

## 21L703: Studies in Drama: Stoppard/Churchill

### Discussion questions for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

- 1) What's in a name—beginning with the title of this play?
- 2) Some theater critics consider Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be modern “types” rather than fully developed characters. Some even think that the theater audience should be excused if, like Gertrude and Hamlet, they can't tell the two apart. Do Stoppard's opening “character notes” refute such responses? Does the script that follows? And does it confirm or qualify the character notes themselves?
- 3) Early in his career, Stoppard said he wrote plays of ideas. What ideas are thrown into play by the coin toss? How do they shape and connect with the narrative to come?
- 4) When does the coin finally come up tails, and what do you make of that?
- 5) The Player says he is always *on*. Is he, and what does that mean? What vision of the theater do we get from the tragedians, and how does it connect with or reflect upon the play we are watching? What do you make of R&G as audience members?
- 6) What is the first scene from *Hamlet* that we see? What do you make of this choice?
- 7) Stoppard said just a little knowledge of *Hamlet* would suffice for an *R&G* audience. How much knowledge of *Hamlet* (if any) does this play require for it to “work”? Taking it a step further, how does your thoughtful contemplation of *Hamlet* affect your experience of this play—and vice-versa?
- 8) After R & G's scene with Claudius and Gertrude—that is, after they have been “placed” back in the play *Hamlet*—what upsets them? Is this the response you expected, based on your knowledge of *Hamlet*? Does their subsequent encounter with Hamlet himself alter your feelings about these three characters (of the Shakespearean or Stoppardian variety)?
- 9) In what sense do R & G have choices? In this, how are they like/unlike other characters? How are they like/unlike human beings?
- 10) Which do R & G prefer: order or arbitrariness? Which does the play itself present as more fearsome?
- 11) How does the play make connections between its fiction and the audience?