

# Costume Design and Production for the play "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead"

Suyon Choe

Ph.D. Candidate, Lecturer Dept of Fashion Design, Konkuk University of Korea

## ABSTRACT

*This is a project presented to obtain Master of Fine Arts degree in Costume Production. The candidate has to present 20 costume illustrations and four full constructed costumes for selected actors. At the presentation, the candidate is given 45 minutes to present followed by questions asked by the committee and audiences and it was presented and exhibited in Brookline Arts Council. The thesis consists of two parts; research and analysis on the play, and the result of the design and production for the play<sup>1)</sup> which consists of four fully built costumes-two in chosen fabrics and the other two in muslin with full closure worn on selected actors for each character. The period for the costume design is the Elizabethan period, the actual period the play Hamlet was written in England. The play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is a play written in 1967 from a view of two small characters from Shakespeare's play Hamlet. So the costumes of Hamlet's characters are in full period, but the main two characters' costumes will have some of modern twists.*

**Key Words :** *costume, shakespeare, theatre, elizabethan*

## I. A Synopsis of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

### Act 1

The play opens in a place without any visible character. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the two college friends of Hamlet, are traveling. To pass their time, they are betting on the toss of a coin. Each coin Guildenstern spins lands on the same side. Rosencrantz studies it, announces it as 'heads' and puts it into his bag. They repeat the process. Apparently, they have been doing this for some time. Rosencrantz shows no surprise at this bizarre

happening. Guildenstern is well aware of this oddity, and is worried by the implications, but does not panic about it.

They are also trying to remember the beginning of their journey, which seems to be more difficult than it is, and after several attempts, they remember that they have been "sent for" by a messenger.

Suddenly, they hear music and a group of players(the Tragedians) appears with their stage cart. The leading player(the Player), a world-weary actor-manager who is down on his luck because of the current vogue for child actors, is willing to stoop to any scurrility in order to make a living. He invites Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to partic-

ipate in a strolling play, but they cannot come to any agreement. Guildenstern suggests a bet, and undoubtedly all the coins they toss lands on 'heads'. He asks for a performance in return. Rosencrantz picks up the coin Guildenstern had been betting on, which the Player had hidden under his foot, and finds out that the coin had landed on 'tails'.

All of a sudden, the exterior changes into the court of Elsinore; and from nowhere, Ophelia runs into the room followed by Hamlet. After they have passed by, the King (Claudius) and the Queen (Gertrude), with a large number of attendants, pour in. Not getting their names right, they welcome Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and tell them to keep an eye on Hamlet's strange behavior and report back to the King. The group sweeps away leaving the two bewildered.

#### Act 2

Hamlet greets his old friends. He is already aware that these two friends were sent for; not a 'visit of their own inclination' nor a 'free visitation'. He welcomes them to Elsinore, which he himself describes as 'a prison'.

The Tragedians arrive at the court. Hamlet asks them to play 'The Murder of Gonzago' before the King. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet the Player for the second time. The two watch a performance the Tragedians are rehearsing. They present a very stylized reconstruction illustrating the plot of the court of Elsinore(the plot of *Hamlet*). They show the death of the 'two spies' accompanying the Prince on the ship.

Polonius, the Elderly Lord Chamberlain, is murdered by Hamlet. The King Claudius orders Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find out from Hamlet where he has hidden the body. Afterwards, they are given a mission to take Hamlet to England with a

letter for the English King.

#### Act 3

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves in a pitch darkness wondering if they are still alive. They are on the ship with Hamlet bound for England. They have a faint knowledge that this trip will finalize their mission. As they continue their usual game trying to figure out the situation they are put into, Rosencrantz gets carried away in this role play and opens Claudius' letter to the King of England, which they are supposed to deliver. They both find out Claudius' request of Hamlet's sudden death upon their arrival. Not knowing how to handle such an incredible matter, they go to sleep. While they are sleeping, Hamlet switches Claudius' letter with his, which contains the name of this two clueless friends in place of his.

The next morning, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are surprised to find the Tragedians climbing out of the barrels on the deck. Having offended the King with their performance, they have become stow-aways on Hamlet's ship. Later, the pirates attack the ship and kidnap Hamlet.

During the remainder of the play, the Tragedians perform the rest of hamlet's story.

In the end, they form a tableau of *Hamlet's* last scene, portraying the court with corpses of Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet.

The ambassador of England arrives and says his line(Act 5, scene ii).

*The sight is dismal; and our affairs from England come too late.*

*The ears are senseless that should give us hearing to tell his command is fulfilled, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.*

*Where should we have our thanks?*

## II. The Play

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, a play by Tom Stoppard (1937-. Czech born British dramatist), was first staged in 1966. After being rejected from the Royal Shakespeare Company, Stoppard's agent released the script to a group of Oxford undergraduates, who wanted to perform at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

"the director and his leading lady had quarreled and dropped out, the stage manager had taken over the direction, and the actors were bewildered by the play, which seemed clogged with repetitions and had no proper ending".<sup>2)</sup>

Stoppard was "very light hearted" about the whole thing, because he had a novel published in the same week and he had no doubt in his mind that the novel would make his reputation. That Sunday, scanning the papers for his dream book reviews, he came on the *Observer's* rave of *Rosencrantz* instead. By this invidently random twist of fate, *Rosencrantz* became the work that established Stoppard's reputation.

The first official performance was at the Old Vic by the Royal National Theatre on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1967. On October 16<sup>th</sup> of the same year, it began a long run in the New York at the Alvin Theatre by the same director, Derek Goldby.

The play has been the subject of many critical interpretations, notably as a statement of existential as well as absurdist<sup>3)</sup> intent or even a serious critique of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

These views have led to what might be called the *Catch 22* of Stoppardian criticism.

Stoppard himself claims he had "never written anything for discussion".

His important ideas are trivialized by theatrical trickery. His plays are written for, and shaped by,

the theatre.

This is proved to be true in all his works for stage and radio, as well as his other adapted plays. Stoppard has also co-written some of the screen plays for Monty Python's *Flying Circus* and *Brazil*. He directed and wrote the film version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

This travesty of Shakespeare's play feeds not only on *Hamlet*, but in Pirandello's *Six Characters In Search of an Author* and on Beckett's *Waiting for the Godot*. Stoppard goes to Shakespeare for his characters, for the background of his play's action, and for some direct quotations; to Pirandello for the idea of giving extra-dramatic life to established characters; to Beckett for the tone of some scenes, the philosophical thrust, and for some comic routines.<sup>4)</sup>

In this play, the death is the concept; the object of cool speculation.

Even in Shakespeare's context, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the oblivious characters who don't really know what they are doing. The little they are told is mainly lies, and there's no reason to suppose that they ever find out why they are killed. They are thrown into a game in the world of death. The rule book of the game here is *Hamlet*.

Everyone knows the game except the two, for should there be anyone on the theatre unfamiliar with Shakespeare's play, Stoppard's title supplies him with the crucial information. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead, even before the play begins.

The two sides of the coin they toss represent the world they are in-the world that only has two results, nothing in between. Guildenstern asks in the play; "The only beginning is birth and the only end is death-if you can't count on that, what can you count on?"

Like the consecutive results they get, the other

side is no longer an option. Despite the struggle of the two, Shakespeare's *Elsinore* goes on regardless. It reflects the way in which death makes footnotes to our own self-centered drama. The play contains at its center an affecting exploration of what death means.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are fools. When you come to think of it, they would have to be. Otherwise, they might have been Hamlet. Displaying a clear understanding of this idea, Stoppard pits the condition of those two against that of Hamlet's; Shakespeare's Hamlet is a prince, absolutely connected with a state, forced to play a burdensome part in someone else's play, but understands that he *is* a prince and acknowledges the action he must perform. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in contrary, question their identity ("Who are we?" "Who do you think we are?") and do not wish to perform the parts they too must play ("Why us?"). They are not "born" to set things right. They were born to die, and this kind of morality which is not connected with a large action ("Incidents! All we get is incidents! Dear God, is it too much to expect a little sustained action?!")<sup>5</sup> reflects the absurdity of their condition. "The time" vs. "times", action vs. incidents, I vs. us—these separate Shakespeare's hero from Stoppard's non-heroes.<sup>6</sup>

Stoppard also uses Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as part of the game he plays with the audience, juxtaposing its rules with those of *Hamlet* for good measure.

Our rather likeable Elizabethan lords share the predicament of the two tramps of *Godot*. They try to get through life with a little logic, and perhaps a splinter of comprehension would appear here and there. In Beckett's play there can be no answers; *Godot* may or may not exist and may or may not arrive; we know no more about him than Vladimir

and Estragon. But Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's world is not an absurd one as is theirs. We enter the theatre knowing the outcome of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's lives, and the audience shares the viewpoint of *Godot* (whomever he is). In Stoppard's play, life only seems absurd because of the limitations of one's own particular angle. Whereas *Godot* presents us with an entrapping circle, Rosencrantz is linear.<sup>7</sup>

Also, the games they play while waiting for their end are not simply a means to fill time. From a superior viewpoint, our little lives may seem purposeless as we busy ourselves between birth and death, but from our *own* point of view, that 'busy-ness' seems both purposeful and genuinely diverting. Consequently, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are neither entirely tragic (no self-recognition) nor absurd (they have at least two chances to say no). Instead, they become mirrors of our own fears at the thought and experience of death.

Another of Stoppard's brilliant ideas that makes this play remarkable, is his clever conceits of stage craft. The players' reenactment of *Hamlet* is effectively dovetailed into the main section of the play. Thus, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as both actors and people— not only characters in life but also characters in a play. When the Player invites them to participate in a strolling play, they refuse with scruples. But they cannot, because in life this is what they have already done.

They are modest; they admit they are only supporting players, but they do want to see something of the script everyone else is working from.

### III. Costume Concept

All the world is a stage for Stoppard, as for Shakespeare, but Shakespeare's art fuses world and

stage, causing the barriers between what is real and what is acted to break down, while Stoppard's art separates the two, making us the observer and the critics of the stage. This allows the audience to see the world through the stage, ever conscious that we are doing just that.

The costume design for the play consist of three different parts; first, the two heroes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; second, Claudius' court of Elsinore that includes Hamlet's world; and the Players' traveling troop.

All three parts are true to the Shakespeare's time of writing the play Hamlet around 1611 England at the time of the queen Elizabeth I.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will both wear leather doublet and hose with long boots which represents their long travel. Claudius' court with many attendants will all be presented in full set of heavily decorated Elizabethan courtiers' true-to-period costumes, made in full brocades and heavy velvets, decorated with gems and embroideries. This will give a high visual impact to the weight of the play. The Player's troop, on the other hand, will show layers of costumes with more natural textures of fabrics, such as raw-silks or textured cotton and linen. The colors will be natural-dyed or have its effects, with more of an earthy tone.

Regarding the shape, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern will stand out as the double protagonists with their twin look that resembles each other. Some details-eg. Shape of the footwear or the props they are handling- will look more modern than any other groups of character to give closer intimacy to the modern audience. This intimacy to the audience will be followed by Players and then Elsinore's court. Elsinore's court with its heavy decorations and periodical shape will be extremely exaggerated to give distance to the audience. This is necessary for the

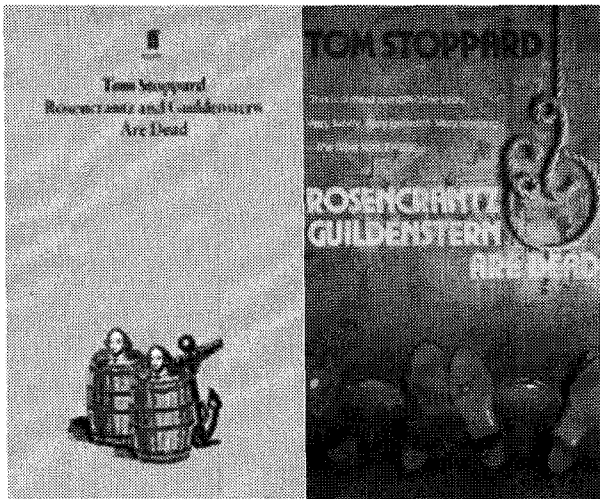
audience to make believe that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are "dazed and confused" not really understanding what's really going on in Elsinore and that they will be used and be abused to reach death and be thrown out of the world "stage" as a result, which is the key plot of Stoppard's play.

#### IV. The Production

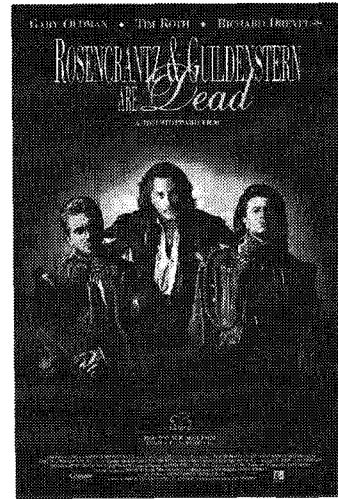
In thirty years, numerous productions have been performed all over the world, including the award-winning film directed by the author (Venice Film Festival, Best Picture Award), introducing many different and interesting interpretations of the play.

The two protagonists' costumes can say a lot about the whole concept of the production. Here are some representational styles;

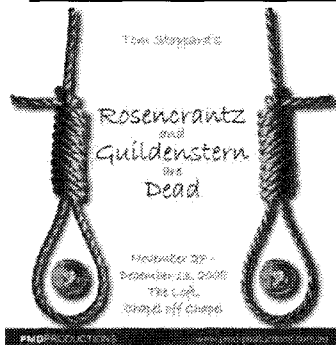
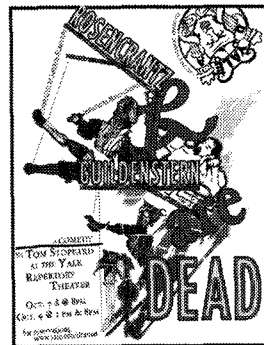
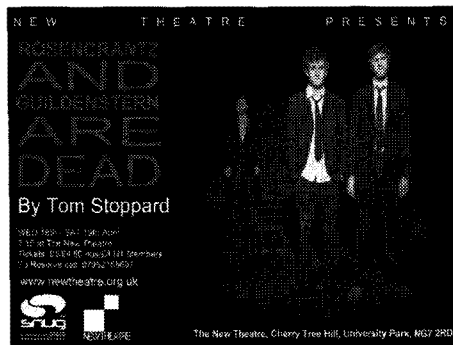
- In the first London production at the Old Vic by the Royal National Theatre (April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1967), all characters wore late -sixteenth century Elizabethan period costumes. The New York production at the Alvin theatre(October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1967) was a duplication, by a same director with different cast.
- The Tokyo production at Parco Space Part 3 Theatre (July 7, 1985), was done in modern suits-dress shirts and ties, Rosencrantz & Guildenstern representing modern white-collar workers.
- The Paris Production at Le Dix-Huit Theatre (June 7,1991)had the two characters wearing black suits and black bowlers with canes in their hands like the popular appearance of Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's Waiting for Godot, or as the Thompson twins in Herge's famous comic book Tin Tin, who also were "a couple of bewildered innocents" as Stoppard describes his own characters.



<Figure 1> texts of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead



<Figure 2> poster of film directed by the author



<Figure 3> posters and pictures of theatrical play from different periods and countries

The most recent London Production staged at the Lyttleton by the Royal National Theatre (December 14 1995), was Produced with costumes representing sixteenth century with mod-

ern details such as the two Protagonists' hiking boots and wool socks over jodhpurs with doublets and similar manipulation on the rest of the characters' costumes.

## V. The Project

As mentioned earlier, this is the Play in which the audience holds the most superior Position. Being described as a theatre of criticism, intellectual, distanced, than of those characterized as “direct involvement”, “emotional”, “precritical”. The audience is expected to be capable of understanding suggestive and symbolic appearances. It is important for the designer not to be too illustrative.

The theme of this Play is death, but it does not bring the Play into a dark mood. Ironically as it may seem, the Play maintains a Pleasant and bright atmosphere throughout Acts 1 and 2. However, the Play does move its audience to feel about death as it goes along. The stage gets darker in Act 3, which takes Place on the ship at night. This insinuates Rosencrantz & Guildenstern approaching closer to death and it is when the audience begins to feel vividly about death.

### 1. The Theatre

This is a Play that works well in the modern theatre architecture. The Loeb Theatre at the American Repertory Theatre (ART; Cambridge, Massachusetts) and the Lyttleton Theatre (London, England) have the suitable space for this Purpose. I have chosen the ART's Loeb Theatre, because of its extremely rectangular shape of the proscenium and its low Placement from the audience's view. This will be effective in creating contrast between the space of the two dwarfish characters and of the other characters when they “come Pouring in from every side”.

Suggesting a devastated space of Elsinore where the Protagonists are trapped in, it is also a good idea to choose the thrust, such as Hartford Stage

(Hartford, Connecticut) or the smaller Pit (London, England), to visualize the Protagonist's trapped world through the surrounded acting space, but the Proscenium-arch can isolate the audiences, making them feel more like just a spectator' as in the theory of the fourth wall.

### 2. The Period

For this Project, I have set time and Place in the Period where Shakespeare's Hamlet was first performed. Even though it takes Place in Denmark and the original story of the Prince Hamlet which Shakespeare had adapted from is that of the middle ages, it is interesting to look into how Shakespeare would have influenced his audience with the idea he found in the old story. This is evident in all his works.

It is basically the same thing Stoppard has done with Shakespeare's Play in terms of dress, sixteenth century London was where transformation, elaboration, and the cultivation of artifice began to describe the nature of elite modes of dress both in male and female. It is already identified by numerous art historians as the Period of inventive cutting, new uses of colour and texture, and the heightened significance of deliberate manipulation of the social meanings attached to clothing, Particularly the later half of this century, which is the chosen period for this Project, shows the development of such a system taken to its extremes.

Under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, England was a Prosperous and Peaceful country and London was the biggest international market Place. The trade of luxurious textiles took Place and the most exclusive mercers and jewelers were located in Cheapside, so the shoppers looking for an expensive material for a highly fashionable outfits could af-

ford it, insisted on wearing fashions that were “farre bought”. A number of documents written by the foreigners visiting London describe the well-dressed people on the streets.

The Queen herself was fond of fashionable attires and expected her courtiers to reflect her own splendid appearance at court. This also made men’s dress more fashionable than ever. This is another Part of the reason I chose this Period. I would like to explore men’s dress of this time. The court fashion was more extravagant than ever. The most distinctive styles of the Powerful countries in this era were found in English dress.

### 3. Costume Concept

The world in this Play can be divided into three; first, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the Protagonist group; second, the court of Hamlet, King, and Queen; and third, the indifferent world of the Tragedians.

None of the characters in this Play is more superior than others. It only seems like it is, because they know little more about the rules, and are a little ahead of the game, but they are also trapped in their own undeniable logic. These different logics completely separate the worlds. The only superior viewpoint is that of the audience’s (Who, of course, wouldn’t be any different as soon as they leave the theatre.)

The costume designer’s role in this Particular Play would be to distinguish and to balance the three groups and at the same time reflect the notion of the world they are in.

The court people of Elsinore, being the characters of an already existing world, are more preserved in their elaborately detailed period costumes than the others. Their costumes are rich in colours

and texture, alienating the audience from them.

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern, on the other hand, are the timeless dramatic characters in an imaginative world. Like the six characters’ in Pirandello’s Play, they belong to a different world, which can also represent the modern world we audiences live in. Their looks are simpler, solid, more natural in colours and texture. Not forgetting the fact that they are Elizabethan courtiers, contemporary ideas will be used in relationship with the period ideas in costumes to serve this concept, but as much as to exclude the characters from their time.

The Tragedians, being indifferent, are somewhere in between. They will somehow reflect the appearance of the actors whom Shakespeare had worked with. Clever manipulation of the costumes in their time, and the idea of a boy-actor Alfred who plays woman’s roles, incorporates an interesting idea of the theatrical costumes. It is also a good resource to explore such terms as; quick change, on-stage dressing, under-dressing. The modern details on the costumes of this group, will be taken differently from those of Rosencrantz & Guildenstern’s.

Each group will be differentiated by the amount of modern details; in proportion to the distance between the characters and the audience.

Contrast of colour, texture, and form will be fully used to serve this purpose.

### 4. Project Contents

Final Presentation; *Brookline Arts Council*, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1997

The following is a list of all items I agree to include in my final presentation as my Graduate Project in Costume Production:

\*20 Costume Plates: full colour renderings of





<Figure 4> Costume design sketches, patterns are exhibited on the wall. Costumes are for Rosencrantz, King Cladius, Queen Gertrude, and the boy actor Alfred. Brookline Arts Council



<Figure 5> Full costumes built in Muslin for King Cladius, Queen Gertrude. Brookline Arts Council

costumes for each character, each plate fully swatched with fabric and trim

\*A total of 4 constructed costumes:

-2 male characters (one in muslin and one in fabric and trim)

The characters are; Claudius, Rosencrantz (or Guildenstern), Gertrude and Alfred. At least two costumes will be presented on actors and the others on dress forms.

\*Costume crafts; millinery, leather, metal, and distressing methods will be used for above costumes

\*Research packets; visual and historical research for design and construction each character will have its own packet

\*Full scale patterns

\*Cutting bible I; period pattern references used in construction each construction process will be kept in record

\*Cutting bible II; construction process of the production

\*Design bible; including Costume plot, Budget breakdowns, and Design spec sheets

\*Summary of set and lighting; concepts detailing how the costumes relate and how the chosen theatre affects all disciplines

\*Information on chosen theatre; including photographs of front of house, seating, and the ground plan.

-Above will be presented in front of the committee and audiences on the date of presentation-

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