



ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

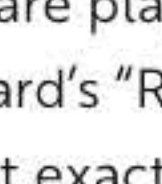
Existential crisis has never been this funny: SH Theatrical takes on Stoppard



BY JANA MARCUS

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Quick Take

New Santa Cruz company SH Theatrical makes an impressive debut with Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead," a smart, well-acted and laugh-out-loud production led by Zed Warner, Chris Salem and Ward Willats.

There are plays that make us laugh. There are plays that make us think. Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" somehow manages to do both at exactly the same time.

Two bewildered men wrestle with questions about fate, free will, death, identity and the meaning of existence. It sounds like pretty heavy stuff. Instead, in the hands of Stoppard, it becomes a wonderfully absurd comedy filled with verbal gymnastics, theatrical mischief and some of the funniest philosophical conversations ever put on a stage.

If you go

Who: SH Theatrical

What: Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead"

When: Through Aug. 30

Where: Actors' Theatre, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz

Tickets: [Click here](#)

And play they do.

Presented in three acts with brief intermissions, this is a substantial evening of theater, particularly for a play so dependent on language. Yet the production never feels long. Hayward keeps the pace moving, and even Stoppard's densest philosophical exchanges have a momentum that keeps us listening, laughing and trying to stay one step ahead.

Stoppard's 1966 play performs a wonderfully clever theatrical trick by taking two relatively minor characters from Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and making them the center of the story. This time, Hamlet is the supporting character.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are childhood friends of the Danish prince who have been summoned to court by King Claudius and Queen Gertrude to discover what is behind Hamlet's increasingly strange behavior. Unfortunately, neither man has much idea what he is supposed to be doing. They wander through Elsinore trying to follow instructions, decipher Hamlet and understand the increasingly alarming events unfolding around them.



Zed Warner as Guildenstern and Chris Salem as Rosencrantz are laugh-out-loud funny in Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead." Credit: Jana Marcus

At the center of it all are Zed Warner as Guildenstern and Chris Salem as Rosencrantz, and the production works because the two establish an easy comic rhythm almost immediately.

Warner handles the more rational and philosophical Guildenstern beautifully. He has grown considerably as an actor on local stages, and it is a pleasure to see that growth come into full focus here. He is comfortable with Stoppard's language, allowing Guildenstern's increasingly desperate attempts to impose logic on an illogical situation to emerge naturally rather than forcing the comedy.

Salem is a terrific counterweight as Rosencrantz, the somewhat dimmer and more innocent half of the pair. There is an appealing earnestness to his confusion, and Salem knows how to let Rosencrantz arrive at the obvious just a beat later than everyone else. Together, he and Warner develop a rapid-fire Abbott and Costello "Who's on First?" rhythm, batting questions, answers and misunderstandings back and forth until neither seems entirely certain where the conversation began. Their timing is sharp, their chemistry easy and the laughs abundant.

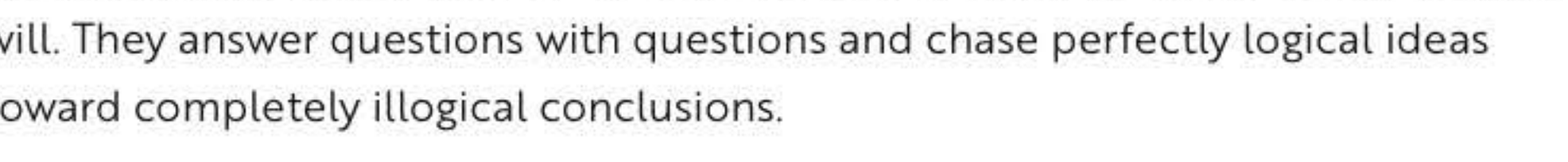
Every so often, Shakespeare's "Hamlet" crashes into their world. Familiar characters sweep through, scenes from the tragedy play out, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are briefly swept into the action before being deposited once again into a strange theatrical wasteland where they are left to figure out what just happened.

Eventually, they are ordered to accompany Hamlet to England, carrying a letter whose contents will determine who lives and who dies.

We, of course, know something they don't.

Stoppard told us in the title.

But the plot is almost beside the point. The real joy of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" comes from watching these two men attempt to make sense of a world that stubbornly refuses to make sense.



Zed Warner as Guildenstern, Chris Salem as Rosencrantz and a traveling band of actors performing "Hamlet" in "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead." Credit: Jana Marcus

Stoppard gives them language that is simultaneously thoughtful, ridiculous and breathtakingly clever. They debate probability, identity, memory, death and free will. They answer questions with questions and chase perfectly logical ideas toward completely illogical conclusions.

At one point Rosencrantz suddenly shouts, "Fire!"

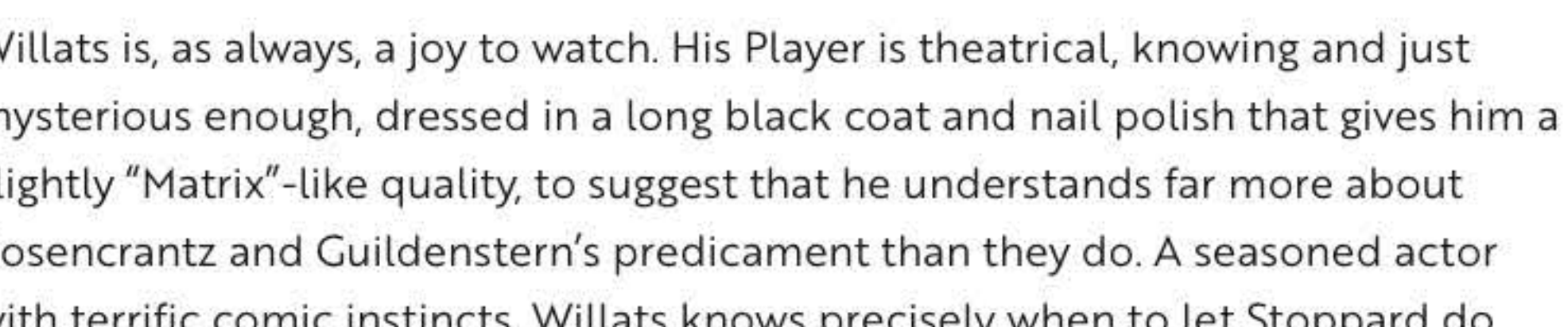
When nobody reacts, he explains that he is exercising free speech, but nobody moved.

Elsewhere comes the wonderfully cynical observation, "Actors are the opposite of people."

Listen closely. Stoppard's language moves with a rhythm all its own. A sentence begins in one place and frequently ends somewhere entirely unexpected. A joke becomes a philosophical observation. A philosophical observation becomes nonsense. And occasionally the nonsense turns out to contain more truth than anything else being said.

That makes this, above all, an actor's show.

Then there is Ward Willats as the Player, leader of the wandering troupe of actors Rosencrantz and Guildenstern encounter along the way.



Chris Salem as Rosencrantz, Zed Warner as Guildenstern and Ward Willats as Player in Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead." Credit: Jana Marcus

Willats is, as always, a joy to watch. His Player is theatrical, knowing and just mysterious enough, dressed in a long black coat and nail polish that gives him a slightly "Matrix"-like quality, to suggest that he understands far more about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's predicament than they do. A seasoned actor with terrific comic instincts, Willats knows precisely when to let Stoppard do the work and when to give a line an extra twist.

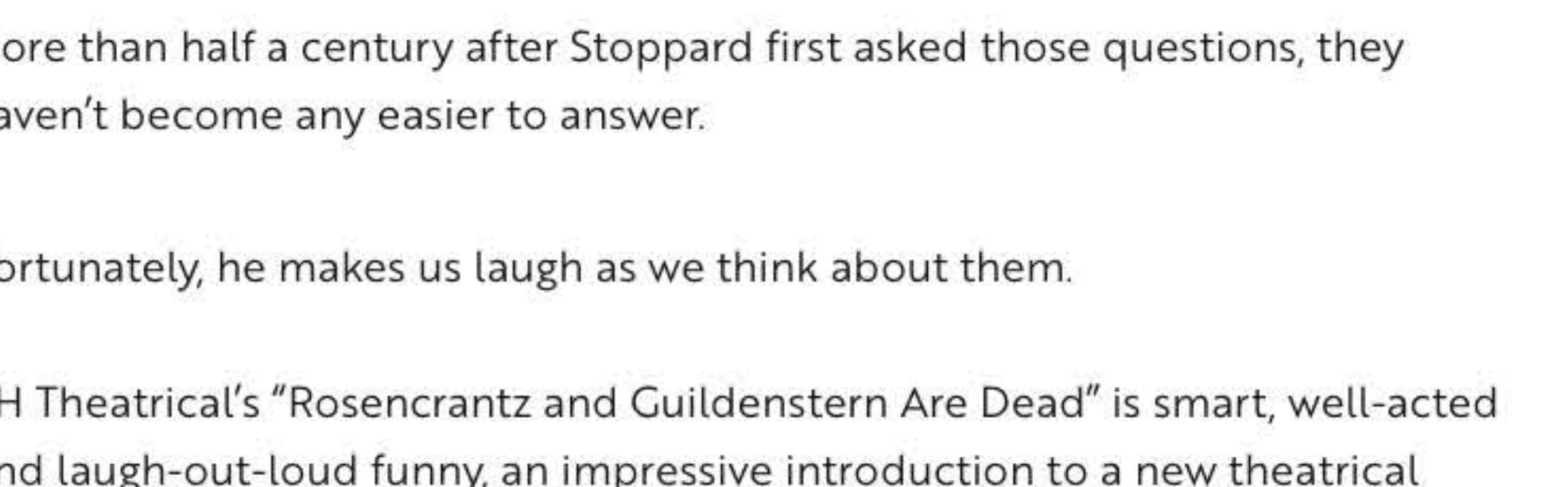
Ian Dyer appears in flashes as Hamlet, while Andy Waddell, Jennifer Stanford, Kevin Karplus, Juno Aliah, Raven Voorhees, Nick Bilardello, Brad Roades, Tom Boyle and Benjamin Canant round out the ensemble, moving in and out of the Shakespearean world surrounding the two central characters.

Steven Phillipps' sparse set works particularly well, lending a sense of theatrical purgatory to the space Rosencrantz and Guildenstern occupy. There is nowhere in particular for them to go, which is precisely the point. Josephine Czarnecki's lighting occasionally bathes the stage in moodier shadows as the comedy edges toward its inevitable conclusion.

Hayward wisely avoids burying all of this beneath an elaborate directorial concept. The words are the concept. The actors are the engine.

And beneath all those words is something unexpectedly moving.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern keep talking because talking is one of the few things they can control. They are two men trying desperately to understand the rules of a story they did not write. The audience knows their destination before they do, which makes their confusion funny at first and increasingly poignant as the play moves toward its conclusion.



Zed Warner as Guildenstern and Chris Salem as Rosencrantz in Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead." Credit: Jana Marcus

How much of our lives is choice and how much is fate? Would we recognize the ending if we were already walking toward it?

More than half a century after Stoppard first asked those questions, they haven't become any easier to answer.

Fortunately, he makes us laugh as we think about them.

SH Theatrical's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" is smart, well-acted and laugh-out-loud funny, an impressive introduction to a new theatrical presence in Santa Cruz and proof that even the deepest questions can be awfully entertaining.