

## Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and Its Screen Adaptivity

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### ABSTRACT

Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which is an appropriation of *Hamlet*, has a consistently acclaimed stage history. However, Stoppard's 1990 screen adaptation, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, did not receive positive responses from noteworthy critics, although Stoppard himself directed the film, carefully revising his own play for screen. Theories suggest that Absurd plays such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, hardly provide the ideal scripts for a stage to screen transfer. Stoppard's film also goes through a double adaptation process which includes both an inter-generic transfer from stage to screen and an appropriation of a preceding text. The purpose of this paper is to examine Stoppard's text's adaptive qualities in relation to theories on stage to screen adaptation and the tradition of the Absurd.

**Keywords:** *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, adaptation, appropriation, Absurd, stage to screen.

### ÖZET

William Shakespeare'in ölümsüz eseri Hamlet'ten uyarladığı varoluşçu komedisi *Rosencrantz ve Guildenstern Öldüler* ile 1968'de Broadway sahnesinde üne kavuşan oyun yazarı Tom Stoppard, oyunun aynı isimli 1990 film uyarlamasında beklenen başarıyı yakalayamamıştır. Stoppard, kendisiyle yapılan bir söyleşide oyununu beyaz perdeye uyarlama isteğini açıklarken oyuna "gerekli saygısızlığı" ancak kendisinin yapabileceğini ifade etmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*'in iki farklı performansında, tiyatro ve sinema seyircisinden zıt geribildirimler alınmasının nedenlerini Absürd Tiyatro geleneği ve adaptasyon kuramları çerçevesinde irdelemektir.

**Anahtar Sözcüler:** *Rosencrantz ve Guildenstern Öldüler*, adaptasyon, uyarlama Absürt, film uyarlaması.

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When Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* premiered in 1966 Edinburgh Fringe, it was praised by the noteworthy critic Harold Hobson as "the most important event in the British professional theatre since Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*." The play consistently had a good stage history, being the first Royal National Theatre production to transfer to Broadway. Tom Stoppard himself adapted the play to screen in 1990, saying "—at least the director wouldn't have to keep wondering what the author meant.

It just seemed that I'd be the only person who could treat the play with the necessary disrespect." (Brunette 1991) Rewriting the two minor characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in an existential comedy where they pretend to act as the protagonists, Stoppard's free / loose adaptation or "appropriation" offers a social critique on the hierarchy in *Hamlet*. Although it was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, the film has received many serious criticisms by the top critics of *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Sun-Times* and many others in its release. In his review of the film, Vincent Canby notes that " [Stoppard] delights in sounds and meanings, in puns, in flights of words that soar and swoop as if in visual display. On the stage, this sort of thing can be great fun... In the more realistic medium of film, so many words can numb the eardrums and weigh upon the eyelids like old coins. This is the effect of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*." (1991) In another well known film critic Roger Ebert's words, "the problem is that this material was never meant to be a film, and can hardly work as a film." (1991) This study examines the 1990 film *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* with a view to highlight its complicated adaptation process as a "double adaptation" besides its difficult screen translation as an Absurd play.

Tom Stoppard's film, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, can be considered as a loyal screen adaptation of his drama play with the same title. Stoppard offers a rewriting of *Hamlet*'s minor characters *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern* in an Absurdist three act play where the duo are supposed to be the major characters while the Shakespearean plot remains in the background.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, specifically revisits Acts 4 and 5 in *Hamlet*, where Claudius commissions *Rosencrantz* and

Guildenstern to find out Hamlet's intention and to trap him. As Hamlet senses the ill plan and changes the content of the letter which instructs his own execution, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are finally executed instead of Hamlet. Stoppard's script draws on an existential questioning of man as opposed to fate, symbolized by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's struggle to survive against Shakespeare's plot. The film begins as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ride their horses to Elsinore, getting involved with absurd discussions on the rule of probability as they find a coin which constantly comes up heads. On their way, they encounter a group of players and as they talk to the players, they find themselves in the middle of Hamlet's plot. They desperately try to understand the given circumstances in Hamlet by eavesdropping the characters' conversations. Asked by the king and the queen, they helplessly try to find out the reason for Hamlet's strange mood. Finally, the two are sent to deliver a letter to England by ship. There they learn the content of the letter and try to prevent Hamlet's death by pretending they did not see the letter. As in Shakespeare's play, Hamlet replaces the letter, and escapes on another ship. Ignorant of the situation, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are finally hung by the players. The film ends as the tragedians prepare to go on their journey.

Both Stoppard's play and film follow the tradition of the theatre of the Absurd in giving the audiences a sense of circular plot, which draws on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's repetitive existential questionings of life:

Ros: Heads.

(He picks it [the coin] 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. (9)

....

Ros: Oh no-we've been spinning coins for as long as I remember.

Guil: How long is that?

Ros: I forget. Mind you-eighty-five times! (11, 12)

The repetitive word "heads" becomes disturbing to the film audience as well as the conversations on the rules of probability after a few times. "Time has stopped dead, and the single experience of one coin being spun once has been repeated ninety [in the film version a hundred and fiftysix] times". (12) These questionings are very central to the play and the film which in turn makes even the ending, the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hardly a part of action but rather a continuation of the foregrounding situation that their death does not make a difference either in Shakespearean text or in Stoppard's text or in real life.

The self-reflexive qualities of Stoppard's play are revisited in the screen adaptation, which in turn contributes to the Absurdist sense of helplessness by indirectly addressing the source text as fate. For instance, the major player who keeps reminding Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the conventional rules of theatre. However, references to the stage create a sense of stage-consciousness in the audience, which in an intersemiotic transfer, evokes a sense of intertextuality as well. Another noteworthy example of metatextuality is that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern start their boat trip right after watching *The Murder of Gonzago* performed by the players. In other words, the play-within-play structures of both

*Hamlet and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* are revisited in the film with an intergeneric consciousness. A sense of stage to screen transfer is consciously passed on to the audiences by showing scenes from *Hamlet* on screen. To exemplify, the falling pages of Shakespeare's script before Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet the characters of *Hamlet* is a cinematic technique to remind the audiences of the adaptive process itself.

The prototypical characterization in Stoppard's text positions Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a double rather than individual identities, the latter of which is Allardyce

Nicoll's suggestion for the cinematic mode. For instance, Rosencrantz can not distinguish between himself and Guildenstern as he frequently confuses the two names. Their limited understanding of the world that surrounds them contributes to the strength of the Absurdist representation and reinforces the ground of their vain philosophical discussions. The following lines reflect their void attempts to prove their own existence by showing that even Guildenstern's relative wisdom does not make any difference: "A weaker man might be moved to re-examine his faith, if nothing else at least in the law of probability." (10) Owing to the Absurdist representations of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who fail to comprehend their purpose in the text,

Guil: What about suspense?

Ros: (innocently) What suspense?

(Small pause.) (11)

Stoppard offers a dark existential reading which finally announces that for any man, there is "no exit" (reminding the audiences of the title of Jean Paul Sartre's play) from an Absurd presence in life. In an interview Eugene Ionesco notes that "puppet show" is the essence for Absurd theatre as well as life (web), which in turn accounts for the puppet-like depiction of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Thoroughly controlled by the rules of the universe and limited in action as well as in comprehension, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are closer to being puppets than individuals.

Constantine J. Gianakaris's words, "motion pictures are primarily [...] a visual medium; theatre is primarily [...] verbal, hence largely metaphoric" (85f), underline the difficulty in the intersemiotic transfer from theatre to cinema. The term "adaptation" dates back to the end of the 19th century when film adaptations of literary works flourished and was therefore initially associated with screening although it is now being used in a broader sense. In fact, one should address the issue of stage to screen adaptations as an intersemiotic transfer in between two different means of representation as well as two different systems of signs. Linda Hutcheon

highlights the difficulty in drama on screen by calling them “two different modes of showing” (46-50). Susan Sontag’s question “[i]s cinema the successor, the rival, or the revivifier of theatre?” (371) also reflects the usual problematization of intergeneric relations between the two. In this respect, the juxtaposition of two different understandings of showing can be considered as the major challenge. To be more specific, showing plays only an instrumental role in theatre although it is very essential to cinema which is a more visual genre, incorporating technology. Theatre does not aim at showing but rather representing through signs. As Keir Elam puts it forth, the presence of signs on stage “suppresses the practical function of phenomena in favour of a symbolic or signifying role.” (6) In other words, the signifying process itself is the essence of theatrical reception.

It is obvious that text to screen transfer usually functions better, which in turn can be linked to reading and watching being thoroughly different experiences and thus, not rivals. Susan Bassnet who places performativity as the most important element in theatre translations, does not differ the stage text from its performance (38). In this respect screening a play implies a challenging intersemiotic transfer since the language of cinema is more vision-oriented than that of theatre in which images act as signifiers of the dramatic text.

Screening plays has been one of the recurrent modes of adaptations, dating back to the 1920s. However, by nature not every play is easily adaptable to screen. Owing to their intriguing plotlines as well as vivid characterization, Shakespearean plays, for instance, have usually proven themselves as screen-friendly by reaching a wide global audience. Adaptive strategy of the director, which determines the choices of omissions and additions, is another noteworthy factor which directly determines the strength of the play in screen adaptation. As Robert Stam argues, in film adaptations, translation or “semiotic transposition” should be the main concern. Stam considers losses and gains as inevitable outcomes of the translation process and thus dethrones the issue of “fidelity” in film adaptations. (62) Owing to their strong dramatizations and very little motion, these films can be still viewed as plays, conveying to the audience a sense of screened stage. Similarly, audience responses of most screen adaptations of the theatre of the Absurd such as Beckett’s *Endgame* (1989

TV movie, directed by Tony Coe) or Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1964 TV movie, directed by Bo Widerberg) , Ionesco's *Amedee* (TV movies, directed by Pierre Boursaus in 1968 and by Lars Egler in 1982) or even the best of the genres, Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* (2001 film adaptation, directed by Michael Lindsay Hogg) and Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1968 film adaptation, directed by William Friedkin), similarly put forth that there is a sense of screened stage throughout the film. In other words, theatre of Absurd which draws on a poetic image, can hardly be adapted into screen which draws on a moving image.

Building on Andre Bazin, R. Barton Palmer and William R. Bray consider "reconversion of stage space" as a very crucial process in stage to screen adaptations in order to avoid what they call "canned theatre". (9-10). Problematizing the representation of space itself, film versions of the Absurd inevitably convey their audiences a disturbing sense of watching a play projected onto screen. In Allardyce Nicoll's words "The theatre rejoices in artistic limitation in space while the film demands movement and change in location." (173) or as Susan Sontag puts it forth: "Movies are regarded as advancing from theatrical artificiality to cinematic naturalness and immediacy." (340) In other words, characteristically cinema can easily explore a dynamic context while representing a static situation usually becomes a challenge on screen, unlike on stage. If intersemiotic translation does not work successfully, the outcome would usually be a bad film out of a good play.

Another significant point to consider is the burden of double adaptation process. Since Stoppard's film is based on both an "appropriation "of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and a screen transfer of its own play version, the adaptation process becomes even more complicated. Julie Sanders carefully distinguishes the term from other adaptive modes:

"[A]ppropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain." (27) Stoppard's adaptive strategy in loosely revisiting *Hamlet* is manifested in the existentialist context he addresses as well as his choice of postmodern techniques of self-referentiality and intertextuality. Elizabeth Rivlin makes an important contribution in her analysis of Stoppard's complicated adaptation process as the writer, the adaptor and the director of *Rosencrantz*

and *Guil­denstern Are Dead*, by reading the film adaptation as a reflection of Stoppard's search for authority: "The film of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern* materializes Stoppard's aspirations to manage the unstable negotiations between the authorial text and its performative incarnation; in this sense, the cinema allows him to seize control of the adaptive possibilities of his play and to insist, in this case at least, that the author / auteur is not completely dead." (236-257) However by nature, Stoppard's text *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* which is already an appropriation of Shakespeare's canonical play, in turn both an adapting and adapted text, in all layers implies a shared authority.

Both the play and the film manifest many characteristics of the theatre of Absurd which depicts the characters in an unconscious existential search, as addressed in Sartre's Lectures, in search of making a central "choice" for the sake of a true existence which entails "commitment and responsibility" (1946). However Absurd characters who cannot make sense, who often feel helpless and who are usually blocked by communication, inevitably fail in the process:

Guil: (Seizing him violently) WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Ros: Rhetoric! Game and match! (Pause.) Where's it going to end?

Guil: That's the question.

Ros: It's all questions.

Guil: Do you think it matters?

Ros: Doesn't it matter to you?

Guil: Why should it matter?

Ros: What does it matter why?

Guil: (Teasing gently) Doesn't it matter why it matters?

Ros: (Rounding on him) What's the matter with you? (Pause)

Guil: It doesn't matter.

Ros: (Voice in the wilderness) ... What's the game?

Guil: What are the rules? (33, 34)



The transference of the stage double onto screen with self-reflexive and intertextual techniques inevitably paralyzes them, proving them as Absurd and thus leaving them no room to become actively present on screen. The ontological questioning of language, which is very essential to an Absurd play, can hardly transfer to screen which draws on multiple reference points. The following quote very well explores theatre and cinema's different understandings of communication and in turn the major difficulty in adapting the two stage plays into screen: "The word, when it does not evoke images, when it signifies by itself, paralyzes the film, ruptures the rhythm. If a time not filled with words is intolerable in the theatre because it is empty, a time filled solely by words is intolerable in the cinema because it is excessive."

(Mitry 2) Mitry's words can be specifically related to the inevitable failure of the theatre of Absurd, which represents the act of speech in a void context, in screen translation.

While on stage, theatre of Absurd meets a demanding audience, its film adaptations usually end up in limited number of audiences. Jean Mitry notes that the theatrical representation centralizes "the word" while cinematic representation is meant to explore "the world". (2) The theatre of Absurd, especially focuses on the absence of a linguistic signifier in an emptied cultural context. To quote Edward Albee, theatre of the Absurd mainly deals with "[m]an's attempts to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a World which makes no sense- [...]" (53) In this respect Absurd plays which intend to represent man's ambiguous conception of the world, the major referential context of which the theatre of the Absurd problematizes, inevitably encounter a major disadvantage on screen.

Absurd plays, like Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* are usually associated with a claustrophobic sense of space and minimal number of actors and actresses, both of which can hardly be considered screen-friendly. Stoppard's film conveys this sense not only with the choice of a desert as the initial space but also with the sense of a screened stage passed onto the audiences till the end. Stoppard's film would have to lose its Absurd qualities inevitably, in order to better adapt to screen. In Jean Mitry's words, it would "...express different things not the same things in different way", celebrating a thorough intergeneric

translation through “transposition” or “reconstruction” (1). As Mitry points out, the dramatic form and content should be reworked with screen consciousness.

Consequently, Absurd plays which have less action and more situation-centered plots are thought to struggle more on screen, conveying to the audiences a sense of screened stage. This may be one of the reasons why Tom Stoppard's film *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* did not receive the same positive criticism that their stage performances received. Another major reason is that the intergeneric transfer becomes a more complicated and challenging process, given the adaptive quality of the play. In other words, when the structural qualities of the play are directly transferred, without being adapted into a new medium as cinema, the film conveys the sense of a screened stage which is not very favourable to screen audiences. Given this context, Jean Mitry's strategy for adapting theatre to film, is finally reinforced: “[...] the play would become something altogether different. It would take on another meaning, open onto different perspectives, because the means of expression in being different would express different things-not the same things in different ways.” (1)

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