



**The play of the week**

**Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are back at the National and very much alive, says MICHAEL BILLINGTON**

## Two to a T

**N**EARLY 30 years after its premiere, which made Stoppard famous overnight, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is back at the National Theatre. And, even though I still feel that it over-extends a brilliant initial conceit, I readily admit that Matthew Francis's lyrical production with Simon Russell Beale and Adrian Scarborough is as exuberantly funny as any I have seen.

My doubts about the play are twofold. Stoppard, by focusing on a pair of attendant figures caught up in incomprehensible events at Elsinore, flies against the Shakespearean textual evidence that they are ex-friends of Hamlet specifically hired to spy on him. More seriously, while treating them as symbols of all humanity in that they are trapped in a meaningless universe with death as the only exit, Stoppard also makes them remorselessly self-conscious: I would feel more sympathy with their predicament if they themselves did not so endlessly define it.

Francis's production answers that objection in several ways: by dwelling on the speed and verve of the cross-talk; by highlighting the play's variety of texture; and by demolishing the stock image of Elsinore as a place of dark impenetrability. In Lez Brotherston's highly ingenious design, the two heroes find themselves surrounded

by a windowed, transparent, conservatory-style structure behind which the torchlit politics of Hamlet proceed. It both creates a sense of two worlds and gives the play itself a physical lightness I've rarely known it to possess.

But it is the acting which is the evening's chief delight. And again Francis pushes to the limit the contrast between the ratiocinative Guildenstern and the slower-witted Rosencrantz. Simon Russell Beale, who simply gets better all the time, plays the former in college scarf and corduroys like some intellectual high-flier lumbered with a *fidus Achates*. He mixes raised eyebrows and weary exasperation with, at one point, a very funny jiggling excitement at the prospect of an extended verbal rally.

Meanwhile Adrian Scarborough, with beaky profile and close-cropped hair, touchingly suggests Rosencrantz is a likable mutt who can never quite keep up with his Socratic friend: the one thing they share is a keen apprehension of death. Alan Howard, in Caroline spaniel-like black wig, also lends the *Player King* a wonderful mixture of actorish hauteur and moral seediness.

I still prefer Stoppard's later, more emotionally dynamic plays. But this production has a manic vaudevillian quality that effectively counterpoints the work's inherently self-conscious cleverness.

Alan Howard (left), Adrian Scarborough and Simon Russell-Beale HENRIETTA BUTLER

## Billington on Rosencrantz

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