately wrote the parts of the different serving men in a way that the same actor...could play most of them" (780). The inclusion of certain characters that only appear in one scene suggests that these characters could easily be doubled—the apothecary, for example, could be doubled with any actor except for those playing Romeo, the Friar, and Balthasar. The Prince was probably doubled with the speaker of the prologue. Melchiori suggests that it is also possible for Tybalt and Paris to have been doubled. This speculation is based on literary analysis instead of historical evidence, so while it is impossible to "prove," it is certainly interesting to contemplate (791). The final scene of *Romeo and Juliet* is also revealing in who is absent from the stage: "The absence of some major characters in this all-on-stage scene...is more important than their presence; because it suggests that these actors taking their parts are needed to impersonate other minor figures" (Melchiori, 787). Tybalt and Mercutio are long dead—but the Nurse,

Peter, Benvolio, and Lady Montague are also all absent from this scene. Lord Montague briefly alludes to the deaths of Lady Montague and Benvolio—suggesting Shakespeare’s need to kill off these characters so that they could appear as other important characters in the final scene (Benvolio could theoretically be doubled as Balthasar, for example).

However, it seems that doubling was not merely a practical tool in Medieval, Elizabethan, and Jacobean theatre, but could also have been used in a conceptual way, although there is, unfortunately, limited evidence to prove this practice:

“Some scholars have argued that the convention of doubling required the audience to overlook the individual identities of the actors...while other have argued that doubling could create a significant relationship between the roles doubled...several scholars have argued for the practice of ‘conceptual doubling’ whereby the audience is assumed to be aware of the practice and to make connections between the roles doubled.” (Thompson & Taylor, 112).

Within an actual theatrical performance, audiences (especially the open-air audiences of Medieval and Renaissance theatres) would easily recognize when actors (especially actors of more low-budget productions) changed costumes and personae to become someone else. In certain cases, the implication of specific doublings would certainly set off “shocks of recognition” (Abrams, 357). One of the earlier examples of conceptual casting is in the Medieval morality play *Mankind*, written by an unknown author sometime around 1471. Out of the seven characters in the play, Mercy and Tityvillus (a devil) never meet onstage, suggesting that these parts were portrayed by the same actor. If this was the case, then the “leading player would have doubled in these two roles, thereby playing his own opposite in the struggle for Mankind’s soul” (Bevington, 17). Such a pairing would visibly demonstrate and remind spectators of the spiritual battle between good and evil occurring within their individual souls. In some of the earlier Elizabethan morality plays, for example, four or five actors would play up to thirty parts

in productions such as *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* and *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art*. It is highly possible that doubling actors in such plays could emphasize Christian ideas such as the susceptibility of man to guilt or the recurrence of evil (Dessen, 68). For example, in *The Trial of Treasure* (1567) one actor plays Trust (a woman representing virtue) and Treasure (a woman embodying material beauty and sexuality). This oppositional doubling would be an excellent acting showcase for a talented performer—but seems to also be rife with potential thematic suggestions about the period's views on the corruptibility or duality of women (Sider, 374). In one of the surviving texts of the Elizabethan play *Mucedorus*, "Actor E" is said to play both Tremelio and Bremo. Both of these characters are "tools or extensions of Envy and threats to Comedy" and it is therefore possible that this doubling could have been used to call attention to "structural and thematic analogies" (Dessen, 69). A similar possibility exists in the casting chart for the Elizabethan play *The Fair Maid of the Exchange*, which indicates that the various "opponents of Love" (the rapists Bobbington and Scarlet; the rogues Gardiner and Bennett; and the two cantankerous fathers Mr. Berry and Mr. Flower) were played by the same duo of actors—referred to in the chart as "A" and "C" (Dessen, 69). Melchiori argues that audiences of the day could "recognize the close relationship between the two characters impersonated by the same characters" (790). Melchiori also points out that with doubling in *King Johan*, the audience could make specific connections between key characters and various virtues or vices: "...we are supposed to identify usurped power with The Pope, Private Wealth with Cardinal Pandulphus, and Sediton with Archbishop Steven Langton" (790). John Sider has a similar argument, suggesting that since period costumes were "not disguises, but

representations” (361), actors could be easily recognized when they took on different parts—much like famous comedians on *Saturday Night Live* or other television shows—and that because of this recognition, the “playwrights were able to exploit a player’s dual identity.” While such concrete evidence is limited, the casting charts of these morality plays indicate that doubling could have had “thematic or conceptual payoff” in addition to its economic exigency—that “conceptual doubling may have been one signifier in a theatrical vocabulary shared by dramatists, players, and playgoers in Shakespeare’s times” (Dessen, 70).

While it is difficult to “prove” Shakespeare’s conceptual use of doubling, we can make educated guesses about which characters would have been doubled for thematic purposes. For example, in *Henry V* it is possible that the actors playing the three traitors (Cambridge, Scroop, and Grey) later appeared as the three honest soldiers (Bates, Court and Williams)—and that Bardolph and Nym (the thieves) were also doubled with the Bishops of Canterbury and Ely. As Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor write, “in such cases the audience’s quasi-recognition of the actors adds another layer to the meaning” (113)—in the politically Protestant setting of Elizabethan England, the doubling of two thieves with two bishops would not go unnoticed. Similarly, in an age of capricious arrests and persecutions, doubling traitors with honest soldiers could have possibly had satirical implications. Shakespeare’s use of doubling in *Romeo and Juliet* suggests his ability to “play variations not so much on stage-types as on certain dramatic functions and their incarnations as characters” (Melchiori, 789)—in this play the “clown” reappears time and again in the form of different servants, and the two “confidant” roles (Benvolio and Balthasar) could have been doubled for thematic reasons as opposed to purely logistical

purposes. If Melchiori is correct that Paris and Tybalt were doubled, this is a potent suggestion of the lethal ramification of Romeo and Juliet's romance. For although Juliet "hates neither of them...they are each in turn the stumbling blocks on the way to her union with Romeo" (792)—and Romeo would then kill the same actor twice.

Perhaps the most famous Shakespearean conceptual doubling that has been suggested by scholars, however, is the doubling of Cordelia and the Fool in *King Lear*—an emotionally powerful and potentially shocking combination. As in all examples of theoretical Shakespearean doubling, this double-casting is impossible to prove, yet as Richard Abrams points out, is very likely: "the theory remains improvable...yet it rests on two fairly firm supports: that the two characters never meet on stage, and that during Cordelia's absence the Fool takes over her function of telling Lear the painful truth about himself" (354). Both of these key characters represent the voices of truth (with the exception of Kent, they are really the only "truthful" and honest characters in the play.) Their brave candor has dire consequences—Kent is forced to disguise himself, and both Cordelia and the Fool are exiled and undergo great sufferings and eventual death. On a more metatheatrical level, if the Fool and Cordelia were indeed played by the same actor, this doubling would create a theatrical illusion or disguise for both characters. Both Kent and the Cordelia-Fool must go into hiding as a result of their honesty: the actor playing Kent merely changes his costume, but the actor playing Cordelia and the Fool would change back and forth between his two personae. One of Lear's final lines—"And my poor fool is hanged"—has also captured the attention of many scholars and performers alike. When Lear speaks this line, he is holding the body of Cordelia—and the Fool has not been onstage for several scenes. Is Lear talking about the Fool, using "poor fool" as a

term of endearment for Cordelia, or—as many have suggested—has Shakespeare called our attention to a conceptual doubling by having Lear speak a line about the alter-ego of the daughter he is holding? In such a double casting, the Fool and Cordelia are re-incarnated in each other—and then ultimately suffer and die as one as Lear mourns their deaths simultaneously. Richard Abrams pushes this argument further by arguing that from the beginning of *King Lear*, the audience has a sense that the Fool will eventually have to vanish in order to make way for his female alter-ego, the more “important” princess Cordelia:

Cordelia’s transformation conditions our expectations; it builds tension into the Fool’s part from the beginning. Aware that the Fool’s actor will eventually be needed to play a more important role, we sense that the character himself is living on borrowed time...The audience’s awareness that Cordelia is returning to resume her cast-off role already creates an air of crisis in the Fool’s part (358).

Likewise, Cordelia’s comment to Kent that her life will be cut short “registers with strange force on an audience theatrically rehearsed in watching the Fool’s prophecies of a foreshortened life ripen to fulfillment... ‘Oh no,’ we say in effect, ‘first the Fool; now her!’” (Abrams, 364).

Doubling began to disappear in the Restoration era, when prosceniums, curtains, and elaborate scenery began to take over the theatrical aesthetic (Poel, 5) and by the Victorian era seems to have been completely vanquished. In the Victorian era specifically, directors began to fill the stages with massive amounts of “extras” for dazzling aesthetic effect. This idea of “big-budget theatre” with large casts and the newest technological advancements in design and flashy stage effects—an idea that is still paramount in many major theatres—flourished in this era. As opposed to creating tight-knit ensembles, casting became about spectacle: “full casting [of Shakespeare’s

texts] was an indulgence of the Victorian/Edwardian stage, a demonstration of lavish production values” (Berry, 204). The rationale behind the Victorian theatrical value system can be seen in the writings of William Poel, who condemns the Victorian need to “improve” Shakespearean plays “because the modern experts are familiar with theatrical effects of a kind Shakespeare never lived to see” (119). This one comment suggests a deep-rooted Victorian belief that classical texts should be “improved” to fit the “theatrical effects” of the day. For example, the works of theatre artists such as Herbert Tree were entirely devoted to the spectacle of “pictorial Shakespeare” (Lundstrom, 5). For example, one of Tree’s productions of *The Tempest* ended with an outlandish tableau involving Nymphs singing, Sailors singing, Ariel singing, ships carrying away Prospero and the lovers, and night falling on Caliban alone on his rock—all performed with the most “modern” and spectacular uses of curtains, set changes, and lighting effects (Lundstrom, 5). Victorian commercial theatre, with its focus on spectacle and beauty, was clearly not a good environment for doubling.

Doubling did not entirely disappear in this era, however. William Poel did, in fact, use doubling in some of his historically accurate but incredibly unpopular productions of Shakespeare. For example, his 1881 production of *Hamlet* features several actors playing multiple parts. Francisco was doubled with an ambassador, Bernardo was doubled with a gravedigger, Marcellus was doubled with Fortinbras, Voltmand was doubled with Osric—and, intriguingly, Laertes was doubled with Guildenstern. However, Poel seems to have made “no attempt at doubling by character type or function”—for him, doubling seems to have been a historical detail and economic necessity as opposed to a thematic tool (Lundstrom, 17). In his later productions, Poel

would sometimes use doubling and sometimes not—and when he did, it seemed mostly for economic reasons. Interestingly, his 1900 production of *Hamlet* contained eighteen speaking players and

...at least twenty-three and possibly more supernumeraries. The later included three or four court ladies, six halberdiers, two male courtiers, two blue, two red, and two black servants, three ambassadors, an usher and two beefeaters (Lundstrom, 52).

This radical difference in cast list between 1881 and 1900 reveals that even though Poel was the greatest force for historically accurate Shakespeare in Victorian society, he perhaps did not see doubling as being a critically important aspect of performing Shakespeare “correctly.” James Robinson Planché was another Victorian dramatist interested in Antiquarianism. However, his interest in historical accuracy was based mostly in period costume design and does not seem to have carried over to his ideas about casting. His costume designs referenced exact historical references and greatly changed the way Victorian theatre-goers and designers alike thought about costuming (Reinhardt, 525). However, he seemed to show little or no interest in the historical significance of doubling—the only times he seemed to use anything resembling doubling was to have characters from a preamble or pre-show tableau reappear in the play itself (Roy, 45). As a playwright and theatre-manager, Planché’s productions may have been in accurate period costume, but they were dramatic extravaganzas (frequently inspired by myths and legends) with *mis en scenes* (and casts) designed to “hit the taste of the public” (Reinhardt, 529). For example, his *Beauty and the Beast*—a “grand, comic, romantic, operatic, melodramatic fairy extravaganza in two act” (Roy, 85)—had a cast list of almost fifty actors. Only seven of these fifty actors played major speaking roles.

The advent of the Victorian era's focus on high-budget pieces of spectacular theatre (even when produced by Antiquarians such as Poel and Planché) endeavored to push the practice of doubling further and further into antiquity. This era was followed by the Naturalist and Realist movements. Realism insisted on depicting the physical world and psychology of the characters as accurately as possible, and Naturalism emphasized the importance of creating a total "slice of life" onstage. Neither of these traditions allowed much room for doubling—a practice which would debunk any attempt to truthfully replicate the physical world. The tenets of Realism were frequently applied to new works as well as classical and Shakespearean texts, so doubling seems to have diminished greatly throughout this period.¹⁹ The focus on Realism has continued throughout the twentieth century, and while various other schools of thought have reacted to and against Realism (Surrealism, Existentialism, the Absurd, etc), the practice of doubling continued to be mostly ignored.

However, since the Seventies, doubling has had a resurgence in popularity. For example, in many modern Shakespearean productions, doubling has begun to be used in a "conceptual" way—meaning that doubling is being used to underline some existing relationship or to "bring a hidden relationship to light" (Berry, 208). One famous example of conceptual doubling is the National Theatre's 1975 production of *Hamlet* (directed by Peter Hall) in which the actor playing The Ghost also played Claudius. This doubling subtly emphasized the Freudian aspects of the play—creating a situation in which Hamlet's Freudian need to kill his mother's husband is both demanded by and enacted upon the same man (Berry, 209). In 1988, Michael Cruz directed a production of

¹⁹ Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, there were multiple new interpretations made of Shakespeare and classical texts, however, that subject is for another time and a different thesis.

Julius Caesar in which the actor playing Caesar also played Pindarus and Strato. This doubling means that when Brutus says of Caesar “Thy spirit walks abroad and turns our swords/ In our own proper entrails” (V.3, ll.94-95), he is speaking quite literally, since the same actor that plays Caesar also held the sword that killed Cassius and Brutus (Dessen, 67). By using concept doubling, a director is able to “express a ruling perception of the play’s values” (Berry, 212).

However, not just Shakespearean directors are revisiting doubling as a viable theatrical idea. Since the seventies, several major playwrights have used doubling in a conceptual way to point out political or cultural flaws in Western civilization. Caryl Churchill is a particularly prominent user of doubling. In her play *Top Girls*, Churchill doubles historical and culturally significant female figures with modern (eighties-era) women to point out how little the female condition has evolved over the course of Western history, despite massive technological advances and the rise and fall of different empires. By dissolving the restrictions of time through the use of doubling, Churchill is able to create a play depicting a timeless “sisterhood” of women whose plight for equality has remained unsolved and unchanged: “The women speak of experiences from the past, but they relate to Marlene and to each other as a sisterhood in the present” (xxv)²⁰. The collision of five very different historical women and their modern counterparts through the use of doubling also suggests a certain “universal female experience”—the continuation of the oppression of women throughout different historical eras (xxix). Despite the massive developments in modern civilization, the modern women of the play still face the stigma attached to being a woman that was experienced by their historical

²⁰ The roman numeral citations come from the commentary on *Top Girls* provided by Glenda Lemming and Nick Worrall in the introduction to the play.

counterparts: “despite equal opportunities legislation, women remain concentrated at the bottom of the hierarchies of pay and promotion opportunities” (xxxii). The play can be done without doubling, but it is much more powerful with a very precise use of double-casting. For example, when the same actor plays Dull Gret and Angie, it makes a much stronger statement than if these women were played by separate actors. On one level, Dull Gret and Angie are both lumpish and rude. On another level, the audience realizes that Angie will be able to survive her miserable professional life because her doubled counterpart, Dull Gret, literally went through hell—and survived to tell the tale.

Churchill also uses doubling as a tool for examining feminist critiques of the patriarchal structure in *Cloud Nine*. In this brilliant play, Churchill once again doubles up roles between Act One and Act Two—but she also destroys gender conventions by having male actors play female characters and female actors play male characters. In the first act, Betty (the main patriarchal figure’s wife) is played by a man; Joshua (the patriarch’s black servant) is played by a white man; and Edward (the patriarch’s son) is played by a woman. In this instance, doubling is used to raise questions about gender, sexual orientation, and race by suggesting the differences between the “true identity” of a character—and what Clive (the patriarch) wants these characters to be. The fact that Betty is played by a man suggests how the perception of women is structured by male attitudes: “My wife is all I dreamt a wife should be/And everything she is she owes to me” (Churchill, 846)²¹. The fact that Joshua is played by a white man reveals the white patriarchal inability to conceptualize an individuated African identity: “What white men want is what I want to be” (Churchill, 846). And the fact that Edward is played by a

²¹ The page citations for *Cloud Nine* come from Worthen, William B. *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama*. Boston, MA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004. Print.

woman suggests that Edward is incapable of conforming to traditional heterosexual expectations: “You must never let the boys at school know you like dolls...No one will talk to you, you won’t be on the cricket team, you won’t grow up to be a man like your papa” (854). The questions invoked by these unusual casting decisions are then further emphasized when each actor in Act One is doubled as a different character (or older version of the same character) in Act Two. The doubling then asks the audience to make comparisons between the patriarchal world of British Imperialism and modern London. For example, in Act Two, Clive the patriarch becomes a female child (Cathy). In both of these works, therefore, Caryl Churchill uses doubling to develop the feminist themes of her plays and to deconstruct society in a uniquely postmodern way.

Several other contemporary playwrights have used doubling within major works. Like Churchill, Timberlake Wertenbaker uses doubling as a method of showing oppression in her play *Our Country’s Good*. Set in the first penal colony in Australia, the play depicts the interactions between the prison guards, inmates, and aboriginal people. In the original Royal Court Theatre production, each actor in the company played both a prison guard and an inmate. This particular casting strongly underlines the cruelty and absurdity of the historical situation by having the actors play both the abusers and the abused. The doubling also suggests the cyclical nature of violence and the continual control of the British Empire in a similar manner to how *Cloud Nine* shows the cyclical nature of sexism and the continual discrimination against women in British society.

Moisés Kaufman is another well-known and well-respected contemporary playwright who uses doubling to great effect within his works. Both *Gross Indecency* and *The Laramie Project* effectively use doubling to create emotionally powerful and

politically relevant plays. In the original production of *The Laramie Project*, eight actors portrayed sixty-seven characters. In this play, focused on the horrific events and aftermath of Matthew Shepard's brutal death, a small ensemble is able to create the dynamics of an entire town. The play has the feel of a sort of metatheatrical documentary—it simultaneously tells the story of Shepard's murder from an outsider's perspective, and manages to preserve the metatheatrical magic of actors rapidly becoming or “transforming” (Kaufman, 5) into other characters. The sense of “community”—including the diverse and frequently upsetting reactions to Shepard's murder—as well as the “media cacophony” that occurs in Act Two would be easily achieved by the multiple voices and personas of an eight-person ensemble. The doubling in *The Laramie Project* creates awareness of intolerance and its potential for violence both in the overwhelming reactions of grief and the continual tendency of the townspeople to be either extremely defensive or self-concerned about the tragedy of Shepard's death. Marge Murray's statement about how “two absolutely human beings cause[d] so much grief for so many people” (Kaufman, 54) is particularly profound when we have heard the same actors portray so many different character's grieving process. The metatheatrical style of the play is even further emphasized when the actors occasionally perform onstage as “themselves” to remind the audience that this play has been entirely constructed out of real-life interviews with Laramie residents. Even Kaufman, the playwright, has an appearance onstage as a character depicted by one of the company members. By continually referencing that they experienced these interviews first hand, the actors are able to add an extra layer of legitimacy to the authenticity of their production.

Gross Indecency, Kaufman's first play, is less ambitious in its use of doubling, however, it does contain an ensemble of "narrators" who both give historical information about the trials of Oscar Wilde and create a similar cacophony of societal angst, confusion, and horrific prejudices about Victorian sexuality. As Oscar Wilde's world collapses, the ensemble of narrators become increasingly offensive and inescapable as they rapidly transform from journalists to Queen Victoria to prostitutes, showing that intolerance of "sexual transgressions" pervaded all aspects of Victorian England. The narrators must play thirteen parts in addition to their narrative roles, and Kaufman suggests that four people could easily take on all of these parts. Kaufman describes in his Author's Note that he thinks *Gross Indecency* should be an "actor-driven event"—and the doubling would certainly be a crucial element to achieving the focus on actor ability (Kaufman, 5).

Angels in America by Tony Kushner is another particularly famous contemporary example of doubling—only eight actors are needed to do *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, even though the play has twenty parts. In this case, Kushner used doubling to have a "pared-down style of presentation" that was "actor-driven"—in essence, he was recycling the age-old concept of creating a connected and efficient ensemble to create an epic work. However, doubling up certain characters also thematically highlights in a more political way the difficulties of being gay in 1980s America. For example, the doubling enhances the continual struggle between public and private lives, as certain actors continue to reappear in more private moments. Some of the actors even seem to serve as a continual reminder of personal suffering—the ability of actors to play different characters within the context of *Angels in America* means that specific actors can come to

symbolize specific themes or characteristics (the doubling of The Angel and the nurse Emily to represent a guardian figure is a particularly obvious example).

One of the most popular plays on Broadway in the past decade has been *The 39 Steps*, a play that is heavily doubled—it “does the whole thing with four actors” (Barlow, 7). One actress plays three different women, and the characters “Clown 1” and “Clown 2” play two hundred and fifty parts between them. In this particular production, the doubling is very impressive and highlights the immense versatility of the actors. It is also a clearly metatheatrical show. For example, the first scene of the play contains a metatheatrical reference when the main character declares (*The 39 Steps* was first performed on London’s West End): “A west end show! That should do the trick!” (Barlow, 10). There are also several gags within the play that point out the fact that these characters are not “real,” but represented by actors: “Hannay picks up the phone. It goes on ringing. An awkward moment for the actors” (Barlow, 17); “Hannay the actor just can’t take any more” (Barlow, 32); “Hannay the actor sighs” (Barlow, 72). The aspect of doubling certainly plays up the fun of the metatheatrical jokes that occur throughout the play. For example, some of the costume changes to represent different characters are improbably quick, with one of the Clowns merely changing his hat to become someone else. However, despite the metatheatricality of the production, nothing is stated or suggested by this doubling—it is all a gimmick, albeit a very impressive one.

Doubling has occasionally popped up in modern pop culture as well—for example the 2003 film version of *Peter Pan* had one actor (Jason Isaacs) play both Mr. Darling and Captain Hook, the two tyrannical adult patriarchs of the plotline. This particular doubling has been used traditionally in performances of the play version of

Peter Pan as a symbol of the continual struggle between adulthood and childhood, and in this particular film version the dazzling transformation (via costume and makeup) greatly highlights the different aspects of both Hook's and Darlings' personality as well as maintaining the battle-of-the-ages theme. However, like *39 Steps*, while this doubling does have thematic implications, its ultimate goal is to entertain and amuse the movie viewers via a stunning and clever transformation.

There is clearly a modern resurgence in using doubling both in classical and contemporary works. However, it seems to me that most directors and playwrights are caught up in using doubling as a tool to enforce some other concept or as a gimmicky method of highlighting an actor's talents. I personally believe in the great dramatic potential in using doubling for its own sake. Doubling is an inherently metatheatrical device that highlights the transiency of identity and the power of the actor—and I think it would be fascinating to use doubling purely to highlight its inherent metatheatrical aspects (and what is implied by its metatheatrical aspects), instead of being a method to achieve a political or thematic “concept.” For this reason, I have chosen to use doubling in my direction of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, one of Stoppard's most metatheatrical plays, in order to explore its vast potential as the focus of a production instead of a logistical means to a conceptual end.

Chapter 4: ***Directing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead with Doubling***

In Chapter Two, I discussed the metatheatrical nature of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and in Chapter Three, I discussed how the tradition of doubling presents tremendous theatrical possibilities. My thesis is ultimately a fusion of these two theories culminating in directing a production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. In my particular staging, I am using doubling to see how this tradition can raise even more questions about the play's inherent concern with identity and theatre. I also believe that by inserting doubling into this production, I will enlarge the metatheatrical nature of the play, while simultaneously increasing the audience's awareness of its thematic implications. It is my wish that the doubling will hone in on the crux of the play's meaning and greatly exaggerate its inherent focus on metatheatre, identity, and reality.

The Samuel French acting edition of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* describes the play as containing almost forty parts: fourteen male, five female, twelve extras, and six musicians. Traditionally, professional productions of this play have had casts of anywhere from twenty to thirty actors. The London Premiere (April 1967) of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* had a cast of twenty-seven. The New York Premiere (October 1967) had a cast of thirty-four²². Recent revivals have followed the tradition of using a large cast for this show—for example, the Royal National Theatre Company's 1995 revival featured twenty-two actors. Many of the productions of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, therefore, pit Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

²² *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. New York: Grove Press, 1967. Print.

against a large cast to visually represent their futile attempt to keep up with the constant whirlwind of events. These large casts are frequently coupled with large sets. In these productions, the immense cast size and daunting sets combine to emphasize the idea that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are tiny pawns faced with a huge and terrifying world. Alastair Macaulay's review of the "lavish" Royal National Theatre Company's 1995 revival describes translucent and ever-moving staircases and walls as part of the set design (1710). Benedict Nightingale describes the imposing design of the same production as being "a sinister, dangerous Elsinore...a dark, cruel world" (1711). In Florida, the Jobsite Theatre's revival of the play featured a set that was "eerie and expansive" (Clear, 1). Richard Cuyler's review of a production at Cornell University in 1979 also emphasizes the large scope of the production. The set was built on a double revolve, and featured steep steps that "yawn[ed] open to reveal the court in decadent splendor" (551). Arcola Theatre's 2001 revival is another example of manipulating physical space to disorient Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the audience alike. While using a rather small cast (only thirteen actors), the director and designers went to great lengths to make their space as large and quickly shifting as possible: "...Arcola's immense studio space is rolled out in front us, our newly acquired sense of perspective and disorientation perfectly synched with that of the two lead characters" (Aldridge, 473).

This tradition of using a huge cast to create a more epic feel to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* may be visually stunning at times, but I personally feel is a massive waste of acting talent, since many of the smaller parts have minimal amounts of lines (or no lines at all) and can easily be doubled with other characters. My annoyance

with the illogic of making *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* a huge cast when most of the cast would have barely any stage time led me to consider what would happen if I doubled the casting. I quickly realized the exciting thematic implications of doubling all the *Hamlet* characters that appear within *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* with the roving group of players. While some smaller-scale productions of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* contain some doubling, the major characters of *Hamlet* are traditionally not doubled with the tragedians. For example, the previously mentioned Arcola production doubled four of the players with minor, transitory parts in *Hamlet*—ambassadors, soldiers, Horatio, and Fortinbras. However, the doubling was not implemented for more major characters such as Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia—and interestingly, Alfred (Aldridge, *Theatre Record*, 473).

However, if the double-casting had been made consistent throughout the entire *Hamlet* cast and the entire group of tragedians, the players would not only be able to change their identities within performing their mediocre tragedies, but also within the actual context of Stoppard’s play as they transform themselves from starving “artists” to the royalty of Denmark. When I auditioned and cast the show, the cast list was finalized as:

Rosencrantz
 Guildenstern
 The Player
 Hamlet
 Alfred/Player Queen/Gertrude
 Tragedian (Player King)/Polonius/Fortinbras
 Tragedian (Murderer)/Claudius
 Tragedian (Spy, “Rosencrantz”)/ Guard/Horatio
 Tragedian (Spy, “Guildenstern”)/Soldier/Ambassador
 Tragedian/Ophelia

Not only does this cast list consolidate the ensemble into a more intimate size, it emphasizes the metatheatrical nature of the play by having the actors playing the tragedians also play their *Hamlet* counterparts. The players, the “opposite of people,” literally change identity and character before our very eyes, making the world in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are thrust increasingly confusing, small, and continually changing. In a double-cast production, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become two men stuck within their own identities while surrounded by lightning-quick shifts of persona created by chameleon-like actors, adding another confusing level to the Elsinore reality which the titular characters are forced to try to comprehend.

The Player and Hamlet could not be double-cast because it was a sheer impossibility—in Act Three and several scenes in Act Two, they interact with each other. However, the Player and Hamlet still pose interesting questions about doubling and metatheatricality even if the actors portraying these characters are only performing one role. The Player actually is in a way “doubled” as Hamlet at the end of Act Three, when the players reenact the final scene of *Hamlet* and the Player takes on the “role” of Hamlet, dying in “Horatio’s” arms. Throughout the play we are reminded of the Player’s potential to change personality or character instantaneously, although we more frequently see this character trait through the Player’s use of sarcasm and sudden emotional shifts more than actually reenacting different parts (although he does “act” a bit in *The Murder of Gonzago* dress rehearsal). And while we do not see as much of Hamlet’s “antic disposition” in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as we do in Shakespeare’s tragedy, we are already conditioned to know that he thematically represents duality and the self-protective calculations of disguise. Throughout the course of *Hamlet*, Hamlet

role-plays insanity and in Act Two, Scene 2 of *Hamlet*, he even “performs” a snippet of a dramatic monologue for the players who have come to Elsinore. His relationship with his uncle and mother also raises multiple questions about doubling: after his father’s death, Hamlet becomes his uncle’s son and his mother’s nephew while simultaneously remaining his mother’s son and his uncle’s nephew. The audience’s familiarity with Hamlet’s insanity and incestuous familial situation, therefore, infuses *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* with additional questions about duality and identity. Taken out of the context of *Hamlet*, Hamlet himself becomes a signifier for confused relationships and role-playing. In the snippets of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in which Hamlet appears, for example, it is never entirely clear whether he is “insane” or sane—and for whom, if anyone, Denmark’s prince is “performing.” Thus, while the Player and Hamlet are not doubled, they still prompt interesting conjectures about the transiency of identity, metatheatricality, and doubling.

Using my chosen double casting in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* also raises many fascinating questions about the legitimacy of the “parts” the players portray. For example, the same actor who plays the tragedian depicting the murderer in the *Mousetrap* also plays Claudius (the *Hamlet* character who is represented by the murderer in *The Murder of Gonzago*). This one actor is, therefore, acting both the “true identity” of his characters (a player and Claudius) as well as his “part” (the Murderer who is a representation of Claudius)—but from the perspective of the audience and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, both identities seem equally legitimate and “real.” An extra layer is added to this intensely metatheatrical doubling when the actor performing both a tragedian and Claudius plays “the poisoner” in the pantomime. In this instance, the actor

is depicting a player depicting a character that is supposed to symbolically represent Claudius. As such, this actor becomes a prism for identity by depicting one of his characters through the lens of one of his other characters. He therefore creates an additional interpretation of one particular reality (Claudius' reality) through the viewpoint of the player's reality. In this one moment, therefore, the audience and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern witness the collision of a theatrical world and the "real world" embodied in the double-casting of one actor.

Another particularly potent moment created by this doubling occurs with the actor playing Alfred and Gertrude. The original Stoppard script contains a scene in which Rosencrantz mistakes a costumed Alfred for Gertrude. In this double-cast production, that moment becomes less about Rosencrantz's occasional imbecility and much more about his very natural metatheatrical mistake of confusing an actor's currently presented persona for his other persona. During this mishap, Rosencrantz's error is also probably the audience's error, because for a split second neither the audience nor Rosencrantz is certain whether the actor is depicting Gertrude or Alfred (an actor frequently called upon to portray women in the Tragedians' performances) wearing a woman's costume. In a world where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot even remember their own names, how will this extra twist to Stoppard's love of metatheatre and reality enhance the play's questions about identity?

Another instance of momentary identity confusion occurs in Act One, immediately after the players exit to prepare for their "private performance." After their mass exit, the actor playing both a tragedian and Ophelia sprints on stage, closely followed by Hamlet. It is not until the audience and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sees

Hamlet (who is not doubled with any of the players), that they realize a location shift has occurred. Until Hamlet's appearance, it seems as if the tragedian playing Ophelia has simply "put on" another costume and has re-entered as a character from the tragedian's repertoire. The audience does not immediately understand who this actor is representing because of the change of costume and gender (this actor is a boy tragedian in addition to being Ophelia, a woman.) Nonetheless, her face is familiar as the face that was just seen pushing the tragedians' cart. It is Hamlet's entrance with his cry of "Ophelia!" that allows the audience to finally identify this actor's new identity. I have chosen to make this important, if brief, scene momentarily confusing for the audience so its members experience the same feelings of shock and disorientation that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do. Instead of using double revolves or complicated scenery like the revivals I mentioned earlier, I am using doubling to create a massive shift in the way Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the audience understand the play's construct of identity.

This ever-changing, disorienting environment decreases Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's limited scope of action. In Shakespeare's play, these characters serve as messengers, go-betweens, and objects of Hamlet's fury. Their only job is to follow the orders of Claudius and Gertrude—not once within Shakespeare's text do we see them make their own decision, or act against the royals' commands. On a thematic level within *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have very little worth, and some directors will even cut them out of performances—Shakespeare gives them no lines referring to their own thoughts or motivations. They are emotionally and psychologically empty compared to the other compelling characters of the tragedy. Stoppard's riff on *Hamlet* takes this apparent lack of psychology and self-direction and explains Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern's inability to act by thrusting them into a far more confusing, depersonalized world—which I am hoping to explain further via the use of doubling.

This concept based on doubling thematically emphasizes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's struggle to maintain their sense of self in this absurdist, dizzying world. The players, the "opposite of people," can shape-shift into whatever personae pleases them or gives them purpose, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are stuck within their own skins and prescribed plot sequence. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exist only as singular "characters" within the fixed script of *Hamlet*, yet the players are able to play as many characters as they like. I strongly disagree with Billington's statement that "The players, by their profession, have fixed functions and identities; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in contrast, have no past, present and future and exist only through other people's definition of them" (32). While it is true that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no past and exist only through other people's definition of them, the players, by their profession, have had to acquire the ability to have *fluid* functions and identities. The difference between Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the tragedians is ultimately that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are characters while the tragedians are actors. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are trapped within the confines of their storyline and functions as characters. They cannot change and they cannot truly make an independent choice. They cannot process knowledge outside of their limited perspectives, and they cannot halt their inevitable fate. However, the actors can become as many different characters as they want—as the Player says, they can "come and go as [they] please" (Stoppard, 66). They may be confident in their purpose while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not, but their confidence arises from an ability to cheat the system through their art form—they can

escape danger or problems by changing their identity. For example, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern march towards a certain death by leaving the stage and therefore exiting the confines of their reality, the players are able to “die” at the end of the play purely by acting it—there is no real repercussion or pain for them, because they have the uncanny ability to escape danger by becoming someone else. This inability to transform themselves severely limits Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s agency—while the players can enter and exit the stage (or as the Player says, to “come and go as [they] please”), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are perpetually trapped onstage waiting for the same people (although sometimes playing different “parts”) to come to them (instead of exiting to seek action somewhere else). Because they can only define themselves in relation to the events of *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to leave the stage space. However, the players—able to give themselves a context in which to act at any available moment—may come and go as they please between different realms, different stories, and different locations.

The players also have the ability to understand and depict the events of *Hamlet* by staging a production of the *Mousetrap*, which in Stoppard’s play exactly mirrors the events of Shakespeare’s tragedy (instead of just being similar to Claudius’ crime, as in *Hamlet*). Conversely, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to comprehend the events surrounding them because they cannot escape their own identities and look at the events in Elsinore through the lens of a different persona. They have no counterpoint, no larger experience from which they can compare and categorize Hamlet’s antics and the whirlwind of tragic and confusing events in Denmark, and therefore have no way to process or contextualize what is happening. Guildenstern says that “we only know what

we've been told, and that's little enough"—which is a very apt way to think about their situation. While the Player can easily comprehend the events in Elsinore because he can use his acting ability to give himself a different perspective, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern only have their own incredibly limited persona and perspective. Their attempts to “act out” conversations with Hamlet in order to make sense of what is happening in Denmark are absolutely futile, because they are incapable of truly changing their identities or viewpoints, even in a simple role-playing game. William Babula expertly points out that in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the play is not merely a metaphor for life—the play and world of the theatre *is* life for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They are forced to subscribe to the ultimate destiny scripted for them, and even though “no one is going to come on and drag them off,” they eventually accept their fate and continue on knowingly to their deaths (280). Theoretically, all the other characters of the play would also have an eventual fate towards which they would move—but with my particular casting, the players have the ability to flirt with and evade their “scripted fate” in a way that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will never have.

If Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot even keep track of their own identities, how are they supposed to survive in a world where identities shift and change as different actors take on different roles? This impossibility is closely connected to their ultimate tragedy—while everyone else in the play are tragedians (or Hamlet, who is also constantly “playing a part”) who can change identities at a moment’s notice; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are stuck with their lot in life. Their eventual death is not arbitrary, but arises from an inability to adapt or react proactively to their ever-changing environment. The players, by the nature of their trade and the metatheatrical world in which they live,

are able to escape any danger—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, stuck in their singular and unchanging persona, are not so lucky. However, we should not scorn them for this shortcoming, for in our daily lives we are frequently faced with the same problem—an inability to change our identity or lot in life, especially when unexpected events or the machinations of others destroy our hopes and plans. Even for those of us who are actors, we are only able to escape our day-to-day reality for a transformative, brief period of time onstage. Most of us would never dare to try to make our theatrical lives our real lives—but in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Tom Stoppard suggests to us that such a cross-over might be possible.

While Stoppard did not call for doubling in his original conception and writing of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, he has used doubling as a thematic device with increasing frequency in his later years as a playwright. *Arcadia*, for example, contains a doubling of a nineteenth century character (Augustus Coverly) and a twentieth century character (Gus Coverly). This play focuses on the intersection between the past and present; the cyclical nature of time and invention; and the perpetual human quest for knowledge. Throughout the play, the scenes jump back and forth between the early nineteenth century family living in Sidley Park and the present-day researchers and descendents of the Coverleys who are trying to make sense of events that happened many years before. The doubling of Augustus and Gus is a literal manifestation of this continual interplay between past and present—through the use of doubling; the same actor reappears in completely different eras. While strikingly different in personality, Augustus and Gus share a name, a family, a house, and an actor. In this casting choice,

Tom Stoppard has managed to massively call into question the idea of “time being the greatest distance.”

The Invention of Love, written a few years later, also makes use of doubling: “the two groups of characters appearing only in Act One or Act Two, respectively, may be played by the same group of actors” (Stoppard). *The Invention of Love* is a memory play, and Stoppard therefore makes use of doubling to show how the poet and scholar A.E. Housman contextualizes certain memories—characters who are important to him (such as Jackson, the man he unrequitedly loved his whole life) are not doubled. The multitudes of less important characters that pass through are denied a specific individuality by being doubled with other characters—creating an ensemble of ghosts that construct various parts of Housman’s life. While the double-casting for this production is not clearly defined by Tom Stoppard in terms of which characters are doubled with which, in the original production of *The Invention of Love*, the doubling decisions seemed to have been made by grouping together certain character “types.” Characters in Act One are doubled with reincarnations of similar characters in Act Two. For example, in Act One there is a Balliol student who is expelled from Oxford for exhibiting inappropriate behavior with a male professor. In Act Two, the same actor who played the Balliol student plays Chamberlain, a homosexual colleague of Housman. Pater, the critic and dandy, is doubled with Harris, a writer with a tendency to lie. The art critic Ruskin who thinks of Aestheticism as being “male degeneracy” (Stoppard, 10) reappears as Labouchere, who writes the Parliamentary Amendment that men practicing homosexual acts may be sentenced to two years of hard labor. Occasionally, the doubling in this play comes

across as a Stoppardian pun—for example, Oscar Wilde is doubled with Bunthorne (the Gilbert and Sullivan character that is a satire of Oscar Wilde).

Rock n' Roll, one of Tom Stoppard's most recent works, also makes heavy use of doubling. Esme, the flower-child daughter of Communist professor Max, is split into two different parts—"Esme (younger)" and "Esme (older)". Esme's mother is named Eleanor and Esme's daughter is named Alice. These three characters are played by two actors—one actor plays both the younger version of Esme and Alice, and another actor plays both the older version of Esme and Eleanor. Minor roles within the play are doubled as well, and Stoppard's intention is "that the twenty characters may be played by a company of twelve." As with *The Invention of Love*, character "types" tend to be lumped together and played by the same actor. For example, Magda and Gillian (both university students), are played by the same actor. The Communist interrogator and Nigel (a nosy reporter who fathers Esme's child) are played by the same actor. The doubling of Esme, Eleanor, and Alice plays with this idea of character-types on a whole new level. *Rock n' Roll* is primarily concerned with the disintegration of the Communist ideals (represented by the eventual mental deterioration of Max) and the political upheaval in Czechoslovakia during the Sixties, Seventies, and Eighties. Throughout the play, different characters reflect on the impossibility of truly changing the world via politics, knowledge, and music. In Act One, the flower child Esme could not be more unlike her professor mother (Eleanor), who is slowly dying from cancer. However, in Act Two, Eleanor "reappears" as a much older Esme and the younger Esme "reappears" as Esme's daughter Alice. Throughout Act Two, frequent comments are made between the similarities and differences between the three women. Alice is mistaken for Esme (Alice

likes to wear her mother's old leather jacket) in the supermarket and Jan mistakes a photograph of Esme for Eleanor. Other characters also frequently make comments about Esme's attempts to "become" Eleanor as she grows older—"You're not apologizing for not being Eleanor, are you?" (Stoppard, 64) This doubling is therefore an ingenious way of underlying the play's interest in the continuation of the status quo and how little things change. Despite their massive differences in personality, intellect, and interests, Alice becomes the same as young Esme and middle-aged Esme becomes the same as Eleanor. Presumably Alice, in her old age, will also resemble Eleanor.

Doubling appears in several other Stoppard plays. In *Indian Ink*, Stoppard uses doubling to highlight the class system in both India and England—and how the political structure of India changed after it achieved independence. In *Jumpers* the acrobats or "jumpers" also play various minor characters to emphasize Stoppard's comparison of modern academic philosophy to gymnastics. In looking at these various works, Stoppard has clearly shown an interest in doubling in the years following *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Therefore, if Stoppard were to re-write *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* now it is possible that he might make use of doubling to highlight the core themes of his play.

It is important to note that this production is not designed to be a "concept" production or to force a certain kind of interpretation onto the cast and audience. Instead, I want to create a fresh, exciting production of a brilliant play that I firmly believe asks even more questions about the plays already existing themes of metatheatricality and identity. Fritz Kaufmann wrote that "A work of art does not substitute, but institutes an original awareness of existence on the whole; it does not so much reproduce and

represent as produce and present a total experience” (Natanson, 147). This statement very aptly summarizes my hopes to create a total, intelligent, unusual, and exciting experience with this project. Stoppard was not trying to replicate a “slice of life” when he wrote *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*—he was instead endeavoring to produce a theatrical and intellectual environment in which an audience could question and re-examine their faith in perception and reality. My goal for my particular production is to push this environment even further with the use of doubling—to attempt a “reformation [of] consciousness” (Natanson, 148)—by presenting this play in a new format. However, despite the intellectual excitement that this production is designed to create, I believe that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is not, as some scholars believe, solely an intellectual and philosophical treatise, but a clever and intriguing piece that “reverberates in different ways to people who see it...and can suggest various analogies for itself” (Kuurman, 21). Stoppard himself is quoted as saying: “I don’t expect one voice suddenly to produce a final statement. It’s a continuing process which results in plays as far as I’m concerned” (Rusinko, 9). In my opinion, it would be sacrilegious to try and create some sort of ultimate interpretation of a playwright who clearly prides himself on his works being adaptable and offering multiple interpretations to directors, scholars, and actors. John Fleming writes that Stoppard’s deep love for the theatre arises from his belief that it is “an event, not a text, meaning that his plays are designed to live and breathe on the stage and are meant to be experienced in the theatre” (5). He later writes that

...while Stoppard is rightly hailed for his literary qualities, it is important to keep in mind that he is first and foremost a man of the theatre, an art form that is ephemeral...Stoppard’s plays...are flexible objects that have been, and that can be, adapted to the individual circumstances of different productions (6).

I strongly agree with both these statements, and while the nature of this thesis has been incredibly scholastic, its purpose is ultimately to explore a new way of breathing life into *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* after decades of it being dissected and analyzed by theatre scholars around the world. Stoppard himself once said that “the important thing about a successful work of art is not that it should communicate X to everyone but that it should run through the absolute alphabet for each 26 people” (Fleming, 141). It is my sincere hope that my particular staging of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* will succeed in creating an exciting, thought-provoking staging that instead of drilling one particular concept into every audience member’s head will inspire each to contemplate all of Stoppard’s favorite themes in a new light.

Chapter 5

Post-production Analysis

My staging of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* was performed on February 17th, 18th, and 19th, 2011. After each production, I hosted talk-backs with the audience, cast, and crew in order to find out how my particular production was received. The talk backs were moderated by theatre department professors in order to keep my perspective on the comments and critiques of the audience members as objective as possible. The responses were almost entirely and overwhelmingly positive and reinforced my belief that a double-cast production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* provides highly effective ways of looking at this famous and renowned script. The most frequent comments during talk-backs praised the show as being incredibly thought-provoking—and one participant even asked, “Why would you do it [the production] any other way [referring to the concept of doubling the cast of *Hamlet* with the players]?”

While we welcomed comments of any sort, the talk-backs were designed to focus mostly on the reactions to the metatheatrical elements of the production, with special attention paid to the doubling. To my great relief, every audience member was incredibly intrigued by how the production played with preconceived notions of reality and truth. Many referenced Shakespeare’s famous “All the World’s a stage” speech, which proved to me that on a very basic level the audience comprehended one of the main points I had hoped to make with my staging of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*—the intersections between the reality of the stage and the reality of our day-to-day life. One particularly insightful comment from a very active talk-back participant was that “instead of theatre reflecting life, this production suggests to us that life reflects theatre.” While I do not think the distinction between whether this production was life-as-art or art-as-life

is that polarized (I personally think the play is more about how life-as-art and art-as-life coexist), this comment suggested that there were people in the audience who made the realization during *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* that life-as-theatre is an equally compelling concept as the more familiar theatre-as-life concept (life-as-theatre is certainly very present within this play).

In all of the talk-backs, members of the audience got into heated discussions about who the actors depicting multiple parts were supposed to “be.” On this issue, participants said very different things: some claimed that we were only supposed to see the players as actors, others felt the players were supposed to be interpreted as different characters, and many argued that the double-cast players were supposed to exist somewhere between actor and character. While no audience group could come to an entirely conclusive decision about how we are supposed to interpret the players’ fluctuating identity, it is clear that this production sparked much discussion about the nature of theatre, and forced the audience to consider that within this particular performance, our notions of what defines a “role” can be challenged and reinterpreted.

Several comments particularly stood out to me as revealing the effectiveness of doubling the players with the *Hamlet* characters. One participant commented that each time the players entered, for a split second, he was never quite sure whether it was the players entering as themselves, the players in pantomime, or the *Hamlet* characters. To me this reveals a successful “blending of worlds” between all the different levels of “actual” and “theatrical” reality colliding in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The same participant later commented that when the players first entered the stage space in Act One, he felt like the entire production suddenly shifted, or that “something weird

had just happened.” I was delighted to hear that this particular person had such a viscerally strong reaction to the players, and it was clear that while not all audience members enjoyed this “weirdness,” it was at least something that a majority of audience members noticed and considered.

Several specific moments in the play seemed to profoundly affect the audience. One of the moments that received the most comments was the scene in which Guildenstern stabs the Player with a fake knife and for a very tense minute, the audience was convinced (as were Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) that the Player had actually been murdered. The amount of shock and distress the talk-back participants described experiencing at that “attack” and then their subsequent astonishment when the Player “comes back to life” suggested to me that this production was very successful in creating an environment in which the audience was experiencing the same levels of confusion and astonishment as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when suddenly faced with unexpected or absurd events. As the talk-backs progressed, this suggestion became an overwhelming revelation of a sincere emotional connection between the audience and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This bond arose not just because of how talented the actors were, but because the double-cast environment in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were thrust was so disarming that many people watching the play found themselves undergoing very Rosencrantz and Guildenstern-like reactions. One talk-back participant pointed out, with many nods of agreement from his peers, that as a result of the doubling, the players were a much stronger foil to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because the titular characters seemed even more helpless in the face of an environment in which different actors could transform easily into different people. Instead of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern being

lost in a large ensemble, they became lost in the continual swirl of a small ensemble changing shape rapidly and frequently. These particular comments proved the success on some level of using doubling to create additional sympathy for and understanding of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's situation.

As a result of the increased tension and interplay between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the players, the audience seemed to feel an even greater sense of dread and discomfort with the knowledge that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would eventually die. One moment in the play seemed especially moving and memorable—two players depict the execution of two Rosencrantz and Guildenstern-like characters within the Murder of Gonzago pantomime. In my production, the players portraying “Rosencrantz” and “Guildenstern” perform an almost balletic enactment of their death, slowly moving from their condemnation to the moment their necks snap. My movement director and I carefully blocked this moment to be choreographically simple but emotionally powerful, and fortunately it worked tremendously well—talk-back participants frequently returned to that moment in discussions. The words “creepy” and “overwhelming” were thrown around a lot, but what was clear is that the thinning of the line between the players and the “parts” they play was made immensely more powerful in that one moment—and forced the audience to remember that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will not survive to the end of the play.

Several other smaller conversations during the talk-backs underscored the very human elements of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's situation. The actor playing Guildenstern actually said something very interesting at the talkbacks, which is that he felt Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are suffering from the same problem as Hamlet—an

inability to act and an overwhelming sense of confusion about how to react to horrific and confusing events. I think this particular comment is incredibly insightful, because it contextualizes and compares Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's existential plight to that of a much more well-known literary and cultural figure.

The talk-back audiences described many other moments as being particularly powerful in a thematic and metatheatrical way. Ophelia's monologue,²³ for instance, received a lot of attention because it interrupts the dress rehearsal of the pantomime with a moment of startlingly violent pathos (Hamlet throws Ophelia onstage and performs an excerpt from the "to a nunnery speech" and then leaves her onstage for her "What a noble mind is here overthrown" monologue.) Upon delivering these lines, the actress playing Ophelia went backstage and changed back into a Tragedian outfit to almost immediately reappear as the English king who sentences "Rosencrantz" and "Guildenstern" to death in the pantomime. Many members of the audience described this moment as very disquieting because Ophelia's monologue felt so "real" but was immediately followed by the actress reappearing as someone else.

The talk-back participants also commented repeatedly about how cognizant they were of being in a theatrical space in which characters were coming in and out. I am very glad that the minimalistic setting seemed to help facilitate the audience's awareness that they were in a space designed for performance and not some "other world" created by the illusion of elaborate design. I had been concerned that perhaps the set design was *too* minimalistic and would have come across as being uninteresting, but it was clear from

²³ I inserted some of Hamlet and Ophelia's monologues from the *Hamlet* text into *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in order to flesh out these parts that do not get very much attention in Stoppard's play, give more time for costume changes, and create disarming scenes between Hamlet, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. Stoppard's original text contains none of these soliloquies—"To Be or Not to Be," "How all occasions do inform against me," and "What a noble mind is here overthrown."

audience feedback that we used just the right amount of minimalism in the production to create a metatheatrical feel.

The talk-backs did reveal some constructive criticisms that I would consider if I were to stage this production again. One talk-back participant pointed out that while the doubling and metatheatrical aspects of the play were fascinating, they produced a great amount of uncertainty and occasionally something akin to social awkwardness regarding the stage itself. Some audience members described not knowing how to interact with the stage during intermission, or even after the show. Others described being unsure how much they were supposed to interact with the actors. On one level, this sense of uncertainty is exactly what I wanted to elicit. I wanted the audience to question the thin line between theatre and reality, and to feel a similar anxiety to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's anxiety about how to understand this strange world into which they have been thrust. However, I wonder if such audience uncertainty at times might have manifested itself as undesirable confusion or discomfort. Looking back on the production, I realize that I should have paid more attention to providing a smooth transition out of theatrical moments into "breaks" such as intermission. Perhaps I also needed to encourage audience-actor interaction earlier in the production to establish the atypicality of the actor-audience relationship of this particular production. I probably could have encouraged a more specific and detailed design from several members of my production staff in order to make a metatheatrical point without also having audience members continually asking themselves "what is going on?" For example, more carefully orchestrated music and lighting effects could have made the transition into and out of intermission much easier. My lighting designer and I chose to have a very

“theatrical” light design on the stage during intermission, which we thought was exciting at the time. However, I realize now that it just created discomfort and confusion for the audience members, who were not sure whether or not they could get up from their seat. One member of the talk-back session said that the production had a “confused” sense of whether *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* was a tragedy or a comedy. I have always believed the production to be a comedy with a tragic outcome for the titular characters. I personally prefer productions to straddle the line between drama and comedy, so I am not sure I would have changed anything in terms of the emotional “feel” of my production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. However, this comment did make me more aware that I could have perhaps pushed the more somber moments to a further extreme to counterbalance the ridiculous nature of some of the more amusing scenes.

Several weeks after the production, I held a post-mortem discussion with my cast and crew to discuss their reactions to the rehearsal process and performances. I held this post-mortem on March 14th, almost a month after the play had closed so that the actors, the crew, and I could have time to reflect and, therefore, be more objective with our comments. The post-mortem was moderated by Laurie Wolf, my thesis advisor, in order to keep the conversation focused, specific, and productive. It was absolutely fascinating to hear how the different members of the production interpreted and understood the rehearsal process and thematic implications of our very particular performances of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Hearing the actors discuss their intellectual interpretations of the performances was particularly interesting because I did not spend much time explaining the full

intellectual rationale for my concept with the actors during rehearsals. This was done on purpose, because I feared that the actors would make limited or overly-cerebral choices if they knew the full scope of my thesis. So, while I made everyone aware of the importance of the doubling, I did not waste my time in rehearsals discussing and rehashing the metatheatrical implications of doubling on an intellectual level. My goal was to create organic work from the actors, but have the thesis still manifest itself in the performances. Fortunately, all the actors present at the post-mortem stressed how their minimal awareness of my individual interpretation of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* influenced their acting choices, but not on an overly “intellectual” level.

However, while the actors were free to make many of their own organic choices, some of the actors playing the tragedians revealed theories about their characters in the post-mortem that were incongruous with my thesis. During the rehearsal process, I spent copious amounts of time working on team building exercises and games with the tragedians to build the sense of unity within their ensemble. I focused a great amount of energy on making sure the tragedians were working together as a cohesive whole with energy and excitement—but did not spend nearly enough one-on-one time with each individual tragedian about his or her specific double-casting. During the post-mortem, I realized that if I had taken the time to talk to each of them individually about their interpretations of the play, I could have steered their incorrect conclusions back on track. For example, one of my tragedians felt that every time she “changed hats” as a player she became an entirely new character. For her, this lack of continuity throughout the play gave her what she felt was a “fractured” performance. I personally had wanted all the tragedians to become a different, individual character when they were depicting

characters from *Hamlet*, but I wanted their various “Mousetrap” personas to be acted through the lens of the tragedian. For this particular actor, it sounds as if her role in the “Mousetrap” had become something entirely different from her role as a tragedian—which is not what I wanted at all. The actor who portrayed Alfred and Gertude said that he had the opposite issue—that instead of feeling “fractured,” his parts blended together. He described how his roles as Alfred and the Player Queen informed and fueled how he interpreted Gertrude—and in my interpretation, his roles as Alfred/Player Queen should be kept entirely separate from his role as Gertrude. While working with this actor, I frequently struggled with the fact that something felt “wrong” about his Gertrude, but I could not figure out what it was. Now I know I should have spent more time talking about my concept with him so this confusion could have been avoided.

Unfortunately, the actor who played Guildenstern was unable to attend the post-mortem, but the actor who played Rosencrantz spoke for both of them, and had many opinions about how the doubling affected their performance. For example, one of the questions asked in the post-mortem was if the smaller cast size enhanced the performance or not from an acting standpoint. He said that having the players also depict the cast of *Hamlet* created “a confusing cacophony” and that he felt like he was trying to navigate “an ocean of beings.” According to him, he found the doubling incredibly disconcerting on an acting level—not just an academic or intellectual level. He also described how he felt that being surrounded by a massive cast of twenty or more actors with a separate ensemble for the cast of *Hamlet* and the tragedians would have been just as confusing—but not nearly as unsettling on an emotional and psychological level. The word he frequently used to describe his interactions with the players was “eerie,” which delighted

me, because that is the same adjective I have used multiple times in this thesis. The actors playing the tragedians also frequently commented on how the doubling greatly helped the feeling of being in an ensemble—which also relieved me, because that was one of my primary reasons for utilizing doubling.

We also spent a good amount of time in the post-mortem discussing what the phrase “the opposite of people” meant to each person present. One person said that the phrase the “opposite of people” points out the function of the actor—that to be an actor inherently implies becoming someone else distinct from one’s regular personality. To this person, “the opposite of people” means being able to become a sort of anti-persona—wearing a different skin from the one which normally contains us. The actor playing Rosencrantz described how “the opposite of people” implied that instead of theatre being the opposite of life (theatre is illusionary whereas life is real), theatre and life are really more like opposite sides of a coin—just different sides or perceptions of the same experience of life. My costume designer said that phrase puts the audience on guard very early in the play and breaks down preconceived notions—but at the same time also re-engages them and forces them to reconsider how they think about theatre. Several other actors commented on how “the opposite of people” denies the illusion that theatre is “real.” All these comments reveal to me that at least the designers and actors I was working with had a very similar definition of this key phrase without my having to tell them in rehearsals—so I was relieved to discover that I effectively “directed” this idea in rehearsals without explicitly stating my particular interpretation.

The designers and production staff also had many interesting things to say about how they felt about our performances. In order to create the world of *Rosencrantz and*

Guildestern are Dead, I spent much more time talking with my designers about the concept of the production on an intellectual level. Since my designers and I had already had multiple and lengthy conversations about the themes and implications of the play before rehearsals had even started, I was familiar with their interpretive choices already. However, they had rather illuminating things to say about how their designs manifested themselves during the actual performances. For example, my costume designer mentioned how the actual act of having to help actors quickly change out of their costumes backstage made the doubling a very palpable and tangible situation rather than a purely theoretical one. The actors depicting the players agreed with this statement, saying that their frequent costume changes made them very self-aware of “shedding their skin.” The comments of the production and design staff were particularly helpful because they were the ones who spent the rehearsal process watching the play develop and grow. Several of them commented on how each time they watched a full rehearsal of the play, they picked up different details. My master electrician in particular said that it took him four or five viewings to process everything in the play. While this is a problem with any play written by Stoppard, I am very aware of the fact that I probably should have worked harder to make the play as coherent and straightforward as I possibly could for the sake of the audience members who were not familiar with *Rosencrantz and Guildestern are Dead* or Stoppard’s writing style.

In the end however, it is safe to say that while the production was not quite perfect, it was immensely successful in provoking thought in the areas I wanted to provoke thought. I was greatly pleased at how many people were astonished to learn that Tom Stoppard did not originally intend for *Rosencrantz and Guildestern are Dead* to be

doubled. The overwhelming response to this particular staging was that the doubling felt natural and illuminated the themes of the play. Nobody described the concept itself as being confusing or muddying the core conceptual aspects of the play—instead, as one talk-back participant stated, the production allowed the audience to “access this play on a different level.” One audience participant said that she “wasn’t sure if [she] should leave” after the show because the production had so influenced the way she thought about the intersection between life and art/theatre. She felt like the production had so completely made her a part of the strange and confusing world of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* that she felt odd getting up and leaving, and that ultimately for her, the production was “about us [the audience].” This particular statement reveals the deep level of involvement the audience felt while watching the play. I can, therefore, say with complete confidence that this production achieved exactly what I wanted. The audience members laughed, cried, and in the process were forced to question the relationship between reality and truth and how it relates to art. The actors, crew, and I created both a thought-provoking and thoroughly enjoyable play.

Conclusion

The question posed by this thesis was if doubling could be used to enhance the metatheatrical implications of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. In examining the production itself, the reactions of talk-back participants, and the thoughtful comments of the actors and production crew involved in the performance, I have concluded that the careful use of doubling is a remarkably effective way to jumpstart additional interest and conversation about the themes of Stoppard's first major work. Double-casting the tragedians and the characters from *Hamlet* forced the audience to reconsider their preconceptions of reality and theatrical "truth," to become more aware of the theatrical space, and to become more invested in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern out of a mutual confusion, intrigue, and discomfort created by the double-casting. While multiple opinions were raised and debated in the talk-backs and post-mortem, it is clear that the doubling of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* led to a great amount of conversation and new reflection on the validity of our commonly held interpretations of existence and personal agency. It was not my primary goal to force one particular viewpoint on the audience, but to stretch each audience member's imagination and understanding of the play and its themes. The fact that such discussions and debate erupted in the talk-backs and post-mortem does not suggest that this production was confusing or unsuccessful—but instead that it succeeded in its ultimate goal of inspiring many different thoughts and questions.

That is not to say that this production was perfect. Had I the opportunity, there are several aspects of the production that I would change or "fix." I would spend more one-on-one time with each tragedian, I would have more in-depth consideration of

technical elements such as lighting design and sound design, and I would have made the transitions between acts and intermissions more clearly delineated for the audience.

Staging *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* was an exciting challenge and a learning experience, and so I have weighed and considered what I would have done differently if I had a second chance to stage it—yet, I still firmly believe that in terms of fulfilling its stated goals, this project was unbelievably successful and was very well received by the audience.

However, I cannot stress enough that I do not consider my particular way of staging *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* to be the “only” way—or even the best way—to effectively present this phenomenal work. I have merely endeavored to put a new spin on a canonical play, and in doing so, raise additional questions about metatheatre, identity, and perception. Each director is going to have a different interpretation of this play and will have a different idea of how to perform it—but through my thesis and directorial, I have shown that the use of doubling can palpably and successfully emphasize the core themes of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.

Appendix: Talk-Back and Post-Mortem Questions

Talk-back Questions:

- 1) *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is a play thematically concerned with questions of identity, agency, and death. What were your reactions to the thematic implications of the play?
- 2) Normally, productions of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* contain a much larger cast (anywhere from eighteen to thirty people). How do you think doubling (casting one actor in multiple roles) in this particular production affected the thematic concerns of the play?
- 3) Metatheatre is a self-awareness of the theatre as an art form (including its limitations, structure, etc). Tom Stoppard is fascinated with metatheatre and uses it as a method to explore many of the key themes in this play. How do you think the doubling enhanced or detracted from this concept?
- 4) Any other questions or comments about the production as a whole?

Post-Mortem Questions:

- 1) How aware were you of Megan's concept during your work on this show? How did the doubling affect your work on this production? Actors, how did it influence your characterization? Designers, how did it influence your design?
- 2) What did you think about the intersection between the world of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Hamlet*? How did you react to the interplay between these two worlds? What did you think about the inserted Shakespearean monologues?

- 3) What does the phrase “the opposite of people” mean to you?
- 4) What was your interpretation or understanding of Stoppard’s focus on existence, reality, and death?
- 5) What was it like to perform this piece with an audience and without an audience?
- 6) Is this piece tragic or comedic?
- 7) Any last comments or thoughts about your experience working on this production?

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