New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory
(Online ISSN 2347-2073) Vol. III Issue IV, Oct. 2014

COMING INTO HIS OWN: THE ACTOR IN TOM STOPPARD'S *ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD*

Payal Das
Product Development Executive
(Oxford University Press, Kolkata)
payeldas.8dec@gmail.com

Abstract

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is an absurdist, existentialist tragicomedy by Tom Stoppard, first staged at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1966. The play concerns the misadventures and musings of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two minor characters from William Shakespeare's Hamlet who are childhood friends of the Prince, focusing on their actions with the events of Hamlet as background. Within the play, the close connection between real life and the world of theatrical performance is revealed to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by the presence of the Tragedians, who perform a play that depicts a parallel of the events in which the two men find themselves. Numerous features of the play work to underscore this connection, not least of which is the fact that the play asks its audience to assume that the characters from Shakespeare's Hamlet are real and deserve to have their story told from another perspective. This paper attempts to trace the development of the techniques and sensibilities of theatre direction and acting using two plays- Richard Brinsley Sheridan's The Critic (where the stage becomes real, albeit in a farcical manner) and Gareth Armstrong's Shylock (where the character becomes real)- finally culminating in Stoppard's play, where the actor becomes real, comes into his own, dares to ask questions and play idle games, is genuinely hurt or happy when it is not expected of him, even refusing to die as he feels a theatrical death can never match the importance or the poignancy of a real death.

Keywords: Tom Stoppard, theatre, Sheridan, character, actor, existentialism

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Tom Stoppard's best-known and first major play, appeared initially as an amateur production in Edinburgh, Scotland, in August of 1966. Subsequent professional productions in London and New York in 1967 made Stoppard an international sensation and three decades and a number of major plays later Stoppard is now considered one of the most important playwrights in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Recognized still today as a consistently clever and daring comic playwright, Stoppard startled and captivated audiences for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* when he retold the story of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as an absurdist-like farce, focusing on the point of view of

two of the famous play's most insignificant characters. In Shakespeare's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are little more than plot devices, childhood friends summoned by King Claudius to probe Hamlet's bizarre behavior at court and then ordered to escort Hamlet to England (and his execution) after Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius. Hamlet escapes Claudius's plot and engineers instead the executions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose deaths are reported incidentally after Hamlet returns to Denmark. In Stoppard's play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become the major characters while the Hamlet figures become plot devices, and Stoppard's wildly comic play becomes the story of two ordinary men caught up in extraordinary events they could neither understand nor control. Within the play, the close connection between real life and the world of theatrical performance is revealed to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern by the presence of the Tragedians, who perform a play that depicts a parallel of the events in which the two men find themselves. Stoppard's play immediately invites comparisons with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and also brings to mind the likes of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Luigi Pirandello. Ruby Cohn says,

> In zigzagging between the outer and the inner play, Stoppard works In the wake of such English masterpieces as *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and *The Critic*, but he has the temerity to do so with *Hamlet*, probably the best-known play in the English language. (Cohn 110)

A tracing of the development in the techniques and sensibilities of theatre direction and acting is attempted using two plays- Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Critic* and Gareth Armstrong's *Shylock*- the process finally reaching its just culmination in Stoppard's play.

The Critic: or, a Tragedy Rehearsed, the last of Sheridan's plays was first staged at the Drury Lane Theater in 1779 and was his final belittling of not only the so-called "genteel comedy" but also true comedy with a moral purpose. But rather than being just a farce or a burlesque with a single objective, the play turns out to be about multiple visions or perceptions, illustrated by the characters and events of the play, at one level, leading to the climax- that of Puff's own illusion of *The Spanish Armada* as a great tragedy contrasted with Sheridan presenting it as it really is- merely a distorted vision of tragic drama- one arrives at the final confrontation of two major perceptions: one stated and one, implied; there are now two 'realities' at once, one filtered through the other. Sheridan made Puff's *The Spanish Armada* a tragedy instead of a comedy, through which he laughs at the slavish employment of stock devices and scolds those who strive after large, isolated effects; he reminds one of how a bad play will constantly puncture one's desire to suspend disbelief. Puff's play, therefore, becomes a guide to Sheridan's aesthetics, albeit a guide that shows its user what 'not' to do rather than what he or she should do. Great skill is needed to depict the work of an unskillful playwright, and by examining the tragic conventions parodied in Puff's play, Sheridan expected the audience to appreciate better the skills of dramatists who handle these conventions more adroitly than Puff. In the process, however, *The Spanish Armada* also becomes a guide to the audience about what to believe and what not, and how much to believe, as Sheridan's play seems to doubt the credibility of the adage "art imitates life", the

situations and problems portrayed onstage being far too artificial and ridiculous to be real. But as Philip K. Jason says, "Yet it does not take much sophistication to see that the problems under scrutiny are as old and as young as the art of the theatre…." (Davison 205)

Puff's final speech reminds one of the potential immortality of the compass of life he has created: "Well, pretty well- but not quite perfect. So, ladies and gentlemen, if you please, we'll rehearse this piece again tomorrow." It also shows that after all the portrayals of larger-than-life characters and events onstage, the play finally does come to an end, and real life takes over again. When Sheridan has turned the author inside out, and exposed all his little weaknesses, he turns to the play itself with the same delightful perception of its absurdities. So, *The Critic* becomes, both on its surface and subterranean levels, a play about perceptions culminating in a complex vision in which the stage becomes more than only a "mirror of Nature"- a mirror of itself and of the very process of perception. However, in Sheridan, the stage becomes real, with all its eccentricities, but with stereotypical characters.

But Shakespeare's unforgettable creation Shylock the Jew finds his voice and rediscovers himself in Gareth Armstrong's play *Shylock*, where he questions every injustice that has been done to him, and breaks down the façade of the hook-nosed, red haired Jew, emerging as another normal human being with very human feelings. The play starts with a comic glorification of Jews:

> You mention The Merchant of Venice to anyone- 'Ah, Shylock- the Jew!'
> Famous Jews- Abraham, Moses… Barbara Streisand. The Virgin Mary,
> Jesus Christ. Shylock. He's even become a noun. (Act I)

Armstrong makes Shylock question Shakespeare's choice of his profession as a moneylender and also the integrity of Antonio's character, referring to how Antonio would call him a 'misbeliever, cut-throat dog', foul-mouthing his trade, but in times of need should think of coming to him for help, thus exposing the hypocrite in Antonio. Shylock also says with bitter sarcasm:

> Comic figures. That's what we were. That's what was expected of Jews
> on stage- comedy and villainy. Comic not because we told jokes, but
> comic because people enjoyed laughing at us. To our first audience,
> Shakespeare's first audience, that's what we were- comic villains. (Act I)

A major portion of this play deals with how Shylock feels after his daughter Jessica elopes with Lorenzo taking all his precious possessions with her. This incident might have made the Elizabethan audience feel that the Jew got what he deserved, but here the picture that emerges is of a tired, broken father mourning the loss of his only child, his most precious possession. Also when he hears of Jessica squandering his wealth, he mourns for the ring that his wife Leah had given him and that he would not have parted with at any cost, contrasting with the relative ease with which Bassanio parts with Portia's ring. One feels that not only had the Jew a heart, but it was truer than all the other characters in the play. Armstrong gives Shylock a historical background replete with instances of cruelty against the Jews, to plead his case with. From the massacre of Jews in 1190 in the city of York, King Edward I's directive, the

starting of the Blood Libel in 1144 in Norwich to the Nazi concentration camps, Shylock states them all making one realize how misunderstood his race is. He also pays homage to Charles Macklin, Edmund Kean, Sir Henry Irving for portraying Shylock onstage in a more humane manner, giving him a new personality, one which rose above the 'Jew' who was the laughing-stock of Elizabethan society. Armstrong says,

> The only Shakespeare scene here intact is the one between Shylock and Tubal (Act III scene I). In all other cases the scenes have inevitably been cut to accommodate a solo performer, and in the trial scene, lines have occasionally been reattributed to other characters. These changes are mostly in the cause of clarity or brevity, but of course they are often done just to strengthen my case.

Throughout this play Shylock wants to be understood and accepted; he is not asking for his one pound of flesh anymore, he is a simple and lonely man, with his simple pleasures of life and he finally says what he truly feels.

With the character becoming real, it is now time for the actor to come into his own finally, and Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* gives him the just platform. By far the most celebrated transplantation of Shakespearean characters, the play owes as much to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as to *Hamlet,* as both sources bend Stoppard's play far, far from realism. Except for the title and finale, Stoppard's characters are not dead, but on the contrary, very lively in a play that dovetails the modern dialogue into that of Shakespeare. Stoppard uses and sometimes abuses lines from *Hamlet*, and stages two reported actions of Shakespeare- Hamlet's disheveled appearance before Ophelia, and Hamlet's substitution of his own letter that will lead to the execution of its bearers. For all the residual dialogues and scene direction and settings, Stoppard's play is distinctly modern.

> Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are twentieth-century agnostics, uncommitted and frightened: little men being used by those in power, and cipher characters being used by the dramatist. There is a paradoxical inconsistency here between the rootless twentieth century man and the defined character imprisoned in his play. (Hunter, *Tom Stoppard's Plays*, 136-7)

Stoppard engages our sympathy for these unfortunate, loquacious and confused characters who 'play' their lives away. "We the audience, never know more than Didi and Gogo, because Beckett knows no more. We know much more than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern because we have absorbed Hamlet" (Cohn, *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots*, 217) And therein lies the pity of it, as we know, unlike the characters, that the entertaining metaphysical questioning will come to naught.

The two characters, brought into being within the puzzling universe of Stoppard's play often confuse their names, as they have generally interchangeable, yet periodically unique identities. This play also draws attention to the fact how little they are worth to the characters around them; Hamlet, even though he was their childhood friend, confuses the one for the other and does not think twice before conspiring to murder them, Claudius even though he was using them as spies on Hamlet, confuses their identities and keeps the contents of the

letter secret from them. According to Roger Sales, Stoppard makes use of various devices like 'ambushing the audience', 'performance and patronage', 'peep-shows', 'language games', 'a sense of not-ending', 'dumb shows', 'the direct informal approach', 'playing the King', 'sustained action', 'the dance of death' etc to bring out the actors and make him question the validity of what is going on around him. The confusion of identities begin from the very first scene when the stage lights merely reveal a bare set 'without any visible character'- two unnamed characters pass the time by playing a repetitive game of head or tails and like the audience, even they appear to be waiting for something to happen. Apart from their names, even the associations attached with them are confusing. They may have thought they were actors, without any direction or purpose but the Player, on his arrival, immediately identifies them as spectators, and then cast as voyeurs in relation to the Player's performance but, as will become more apparent later on, they are also voyeurs in their relationship with the theatre audience. One keeps wondering whether Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are performers or patrons, traitors to Hamlet or victims themselves, actors with their designated parts or real people forced to take on roles without understanding:

> Player: …I recognized you at once-
> Ros: And who are we?
> Player: - as fellow artists.
> Ros: I thought we were gentlemen.
> Player: For some of us it is performance, for others, patronage. They are two sides of the same coin, or, let us say, being as there are so many of us, the same side of two coins. (*Bows again*.) Don't clap so loudly- it's a very old world. (Act I)

Guildenstern unwittingly provides a review of the play itself when he lists what is wrong with the Player's repertoire: 'No enigma, no dignity, nothing classical, portentous'. The fact that, here and everywhere else, the play reviews itself heightens its theatricality, holding up a mirror to itself and to theatre in general, just like in *The Critic* and *Shylock*, but here it offers a sustained exploration of relationships of fluid, interchangeable identities rather than sustained action in totality. During the metatheatrical scenes, 'stumbling' is the operative word, as firstly, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern stumble into the performance of Hamlet without a clue about what is going on, and are accused by Hamlet of being bad actors whose looks betray their purposes. They stumble again in their attempts to play the courtier, bowing at the wrong moments and their stage business with their hats resembles slapstick. Thus Stoppard parodies techniques of acting and production which were Shakespearean theatrical norms, and through that, shows how his anti-heroes, supposedly actors, are unable to hide their feelings or act properly.

Bernadina da Silveira Pinheiro notes that Stoppard alters the focus of *Hamlet*'s 'play-within-a-play' so that it reveals the ultimate fate of the tragicomedy's anti-heroes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. However this alteration ultimately culminates in an absurdist anti-climax where the though anti-heroes confront a mirror image of their future deaths in the metatheatric spectacle staged by the Players, they fail to recognize themselves in it or gain

any insight into their identities or purpose. But in their bewilderment, their ignorance and finally through their speech, their utter helplessness can be clearly felt. One of the major themes in this play is art vs. reality and one can feel the anguish in Guildenstern's voice when he speaks to the Player:

> I'm talking about death- you've never experienced that. And you cannot act it. You die a thousand casual deaths- with none of that intensity which squeezes out life… and no blood runs cold anywhere. Because even as you die you know you will come back in a different hat. But no one gets up after death- there is no applause- there is only silence and some second-hand clothes, and that's-death-
>
> (Act III)

When they are finally alone and facing their destiny, they express their feelings in different ways, yet they touch the heart and make one wish for their lives to be pardoned. Guildenstern says:

> No…no…not for us, not like that. Dying is not romantic, and death is not a game which will soon be over…Death is not anything…death is not…It's the absence of presence, nothing more…the endless time coming back… (Act III)

Rosencrantz has no philosophical thoughts, he is afraid to die and that fear is tangible in his words:

> We're still young…fit…we've got years…
> We've done nothing wrong! We didn't harm anyone. Did we? (Act III)

This is where Stoppard's play rises above its metatheatrical elements, differentiates itself from the farcical comedy in *The Critic*, and takes audience sympathy to a higher level than with Shylock, as here the tragedy happens with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, both as characters, as well as actors; actors who have finally become real, have come into their own by daring to ask questions beyond the set directions and dialogues given to them, by playing idle games and being hurt or happy or just doing as they pleased without the theatrical pretensions, even refusing to die as they feel a theatrical death can never match the importance or poignancy of a real death.

Works Cited:

Armstrong, Gareth. *Shylock*. Great Britain: Expression Printers Ltd, 1999. Print.

Bareham, T. ed. *Tom Stoppard: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, Jumpers and Travesties (Casebook series)*. Great Britain: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1990. Print.

Cohn, Ruby. *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama*. United States of America: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Print.

Davison, Peter. ed. *Sheridan: Comedies (Casebook series)*. Great Britain: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1988. Print.

Sales, Roger. *Tom Stoppard- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1988. Print.

Sheridan, Richard Brinsley. *The School for Scandal and The Critic (The Modern Library series)*. United States of America: Random House Inc, 1930. Print.

Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. United States of America: Grove Press, 1967. Print.

Zeifman, Hersh. *Modern British Dramatists- New Perspectives*. ed. John Russell Brown. N.J.: Spectrum Books, 1984. Print.