



The Intertextual and the Theatrical in Postmodern Drama: A Case Study of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

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Abstract

The present study addresses one of the most recently debated areas in postmodern literature and art, the revival of interest in theatricality. The researcher aims to introduce a few strategies which are used to turn the intertextual elements and the pastiche into working tools for creating theatricality. In order to do so, Thomas Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) which was later made into a movie version as well, directed by Stoppard himself, is examined. The study tries to show how theatricality can affect the performance as well as the contribution of the spectators to the dramatic text and performance. The shared experience of the pastiche made based on *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, can contribute to the understanding of how theatricality can work when intertextuality is a powerful and positive force. The sample scenes chosen here are concluded to be the examples of how the illusion of having a stable identity is what not only the characters, the players or the author just assume to exist, but also what the text deliberately and constantly recreates. The playful nature of theatricality highlights the way each of these contributors willingly dupe themselves for the show to go on.

Keywords

Theatricality, Postmodern Drama, Intertextuality, Pastiche, Stoppard's Drama

1. Introduction

To study drama in the perspective of literary theory necessitates a simultaneous focus on/and away from the "performed" version of any specific play. Language is the main medium of literature and drama always includes more elements as well: stage, mise en scene, actors' performances, lighting, sounds.... A study based on the principles of literary theory, therefore, should have both aspects in perspective in order to be faithful



to the spirit of drama as a literary work. Theatricality, a notion which has attracted a number of controversial debates especially lately, is used here as a point of reference to examine Thomas Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) as a postmodern play, a study which basically focuses on the script with a few references to actual performance possibilities. This play uses the sign system and codes that have intricate intertextual ties with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and with the conventions of contemporary literary and artistic forms, especially the theater of the absurd and postmodernist literature which all contribute to making up of what is known as theatricality.

2. Theatricality as Interaction

Defining theatricality is not the only challenge regarding this term; its roots as well as the functions have also been the matter of different debates. Does theatricality only belong to "theatre", is it a quality which distinguishes drama from other performative genres (performances and body arts, for instance) and what about other literary and artistic genre? Could we trace theatricality in other forms, and if so, which attributes function to create it?

Theatricality is a notion which has been defined within various discourses which includes a wide range, from a specific manner of performance to an attitude and from a style to a semiotic system, from a medium to a message (Postlewait & Davis 251). But what is it that we call theatrical? A number of prominent thinkers have confirmed that theatricality can be completely abstracted from theatre itself and attributed to different forms and phenomena. In fact, the codes and rules which make up theatricality are not necessarily the essence of acting, the actor's performance, the objects or the atmosphere, or else it would not be used outside the realm of drama.

Having relied on the most widely accepted understandings of the term, one could say actors are the greatest contributors to the creation of whatever which is called "theatrical". To some critics, it is mainly the actor who creates theatricality (Féral and Birmingham 7). People like Peter Brook defend this idea and therefore to them the other elements such as costumes, lighting, stage settings or even dialogs are of secondary importance in this matter. The actor can be in a state of frenzy or play within the boundaries of strictly defined forms and rules. The theatre of the absurd or Brechtian recommendation for the



creation of alienation effect, for instance, made theatrical performances more popular after realism had long ruled the stage; postmodernist drama, too, played on the variations of these previously introduced suggestions. "Modern farce makes wide use of unfulfilled ceremony. Postmodern theatre of the absurd drama mixes farce and tragedy, in which the characters desperately repeat their private invented 'ceremonies' but end up in vain." (Liang 5).

The actors, then, try to change reality and make something new. In the process they need to forget their own self and play a part. At the same time, they obey a certain set of rules and conventions. In other words, acting itself becomes a source of theatricality. Both the actors and the audience are simultaneously conscious that this is an act but seriously regarded as something which is not what daily life requires but which is offered in the present moment. Stoppard's play in its structure and content reveals some aspects of theatrical sensibility which will be dealt with in more detail in the following. This passage, taken from the conversation between the two protagonists and the acting group exemplifies how the whole notion of acting makes its own conventions, not as a final outcome but in the process of creation and recreation of acts:

PLAYER (*to the TRAGEDIANS now departing with their cart, air taking various props off*

it): Entrances there and there (*indicating upstage*).

The PLAYER has not moved his position for his last four lines. He does not move now.

GUIL *waits.*

GUIL: Well... aren't you going to change into your costume?

PLAYER: I never change out of it, sir.

GUIL: Always in character.

PLAYER: That's it.

Pause.

GUIL: Aren't you going to-come on?

PLAYER: I am on.

GUIL: But if you are on, you Can't Come On. Can you?

PLAYER: I start on.

GUIL: But it hasn't started. Go on. Well look out for you.

PLAYER: I'll give you a wave.



One must have in mind that although many forms of drama since the golden time of ancient Greece to the theatre of the absurd and postmodern theatre have emphasized on theatricality in a way that it is praised and asked for, certain dramatists have considered theatrical as a negative force since it can break the pretence of reality they are looking for: For Stanislavski, theatricality appears as a kind of distancing from reality-an effect of exaggeration, an intensification of behavior that rings false when juxtaposed with what should be the realistic truth of the stage (Liang 11).

However we regard theatricality, it is definitely caused by a set of conventions and principles but it is equally important to consider where it leads the audience to. The dramatists seemingly borrow certain codes which has the effect of intertextuality, the dialogic which is resulted by the transference of various codes.

Thus these two poles (self, reality) are the fundamental points of focus for all reflections on theatricality: its point of emergence (the acting self), and its point of arrival (reality). The modalities of the relationship between these two points are governed by performance, whose rules are both transitory and permanent. In fact, movement between these poles is varied and non-restrictive, bringing into play three elements whose relationship defines the process of theatricality and whose possible interactions-taking into account historical, sociological and aesthetical variations-encompass the totality of theatrical practices. (Liang 7)

3. Theatricality in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*

Thomas Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* has such strong intertextual ties with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that it is impossible to read the play without tracing the codes borrowed from Shakespeare's work. This play definitely brings its own deconstruction (and constant reconstruction) of the original which changes the perspective of the contemporary reader towards both texts. This restructuring is what makes pastiche a desirable tool in the hands of contemporary dramatists. The following are only a few, non-exclusive instances of some of the scenes which may highlight theatrical elements within the framework of intertextual references.

3.1. Beginning: The Intertextual and the Tragic Hero

The title and the opening of Stoppard's play clearly introduce its intertextuality with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the original play, the main characters are Hamlet, his uncle



Claudius (who is also his father's murderer and his mother's suitor), his fiancé Ophelia, his mother Gertrude and a few others. The two characters, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (briefly, referred to here as Ros and Guil) are Hamlet's friends, his university peers, who are summoned by King Claudius to distract him from any secret plan he might have against the new king and later to provide the means to execute Hamlet but they are just accessories to the advancement of the plot. The king sends them to a sea journey together with Hamlet, having given them a secret letter which orders the authorities to get rid of Hamlet. The spectators already know Shakespeare's story: Hamlet is going to find out about the secret plot, replace the letter with the one that orders the two men to be killed and manage to return to the Elsinore palace in Denmark safe and sound.

As the title of Stoppard's play says, though, Ros and Guil are now the main characters of a play with a similar story; however, the two "are" (and not "are going to" or "may be") dead, a piece of knowledge which is shocking and self-reflexive: the play "knows" it is a play, dramatizing the sad fortune of the two protagonists. These people are only given prominence to represent something more important than their personality and their choice. They are dead to show all is a play performed on stage for the audience who are already aware of everything.

The prior knowledge of the characters' fate is similar to what the spectators in ancient Greece experienced; the audience used to watch long performances based on the stories of the gods and goddesses, the heroes and the villains which they all knew quite well. The Greek audience did not watch to know, it watched to see how well the theatrical performance created the mood and the effect it planned to. Theatricality, and not a pretence of reality or method acting, was an indispensable part of such performances.

Stoppard's play opens with Ros and Guil on the road to Elsinore, unaware of the fate that the audience already knows what they cannot see. They are tossing coins, apparently to entertain themselves during the long ride to the palace but in fact to bring forth the role of chance—which is ironically not even arbitrary as it might happen in the "real" world. This is a toss of coin which is deterministic and unchangeable: the theatrical is the strongest force here. Guildenstern cannot even be sure if "luck" is the word he is looking for.



ROS: Heads... (*He puts it in his bag.*)

GUIL *sits despondently. He takes a coin, spins it, lets it fall between his feet. He looks at it, picks it up, throws it to ROS who puts it in his bag. GUIL takes another coin, spins it, catches it, turns it over to his other hand, looks at it, and throws it to ROS, who pun in his bag. GUIL takes a third coin, spins it, catches it in his right hat turns it over onto his left wrist, lobs it in the air, catches it with his left hand, raises his left leg, throws the coil? up under it, catches it and turns it over on the top of his head, where it sits. ROS comes, looks at it, puts it in his bag.*

ROS: I'm afraid

GUIL: So am I.

ROS: I'm afraid it isn't your day.

GUIL: I'm afraid it is.

Small pause.

ROS: Eighty-nine.

GUIL: it must be indicative of something, besides the redistribution of wealth. (*He muses.*) List of possible explanations. One: I'm willing it. Inside where nothing shows, I am the essence of a man spinning double-headed coins, and betting against himself in private atonement for an unremembered past. (*He spins a coin at ROS.*)

ROS: Heads.

GUIL: Two: time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety times... (*He flips a coin, looks at it, tosses it to ROS.*) On the whole, doubtful. Three: divine intervention, that is to say, a good turn from above concerning him, cf. children of Israel, or retribution from above concerning me, cf. Lot's wife. Four: a spectacular vindication of the principle that each individual coin spun individually (*he spins one*) is as likely to come down heads as tails and therefore should cause no surprise each individual time it does. (*It does. He tosses it to ROS.*)

ROS: I've never known anything like it!

Even the stage directions are ironic; while the title directs us to two well-known, though minor, Shakespearean characters, they are introduced as "two Elizabethans" who are wearing what they should: "hats, cloaks, sticks *and all*" (my emphasis). The dramatist explains the tossing of the coins (in which the result is always "heads" and Rosencrantz wins every single time) which has been and will be on for a while. The deconstruction of



theatrical convention goes on. The voice giving directions comments and elaborates on the characterization of Ros and Guil, not as we expect to see in a play script but just like a narrator would speak in a novel:

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. (Act one, stage directions)

The obvious intertextuality which is indicated from the beginning is focused on the issue of fate, the quality which is an indispensable part of tragedy: the tragic hero is supposed to experience a downfall, one that is based on a flaw which is unavoidable—something that the audience is supposed to be aware of but the characters are not to know well. Only this time, in Stoppard's play, there is some other agent who shares the knowledge: the play itself. The play announces it is a "play" and the characters state even the rules of chance do not govern a world in which everything is already determined by the playwright:

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.

Therefore, this whole effect is only created because a number of other texts work in the background: the nature of tragedy, that is to say, what a tragedy is and is supposed to be, the text of *Hamlet* and all the literary and performative codes that govern it, and in addition, the liberty of pastiche making which Stoppard has given himself built upon all the previous experiences of dramatic creation.

3.2. Meta-Theatrical Elements in the Play-within the Play

“Mousetrap”, the play within the play in *Hamlet* has fascinated the spectators for many different reasons, the most interesting of which is that it creates a chance to focus on the nature of drama itself, the power of playing and its ability to influence the audience: Hamlet arranges for the actors to pick his desired script just to be completely sure his uncle is the father’s not-trapped murder after Claudius reacts to this play which is very similar to his own murderous plan. The concept of theatricality is illustrated through this play-within-the-play. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* follows and extends the idea through playing with its codes and by the use of postmodernist dramatic and narrative techniques.

The boundary between art and life which Stoppard’s play extracts from *Hamlet* (and particularly its play-within-the-play) and elaborates on in a theatrical manner, is further reinforced by another twist in the choice of a metatheatrical game. “What Stoppard had stumbled on in *Rosencrantz* was not a philosophy but a comic stratagem. What came through more strongly than in previous writing was the playwright’s gift for badinage, repartee, verbal byplay” (Delanay 280).

Right before Ros and Guil appear in Elsinore in Stoppard’s play, they meet the group of the actors who are travelling to the same destination. Only this time, the group engages in a funny and much informative game/repartee with the two men including the discussion of the nature of fate, role-play and make-belief. The intertextual ties with *Hamlet* make the game more interesting. Since the spectators are supposed to know a number of things about Shakespeare’s play, the irony and the pastiche-like structure is much more



influential. The scene brings up the notion of tragedy, revenge plays and entertaining performances as the Renaissance artists tried to define, reminding the audience of the traditions within which Shakespeare created his plays with his unique variations and innovations.

ROS: What is your line?

PLAYER: Tragedy, sir. Deaths and disclosures, universal and particular, denouements both unexpected and inexorable, transvestite melodrama on all levels including the suggestive. We transport you into a world of intrigue and illusion... clowns, if you like, murderers---we can do you ghosts and battles, on the skirmish level, heroes, villains, tormented lovers---set pieces in the poetic vein; we can do you rapiers or rape or both, by all means, faithless wives and ravished virgins---flagrante delicto at a price, but that comes under realism for which there are special terms. Getting warm, am I?

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead deliberately crosses the pretension of reality and does not shy away from accepting its own limitations as a world of stylizations, acts and games which is twice limited by having been bound by the text of an existing plays which happens to be one of the most famous in the world.

3.3. Theatricality and the Influence of Places and Spaces

The two characters' entrance to the palace Elsinore is fascinating; they do not actually "enter" the place. They simply disappear from the road and appear in the midst of a crisis, happening between a royal funeral and a royal wedding, when Hamlet is causing troubles for Claudius's plots and his mother, Queen Gertrude, is puzzled and worried. The intertextual codes are again at work: Ros and Guil are asked to have an eye on Hamlet, their identity as independent characters is made fun of as the Royal family does not care who they really are and they are given the permission to turn from "nobodies" to some bodies just to be of help to the new king and then disappear again but this is tightly interwoven with where they are and how the space affects them or is affected by their presence. This is clearly shown in the movie version Stoppard directed himself in the variety and similarity of the places these characters are in.

The determinism that is felt through the confusion of Ros and Guil's identity continues as they speak, as they appear and disappear, like magicians or drama actors, and their



emphasis on theatrical tricks which gives them the position of mere entertainers who play their part on a stage “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”.

They go from room to room in the palace, meeting different people in each place who are either not aware of their presence or do not care who they are as long as they fulfill the mission they are summoned for or, at their best, they act as the confidant and transfer Hamlet’s message to the audience.

HAMLET: Do not believe it.

ROS: Believe what?

HAMLET: That I can keep your counsel and not mine own. Besides, to be demanded of a sponge, what replication should be made by the son of a king?

ROS: Take you me for a sponge, my lord?

HAMLET: Ay, sir, that soaks up the King’s countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers do the King best service in the end. He keeps them, like an ape, in the comer of his jaw, first mouthed, to be last swallowed. When he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you and, sponge, you shall be dry again.

ROS: I understand you not, my lord.

HAMLET: I am glad of it: a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear.

One may characterize the two as signifiers being displaced all through the play, looking for signifieds, of their own identity, their function, their importance to whoever and whatever they are significant for, which happens to be not much. After all, they are already dead. The deferral of their fortune is just what is already decided and wherever they are at any single moment is the only thing that matters for the present time of the play.

3.4. Theatricality and the Question of Identity

Confused, as they have been about life and destiny and choices all along, Ros and Guil are now given an important position in the plot—and in the play; one has to remember they are still two minor characters in *Hamlet* the identity of whom is not even important. Here in this play the same thing exists, they are given prominence just to be played with; the situation is reinforced by the fact that this is parodied and ridiculed through the game of theatricality and intertextuality. Some of the elements which contribute to this effect can be listed as the following.

For one thing, it is still not clear who is who when it comes to distinguishing



Rosencrantz from Guildenstern. The king addresses them and the queen corrects him, saying that the real names are opposite of what he has just said. However, the irony is that this problem is not even dealt with seriously and that even the two characters provide comic instances of the confusion of their identity each time they introduce themselves or even talk to each other. This is an example from act two in which they seemingly talk about Hamlet but then the “question” turns to be about who they are or could be in this play.

ROS: He's afflicted.

GUIL: You question, I'll answer.

ROS: He's not himself, you know.

GUIL: I'm him, you see.

Beat.

ROS: Who am I then?

GUIL: You're yourself.

ROS: And he's you?

GUIL: Not a bit of it.

ROS: Are you afflicted?

GUIL: That's the idea. Are you ready?

ROS: Let's go back a bit.

GUIL: I'm afflicted.

ROS: I see.

GUIL: Glean what afflicts me.

ROS: Right.

GUIL: Question and answer.

ROS: How should I begin?

GUIL: Address me.

ROS: My dear Guildenstern!

GUIL: (*quietly*): You've forgotten---haven't you?

ROS: My dear Rosencrantz!

GUIL: (*great control*): I don't think you quite understand. we are attempting is hypothesis in which I answer him, while you ask me questions.

The other point is that they are treated as trusted subjects and are given a special mission by the king himself, while at the same time, they are left alone to wander around the palace, wondering sometimes where they are or what is it exactly that they are



supposed to do. The setting provides the right atmosphere for the effects Stoppard's characters are creating.

The same thing is applicable to any other character in this play. Even Claudius and Gertrude are in no better position. Gertrude is the passive agent to Claudius's plans whose love for his son or innocence does not affect the direction of the events. Claudius pretends he is in control and dominates everybody's life as a real king but he is no more than another actor playing a minor part in this play which is leading to his, his family's and his nation's downfall. Stoppard takes this idea from Shakespeare and illustrates it in a metatheatrical manner based on the theatricality he has created from the beginning of the present play. In fact, the playfulness which the beginning of Stoppard's play creates, in contrast to the opening of *Hamlet* that brings forth the tragic air and the question of choice. The set of codes and the horizon of expectations that *Hamlet* suggests are borrowed by this play to be deconstructed and create the tragic in a totally different fashion. Ros and Guil are tragic heroes but the flaw is not to be looked for in the error of judgment or the hesitation in decision making or the fallible wisdom; the questions are there in the text not the character: the show must go on and the play is going to begin and end as it should. There is no escape, nor is there any other possibility to change the course of events.

4. Conclusion

Thomas Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* can be considered a postmodern play for its mixture of the tragic with the comic (or even farce at times), for its collage of codes borrowed as much from Shakespeare as it is from the theatre of the absurd or any other text of significance to the reading of the present text; and, in a nutshell, for its clever use of the theatrical conventions and the intertextual codes to provide us with a new experience which cannot be easily labelled but can be partly understood through the theatrical nature of the play, especially in the characterization of Ros and Guil:

Moments of overt theatricality ensure this, as do certain moments which temporarily halt our sympathies and stop us from entirely losing ourselves in the pair as people until the denouement. Our empathy towards them is not a sudden emotional outpouring but a process in which we give ourselves to them by



degrees during the play, holding back whenever their cries of bewilderment become overinflated or when they use rhetoric to persuade themselves to dishonest ends such as allowing Hamlet to go to certain death. Because of that fluctuating state, our final and total empathy with the pair is neither uncritical nor sentimental. (Jenkins 44)

The theatrical is the only rule which is probably no real rule or rule of reality; the text exists as long as it is intertextual and the interaction of the audience with the text and the performance is never devoid of being simultaneously conscious of whatever is fabricated and played based on existing texts, the elements which constantly make signification possible and impossible. Whereas the play reverses some known binaries of the original—*Hamlet*—it is not Hamlet any more. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is perhaps better defined as a pastiche, a metaplay reflecting upon very fundamental ontological concerns of postmodernist literature: are the characters that are filling the pre-destined parts already dead, and if so, who really is there? That might be the question.



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