

TOM STOPPARD

"This is a most remarkable play.

Very funny. Very brilliant. Very chilling."

—*The New York Times*

ROSENCRANTZ GUILDENSTERN

ARE DEAD



ACT ONE

Two ELIZABETHANS passing the time in a place without any visible character.

They are well dressed—hats, cloaks, sticks and all.

Each of them has a large leather money bag.

GUILDENSTERN's bag is nearly empty.

ROSENCRANTZ's bag is nearly full.

The reason being: they are betting on the toss of a coin, in the following manner: GUILDENSTERN (hereafter "GUIL") takes a coin out of his bag, spins it, letting it fall. ROSENCRANTZ (hereafter "ROS") studies it, announces it as "heads" (as it happens) and puts it into his own bag. Then they repeat the process. They have apparently been doing this for some time.

The run of "heads" is impossible, yet ROS betrays no surprise at all—he feels none. However, he is nice enough to feel a little embarrassed at taking so much money off his friend. Let that be his character note.

GUIL is well alive to the oddity of it. He is not worried about the money, but he is worried by the implications; aware but not going to panic about it—his character note.

GUIL sits. ROS stands (he does the moving, retrieving coins).

GUIL spins. ROS studies coin.

ROS: Heads.

He picks it up and puts it in his bag. The process is repeated.

Heads.

Again.

Heads.

Again.

Heads.

Again.

Heads.

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

ROS: Heads.

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

ROS: Heads.

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

ROS (*raises his head at GUIL*): Seventy-six—love.

GUIL gets up but has nowhere to go. He spins another coin over his shoulder without looking at it, his attention being directed at his environment or lack of it.

Heads.

GUIL: A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if in nothing else at least in the law of probability. (*He slips a coin over his shoulder as he goes to look upstage.*)

ROS: Heads.

GUIL, examining the confines of the stage, flips over two more coins as he does so, one by one of course. ROS announces each of them as "heads."

GUIL (*musings*): The law of probability, it has been oddly asserted, is something to do with the proposition that if six monkeys (*he has surprised himself*) . . . if six monkeys were . . .

ROS: Game?

GUIL: Were they?

ROS: Are you?

GUIL (*understanding*): Game. (*Flips a coin.*) The law of averages, if I have got this right, means that if six monkeys were thrown up in the air for long enough they would land on their tails about as often as they would land on their——

ROS: Heads. (*He picks up the coin.*)

GUIL: Which even at first glance does not strike one as a particularly rewarding speculation, in either sense, even without the monkeys. I mean you wouldn't *bet* on it. I mean *I* would, but *you* wouldn't. . . . (*As he flips a coin.*)

ROS: Heads.

GUIL: Would you? (*Flips a coin.*)

ROS: Heads.

Repeat.

Heads. (He looks up at GUIL—embarrassed laugh.) Getting a bit of a bore, isn't it?

GUIL (*coldly*): A bore?

ROS: Well . . .

GUIL: What about the suspense?

ROS (*innocently*): What suspense?

Small pause.

GUIL: It must be the law of diminishing returns. . . . I feel the spell about to be broken. (*Energizing himself somewhat. He takes out a coin, spins it high, catches it, turns it over on to the back of his other hand, studies the coin—and tosses it to ROS. His energy deflates and he sits.*)

Well, it was an even chance . . . if my calculations are correct.

"*Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (is) verbally dazzling ... the most exciting, witty intellectual treat imaginable."
—Edith Oliver, *The New Yorker*

Acclaimed as a modern dramatic masterpiece, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* is the fabulously inventive tale of *Hamlet* as told from the worm's-eye view of the bewildered Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two minor characters in Shakespeare's play. In Tom Stoppard's best-known work, this Shakespearean Laurel and Hardy finally get a chance to take the lead role, but do so in a world where echoes of *Waiting for Godot* resound, where reality and illusion intermix, and where fate leads our two heroes to a tragic but inevitable end.

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