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Stoppard: The Metatheatre A Study of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead

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Abstract

Tom Stoppard who is a famous absurd dramatist has excelled many of his contemporaries in using metatheatre. His masterpiece '*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*' is replete with metatheatrical elements. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, is thematically based on Shakespeare's Hamlet. Tactfully enough, Stoppard has made a complete transformation of a revenge tragedy called Hamlet to an absurdist play. Two insignificant characters of Shakespeare's Hamlet have been made heroes and they have been put into a new world where they are apparently at loss; they are thrown into a predicament which is far beyond their understanding. Like a true play of the absurdist genre, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* presents in philosophical ways man's lack of absolute values, the problem of freedom and the uncertainty of knowledge and perception. Themes of confusion, absence of identity and helplessness are the chief concerns of the characters. This paper tries to focus on how the dramatist uses various metatheatrical elements to reinforce the theme.

Keywords: Metatheatre, Stoppard, Theme

Introduction

Metatheatre

The term 'metatheatre' or 'metadrama' is coined by Lionel Abel in his '*Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*' in 1963. Metatheatre generally refers to 'the play within the play'. Richard Hornby defines metatheatre or metadrama as "drama about drama" (P 31). There are also other definitions, "the metatheatrical play that uses the stage as "stage to present life as theatricality has as one of its goals, an examination of the distinction between art and life. This is the type of play about playing, about theatricality, about the human impulse to create fiction and revise reality."(Understanding Play by Millie Barranger)

A metatheatrical play does not present life as it exactly is, on the contrary, it may present actions that are alien, stylised or absurd to distant audience from the theatrical illusion on the stage. These metatheatrical plays intend to demarcate the boundary that conventional theatre tries to hide and it constantly reminds the audience about the relationship between performance and reality. Metatheatre is a medium between art and life.

The meta- Greek prefix means "beside, beyond, after, transcending". Thus metadrama or metatheatre means to use other elements on stage than the story itself. These elements sometimes or most often help to develop the story, provide an intrinsic thought to the story and to the art of the theatre itself. Metadrama produces extraordinary aesthetic insights, which have been spoken of as 'estrangement' or alienation. Hornby listed four types of conscious metatheatre which sometimes overlap with one another:

- The play within the play.
- The ceremony within the play.
- Roleplaying within the role.
- Literary and real-life reference, self-reference.

As Hornby points out metadrama or metatheatre usually moves beyond the metadramatic towards the theme of human perception, which has been successfully done by Tom Stoppard in his *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Henceforth, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* will be referred to as Ros and Guil. I would like to discuss some of the metatheatrical elements employed by Tom Stoppard in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

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The Play within the Play

In the Ros and Guil the boundary between the outer and inner play disappears completely. It takes the readers away from the structure of metadrama, yet sustaining the metadramatic style. 'The Murder of Gonzago', an inset play within the play of Ros and Guil, itself has completely embraced the metatheatricality of play within the play. The play within the play structure is prevalent throughout Ros and Guil. In the famous dress rehearsal, the audience (both Stoppard's audience of the stage and the audience of the inner play on stage) are consciously watching the play (Page 55-62). Conversation goes on among Ros and Guil and the player as the rehearsal goes act after act. In the play within the play we find a multiple layer of performing within performing. Ros and Guil watch the rehearsal of the Tragedians before they perform the play for Hamlet. Suddenly again, for a time, they think themselves as the characters of the play (spies) acted by two Tragedians. The two fellows also foresee their fate in the fate of the spies in the play and compare themselves with them. When the king seems upset with the play, they call for the play to stop and Ros and Guil are left on the stage in the position the spies fell when they died. Ros and Guil wake up slowly and begin earnestly trying to find the way to East. The action of Ros and Guil on the stage is almost similar to that of the two spies of the play within the play. Though this intention is not clear to Ros and Guil themselves, but it is crystal clear to the audience that they are witnessing a play within the play. The inner play reveals the destiny of Ros and Guil on stage. However, Ros and Guil don't remember what they dreamt after they wake up. Their loss of memory leads the path to their lack of identity and thereby disastrous doom.

Ceremonies within the play is another typicality of metatheatre. Ceremonies in the theatre of the absurd are quasi ceremonies where the characters go on repeating their private works or events to create and impress upon others that their life is meaningful. Ros and Guil go on engaging themselves in coin-tossing, interrogation and word games. These events constantly draw the attention of the audience towards the theatricality of what they watch, simultaneously they mirror the predicament of Ros and Guil. The coin flipping head for eighty five times does not follow any reason. The questioning to questions of Ros and Guil indicates their life is without answers and explanations. And in their verbal banter, language loses its function for communication but becomes a means for counter-action. Though not in Shakespeare's Hamlet but in Stoppard's play, they have ample freedom which they cease to enjoy. Playing games is never to change their situation positively but to give them essence of action in their inaction to while away the time. They eagerly wait for the words to follow. As Guil says, "words, words, they are all we have to go on" (PAGE 30). Other ceremonies which Ros and Guil perform sometimes prove their powerlessness to enliven themselves. They frequently speak of their memory loss when they don't play games or flip coins. Their fate is designed and they are subjected to its framework within limits, though not restrictions. In their constant attempts and failures in making sense of their life, Ros and Guil even make their repeated giving in a kind of ceremony and console themselves. They know somehow that they were not created with meaning of their own. They only have to wait until events have played themselves out. They accept with whatever they have been provided with without any desire and right to choose and

reject. They never knew to say no. at the end of their life, Guil seems to be aware of what they missed, "there must have been a moment, at the beginning where we could have said- no. But somehow we missed it." (PAGE 91) They truly lived in blank incomprehension of their identities, they past and their doom is not due to any reason but merely due to their design of fate, and ultimately they return to the non-being from which they came.

Roleplaying is another metadramatic asset in Ros and Guil. The dualistic role of Ros and Guil purely reflects the metatheatrical criteria of roleplaying within the play. Taken from Hamlet, Ros and Guil begin their life as protagonists in Stoppard's play where they are allowed to explore their existence. Yet their destiny is subdued by Hamlet. They appear to play major roles on Stoppard's stage having some measure of free speech and thinking. But they do not take their new roles that comfortably, rather they feel bored and lost if they are not instructed their work and speech.

The fact that reality of their new world in Stoppard's play does not operate as usual and lives them bewildered. They are solely at loss. They do not remember their past, don't foresee their futuristic action, rather they feel summoned. They are passive, thoughtless and brood over certain things and prefer to dedicate themselves to repetitive action. They fail to figure out the dos and don'ts when engaged in the plot of Hamlet, the pair still doesn't seem to know how to act.

There are other examples of roleplaying within the play. In order to find out the cause of Hamlet's transformation, Guil pretends to be Hamlet and Ros questions him. (PAGE 35-36) In act III, to imagine what they are going to say when they see the King of England, the two act out a possible script for their arrival in England. This time Ros takes the role of the King of England. Here roleplay helps Ros and Guil to figure out what they should do. It is ironic that these two actors can only understand things better by pretending to be someone else. They find it very difficult to streamline their activities rationally.

Literary reference of Stoppard's Ros and Guil is various. From the very title it refers to Shakespeare's Hamlet. Again the pairing of characters refers to Stoppard's contemporary play *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett where characters are projected in pairs, for example, Didi and Gogo, Pozzo and Lucky, Nag and Neil etc. These are complementary and competitive characters, never exist isolatedly, rather exhibit an indispensable inter-dependence. Not only they share action, but also they share fame and blame, feelings and sentiments.

The most important example of self-reference in the players' self-conscious theatricality in Ros and Guil sets the performer apart from the audience like "the two sides of the same coin" (PAGE 16). He is always on stage, "we're actors- we are the opposite people." By separating the Tragedian from Ros and Guil, the player doubles the vision ... we are watching the play and Ros and Guil in the play are the audience of the Tragedians. The player understands his play world quite well. Life on stage is always pre-written. Everyone who is marked for death, dies. After all, there is a script and there are logical actions.

"There is a design at work in all art... events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion." (PAGE 57)

The Tragedians create their own reality by acting, accepting or at least resigning themselves to the shifting reality they are given. Unfortunately Stoppard's two protagonists are

confused when they try hard to separate life and art and are incapable to perceive the dialectics between the two. Ros and Guil are actually in surprise between life and art, between reality and fiction. They have never found a right place to fill certainty and security. Ros wants a story that is well made, “with beginning, middle and end”, like the world he wants to be in- in good order that he can comprehend and follow.

All the ennui and lassitude of Ros and Guil is prescribed for them; in the end their inaction has an inaction about it. In drawing attention to Ros and Guil as a play, Stoppard also draws attention to Ros and Guil’s extreme inertness; they are so passive that ultimately they do not even choose to act passively. Neil Sansell, in his book “Tom Stoppard: The Artist and Critic” speaks about the relationship Guil’s inaction has to Stoppard himself. He states, “Stoppard succeeds where Guildenstern fails. He does not act in Shakespeare’s drama, acts upon it.” The title *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* foreshadows the end of Ros and Guil while lending an air of inevitability to the entire process. In an oft quoted interview, “Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas”, Stoppard states, “there is often no single clear statement in my plays. What there is a series of conflicting statements made by conflicting characters, and they tend to play a sort of infinite leap frog. ...” (AMBUSHES 58-59). Further Stoppard says in his letter to John Boorman, “I know now that, possibly the main reason for the play’s effectiveness is that it does not attempt to breakdown or analyse or explain; it simply pinches you into these ambiguities.” (FLEMING 53)

Summarily, with the perfect use of metadrama in the play, Stoppard presents us a kaleidoscopic world through which his two protagonists’ baffled situation was vividly observed and perceived. Tom Stoppard, as Martin Esslin (1966) ^[3] describes Jean Genets theatre, “also builds a labyrinth with metadramatic skills to mirror human condition, carrying resemblance with that of his two protagonists.”

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