

ROSENCRANTZ
+ GUILDENSTERN
ARE
DEAD

1981

Is Godot the inspiration?

In 1971 Teddington Theatre Club was granted a 21 years lease on the building that became the Hampton Court Theatre. Now, ten years later, there are some rumbles off-stage about the impending sale of Hampton Court House, and anxious questioning among TTC members about how this might affect their operations.

What more natural than the choice of **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead** as their tenth anniversary production? In Stoppard's best known play a pair of attendant lords are left together in a bare ante-room of the palace of Elsinore, spinning coins and waiting to be involved in the off-stage action. "Every entrance is an exit somewhere else." Only, in this case, "off-stage" happens to be Shakespeare's Hamlet; and occasionally the great tragic events sweep through briefly involving our heroes and leaving them more puzzled than before about who they

are and what their role is. In the end the title tells it all.

Faithful to Shakespeare, Stoppard keeps these two characters blank and interchangeable; he resists the temptation to invent non-Shakespearean business, except for a stream of verbal tricks and games that sound like his own thought processes turned into dialogue. But, seeing the play again a few weeks after *Godot*, I see that the real inspiration is not the Bard but Becket. And, perhaps unconsciously, those comic tramps have influenced John Buckingham's interpretation of the play.

With the honourable exception of Doug Andrews as Claudius and John Roth as the First Player, the Elsinore crowd go through their parts as unconvincing cardboard supers. By contrast Mick O'Connor as Rosencrantz and Michael Norman as Guildenstern, invest their performances with perhaps more comedy character than the text contains, and Mr. O'Connor especially timed and turned his lines to a comic nicety. But surely these two would be more at home in a police court, nudging and winking to each other, than in the Royal Danish court?

Mart Stonelake's two-level set, with a deep thrust stage (and Mike Elgey's lighting) worked best in the maritime scene of the third act — the one farthest removed from the Hamlet original. Elsewhere it was often difficult to decide whether we were witnessing fragments of the Bard or Stoppard's latter-day inventions.

The production certainly goes off with a bang. The pirate's cannon is enough to wake the old folk next door — not to mention anyone dozing in the audience — and fills the theatre with debris and dense smoke.

The last performance is tomorrow evening.

John Thaxter

Best of Stoppard

The play which first brought Tom Stoppard national acclaim, **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead**, begins a week's run at Hampton Court Theatre tomorrow.

The hit of the 1966 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the play went on to fame and fortune at the Old Vic and has been revived many times since. Stoppard's brilliant idea was to show what happens to Hamlet's ingratiating attendants while they are "off-stage".

In the character of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he has created a double act which rivals many of the great comic partnerships of the past, yet they speak for

all the "little people" bound up in events beyond their control.

Playing the two gentlemen-in-waiting are Mick O'Connor, who recently impressed as Mark in Kennedy's Children, and a longer serving member of Teddington Theatre Club, Michael Norman, last seen as Gaston in *Waltz of the Toreadors*.

Directing this dazzling comedy of semantics is John Buckingham, who directed Poliakov's *Strawberry Fields* at Hampton Court last year. Tickets for this production at £1.30 and details of membership are available on 977 1916, or 979 7904.