What is the meaning of life? Humankind has been obsessed with finding an answer to this question for millennia. Despite the countless men and women who have offered their opinions on the matter, the world is no closer to reaching a consensus on our ultimate purpose as a species. In fact, as society progresses, our uncertainty only seems to increase. However, Tom Stoppard’s play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead unabashedly poses many questions on the subject of life’s meaning. Of course, no clear answers are provided, but Stoppard demands that the questions be seriously considered in a play that is equal parts comedy and philosophy. My aim is to thoroughly analyze Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead through its characters, themes, ideas, and events and determine what it has to say about both the world of theatre and the world at large. While extremely entertaining, this play packs a surprising amount of highly intellectual and complex material into one show.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is not a simple play to analyze. It has many layers and asks many complex questions without ever providing any clear answers. However, this can be considered one of Tom Stoppard’s great accomplishments in writing the play. Stoppard does not seem to intend to provide any definite answers to the questions he poses because doing so would cheapen the experience. The philosophical and metaphysical material tackled in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is much too complicated to be fully explored and answered within the confines of one play. Instead, Stoppard asks the audience to ponder the concepts presented themselves and draw their own conclusions, if conclusions can in fact be drawn on such matters. The play holds up a mirror to viewers that reflects the uncertainty and lack of control present within their own lives.

From the very beginning of the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are moving towards an inescapable fate. Audience members are aware of this from the onset, both from the characters’ fates in Hamlet and the title of the play itself. However, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are completely unaware of this fate themselves. For most of the play, they wander around the stage utterly confused as to where they are or what they are doing. Their inability to find meaning as they march unknowingly to their final destination becomes increasingly evident through the structure of events within the play.

The play begins with Guildenstern and Rosencrantz tossing coins. We quickly learn that every single coin tossed has been coming up heads, and they continue to land on heads every single time (Stoppard 12). In this way, Stoppard establishes right from the start that normal expectations cannot be applied to this world. Normal application of logic and probability would suggest that it would be impossible or at least highly implausible for a succession of flipped coins to land on heads eighty-five times, but the reality of the situation here does not line up with any expected outcome.
Later, after Claudius and Gertrude have requested that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern spend some time with Hamlet and “glean what afflicts him” (Stoppard 40), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play a game of questions while they try to determine why they are where they are and what is going on (Stoppard 42). They continue for quite some time but end the game more confused than when they began. The pair is capable of lobbing out an infinite number of questions but have absolutely no ability to provide any answers. Therefore, any attempt to probe deeper into the meaning of their current circumstances results only in further frustration. Like the coin tossing game earlier, the question game has left Rosencrantz and especially Guildenstern with a looser grip on reality.

In the second act, the tragedians perform a play for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that, unknown to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, recounts the events of *Hamlet* and reveals the pair’s fate. Despite the fact that the two players portraying Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are wearing clothes identical to their own (Stoppard 82), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are unable to understand the significance of the play and what it means for them. They both seem to recognize the two characters as significant. Rosencrantz even goes so far as to say, “I know you, don’t I?” (Stoppard 82). However, they are unable to come to any conclusion as to why they are significant. They are so detached from any meaning in their own lives that they are completely incapable of recognizing it even when it is staring them in the face.

Close to the end of the play, when they are on the boat headed to England and their deaths, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discover that the letter demanding Hamlet’s death has been replaced with one demanding their own deaths (Stoppard 122). The two men are completely ignorant as to how this happened, and despair over the fact that they still do not know how they got into their current position or what they could have done to avoid it. As the play ends, the two resign themselves to their fate, no wiser than when they first began their search for an explanation.

All of these events in some way show the randomness of life or its inevitable end. Throughout the play, things continue to happen to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, regardless of their action or inaction. They are never able to explain the significance of any event or come to any conclusion on anything, but in the end it didn’t matter. They were always going to meet the same end, regardless of their own understanding or lack of it. Their actions and ultimate end reflect humankind’s struggle to find meaning and rationalize its existence while simultaneously being destined to die, unable to escape mortality by any means.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* relies mostly on language to communicate its ideas and themes. The title pair does very little as far as action goes. Most of their time is spent onstage discussing the elusive meaning of the events taking place around them. The language and imagery, like so much else in this play, raises many questions without providing any answers.

Throughout the play Guildenstern attempts to make sense of his situation through logic or his version of it anyway. Speaking of the coin tossing at the opening of the play, he says:

> If we postulate, and we just have, that within un-, sub-, or supernatural forces the probability is that the law of probability will not operate as a factor, then we must accept that the probability of the first part will not operate as a factor, in which case the law of
probability will operate as a factor within un-, sub- or supernatural forces…so, we can take it that we are not held within un-, sub- or supernatural forces. (17)

Though his logic is questionable, Guildenstern desperately clings to hypotheses such as this one to explain the unexplainable. His constant theorizing reveals a very human tendency to desire explanation and order. Even if the logic is circular or flawed, we are comforted by the idea of rationality and reason.

Many parallels are drawn in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* between the theatrical world and the real world. Much of the Player’s dialogue reflects this. For example, in Act II he says, “We’re actors… We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade, that someone would be watching. And then, gradually, no one was. We were caught, high and dry” (Stoppard 64). Stoppard is using the world of the stage to represent the real world. The existential question presented to the audience here through the Player’s story is: Is anyone or anything taking note of our accomplishments as humans and, if not, why are we even trying?”

At other points, Stoppard uses language to address the audience much more directly, breaking down the fourth wall altogether. For example, Rosencrantz shouts, “Fire!” to the audience and then remarks, “Not a move. They should burn to death in their shoes” (Stoppard 60). Stoppard does this to draw the audience into the play and make them realize that they too are a part of the performance. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s struggle is their struggle as well, just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s eventual fate is also their eventual fate.

At certain points in the play, the characters will recite original Shakespearean text from *Hamlet*. This classical Elizabethan language is in sharp contrast to the fast-paced modern language that is spoken for most of the show. The insertion of Shakespeare’s formal verse at these selected moments conveys the sense that these moments are scripted or predetermined. Whereas the rest of the play’s dialogue seems organic and conversational, these exchanges reinforce the idea that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are stuck in a situation whose outcome has already been set. Even the words they speak are beyond their control.

Perhaps the most striking imagery in the whole play is the boat in the final act. After learning that he and Rosencrantz are to be put to death, Guildenstern remarks, “Where we went wrong was getting on a boat. We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and current” (Stoppard 122). Stoppard uses the boat as a symbol for life itself. Within certain parameters, we are free to do as we please. However, the destination remains the same no matter what our actions within our own limited range of choice and freedom. From the very beginning of the play, there is a sense of confinement and inescapability, and the boat perfectly represents the title pair’s entrapment in their unavoidable deaths.

Guildenstern might be the most intelligent character in the play. At the very least he has the quickest wit. As discussed earlier, he is constantly using logic and theories to make some sense of his situation. He is desperately in search of answers to his many questions and becomes very angry and impassioned at the irrational or illogical.
Early in the play, when the Player reveals that he and his company sell sexual favors, Guildenstern instantly becomes disgusted with the company of actors and their leader. He says, “[I]t didn’t have to be obscene…But it’s this, is it? No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous, only this – a comic pornographer and a rabble of prostitutes” (Stoppard 27). Guildenstern is continually disappointed by the lack of substance to the world around him. He searches for deeper meaning but is constantly met with the disgusting or the absurd.

Guildenstern later tries to determine which of them is Rosencrantz and which of them is Guildenstern. He becomes very annoyed when Rosencrantz instinctively responds to both names (Stoppard 45). This again illustrates Guildenstern’s desperate search for answers and consistency in a random universe. The truth is either elusive or nonexistent. He cannot even be sure of his own identity.

At the end of the play, furious that he is about to die without any explanations or answers, Guildenstern angrily stabs the Player (Stoppard 123). He wants to show that he can have some small degree of control over his situation, some effect on some outcome. Unfortunately for Guildenstern, the knife is only a prop knife, and the Player is unharmed. Guildenstern is unable to exercise any control. The outcomes have already been determined.

In many ways, Guildenstern is a tragic character. Despite all his intellect and all his careful analysis, he is never able to find any answers or affect an outcome. As he goes to his death, he cannot be sure that any of his actions had any meaning at all.

Throughout the play, Stoppard constantly returns to the themes of the uncertainty of reality and the inevitability of death. The title characters are constantly confused and cannot be certain of anything. They are not even able to remember their own past. Their “truth” is only what they assume to be true, and their assumptions often fail them. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are given no context for their situation and no rules to follow. They are simply tossed onto the stage and must find their own way. They are constantly bothered by a nagging feeling that they should be doing something, but they never know what that something is. They die as they lived, in total uncertainty and confusion.

From the beginning of the play, with the coins that keep coming up heads, Stoppard is showing us that no matter what expectations might be, actual outcomes are beyond anyone’s control. Guildenstern is fully aware that the continued run of heads is extremely improbable, but this has no effect on his reality. The coins continue to come up heads while Guildenstern attempts to rationalize and analyze such an unlikely outcome.

Many times in the play, the title pair waits onstage for someone to come or something to happen. They feel lost without any outside guidance. They spend much of their time waiting to be told what to do or where to go. Stoppard creates sympathy among the audience for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by making them utterly lost within an inescapable world. The audience recognizes their own experiences of confusion and meaninglessness in the characters.

Stoppard uses the tragedians to turn the stage into a metaphor for life. The tragedians, especially the Player, are the only characters in the play that seem to fully grasp the situation. Stoppard seems to be suggesting that the only truth we can be certain of is the truth we create, such as the
predetermined plot of a play. The tragedians understand what is going on because for them acting and living are one and the same. They adapt to whatever circumstances they are given without questioning them.

Up until the very end, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern remain hopeful that they will be able to grasp the meaning of their lives and the commands given to them. They spend the entirety of the play searching for meaning but find none. Stoppard shows the audience through Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that life may not provide any answers and that people have to do the best they can within parameters that they cannot control. At some point, people have to act on assumptions and their own personal perceptions of reality. Otherwise, they will never be able to act at all.

A common theme among many of Tom Stoppard’s works is characters and events put out of place. In Arcadia, Stoppard tells two stories simultaneously, switching between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Meisel 14). At the opening of the Invention of Love, he places the scholar A. E. Housman on the river Styx (Meisel 13). Stoppard enjoys the “comedy of misconstruing where characters or audience are led to take one thing for another; where the frame of reference is missing” (Meisel 14).

Stoppard also often utilizes themes of order and disorder. In Arcadia, he explores the idea of chaos theory (Demastes 207). There is a constant battle between the deterministic and the irregularity of human behavior. Stoppard writes, “The universe is deterministic all right… I mean it’s trying to be, but the only thing wrong is people fancying people who aren’t supposed to be in that part of the plan” (qtd. in Demastes 208). In Stoppard’s book Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon, Moon searches for a model of the universe that will provide some sort of apparent pattern to events. However, Moon is only able to find disorder and randomness with no central controlling factor (Demastes 210). This uncertainty seems to be very typical of Tom Stoppard’s work. Uncertainty and unpredictability always seem to be at work within his plots.

If I were to propose a production concept for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, I would want to keep it as simple as possible. I do not believe this is a play that should rely heavily on spectacle. Most of the play’s real power lies within its wordplay and presentation of complex philosophical and metaphysical ideas through dialogue.

The actors playing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should be relatable. The audience should be able to sympathize with them very easily since they are both representative of the average person. Therefore, no one too imposing or intimidating should be cast. Athleticism is fine, but anyone who displays obvious physical dominance over the people around him is wrong for the role. The Player must be extremely cunning and haughty. Anyone who has a look of intelligence about them would be suitable and perhaps they should seem a bit sly too.

Sets, for the most part, should be bare. There should be no attempt to hide the fact that this is a play taking place on a stage in a theater. The metaphors within the text paralleling life and theater imply a setting that does not try to hide the inherent theatricality of the show but rather invites the audience to actively involve itself in the play. Stoppard wants the audience to remain aware that the characters are trapped inside a stage. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern should look as though they are confined to the stage, especially in the boat scene. It should be performed on a proscenium stage to divide Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from the audience. Although they
constantly break the fourth wall, the pair is never able to physically pass through it, so a clear distinction between audience space and stage space would be helpful.

Costumes should be traditional Elizabethan garb. The more ridiculous and dated Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s clothing looks, the better. Their modern speech should be sharply in contrast with what they are wearing. They should look uncomfortable and out of place in their costumes, just as they are uncomfortable and out of place in their situation. The Player and his troupe, on the other hand, should look as though they are perfectly at ease in their costumes and the time. There should be no doubt that the Player is the one who knows how to fit in.

I would like to have lighting that is bright and unnatural. It should seem a bit off or unsettling, like a room with fluorescent lighting. Most of all, it must be relentlessly focused on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The lights should put them under constant pressure. The only moments that should not have them clearly and brightly lit are the moments where the script calls for total darkness.

There are several spots in the script that call for music, and those moments always seems a bit foreboding. I would like to have music that is a bit atonal. There should be nothing soothing or pleasing about the pieces used. They must create a sense of doom within the listener.

I immensely enjoyed delving into the world of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. It is an incredibly intelligent and complex piece that generates deep contemplation and discussion within those who experience it. Although it doesn’t provide any answers to the questions it poses, I certainly enjoyed exploring those questions.

Works Cited

