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**TIME OUT OF JOINT – AS USUAL READING
ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD
AS A SATURNALIAN PLAY**

In this paper, I re-read Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead as a text indebted to ancient comedy, with special attention to possible Plautine elements. As its very title suggests, the most obvious intermediary between Stoppard and Plautus is Hamlet, but Shakespeare's text is not necessarily the only feasible route to understanding Stoppard's comic art. I argue that Stoppard's text, like Shakespeare's comedies, borrows from the ancient tradition of festive comedy, and that one of his most important achievements is the reintegration of the whole spectrum of Classical drama into the framework of a postwar absurdist play. This is what I wish to demonstrate by cataloguing motifs that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern shares with the comedies of Plautus. The main points I raise are the Saturnalian time management of Stoppard's play; its likewise Saturnalian protagonists; the parallel behaviour of these texts towards their generic and intertextual frames and their strong meta-dramatic nature; some shared cultural, social, and philosophical themes; and, finally, despite their focus on low-prestige, unheroic characters, the tragic qualities that they likewise share.

Key words: reception studies, comedy, Plautus, Tom Stoppard, Shakespeare, *Saturnalia*, theatre of the absurd, *palliata*

The title of Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* immediately calls *Hamlet* to mind. Stoppard's modern text offers an absurd re-writing of *Hamlet*, which operates in the background (the unseen, unspoken, but still necessary action at the edges) of Shakespeare's tragedy: a re-telling of the well-known story from the point of view of its most obscure characters. They are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two friends of Hamlet, whom Claudius summons to spy on him and then, when things get worse, to kill him. Just like in *Hamlet* – and so one starts with *Hamlet*.

But Shakespeare is not the only way to Stoppard's play. From the first time I took a more or less scholarly look at Stoppard's text, I was struck by its debt to ancient comedy, which immediately brought Plautus' vigorous farce to mind, and which is stronger than could be explained by Shakespeare's own well-documented debt to classical sources in his own comedies. The latter is an unassailable fact, but it will not, to my mind, explain everything Plautine in Stoppard: the intertextual parallels between *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and Plautine comedy seem on analysis more structural than allusive.

So I decided to place the two authors side by side *without* making much reference to Shakespeare. Omitting something obvious, while it can indeed pose problems, can also enhance critical enquiry.¹ It might shed light on connections between the two texts which arch over, or sneak past, the age and cultural context of Shakespeare's own classical borrowings. This method might point to the presence in Stoppard's play of more modern readings of classical drama (and drama in general) inaccessible to the Bard but not to Stoppard; it can also reflect on shared points of historical context between antiquity and (post-) modernity (from personal ones to broader cultural issues), and to the tradition(s) of literary comedy in general, especially those aspects of modern comedy's relationship to ancient comedy which might be more visible in Stoppard than in Shakespeare's comedies. As these rather comprehensive keywords might suggest, I am by no means interested in mere *Quellenforschung* (if I was, I might as well have written an e-mail to Sir Tom and asked what he in fact *used* for *R&G*) – instead, I am interested in *how* and *why* these parallels *work* in his text as well as they do in my reading.² I am also very much aware what an immense cultural distance lies between Stoppard and Plautus: I know I sometimes pair up phenomena

¹ Another thing I shall omit to some extent, apart from most of the Shakespearean connection, is the influence of absurdist drama, especially Samuel Beckett (whose *Waiting for Godot* is an essential source-text for *R&G*). For this article, I think it will suffice to refer to him in passing or in footnotes when relevant. For more on their relationship, see e. g. Sales (1988: 139–150), who finds Stoppard's play a less dark, more accessible rewriting (or even parody) of *Waiting for Godot*.

² Maybe I could have even found a better comic parallel to Stoppard from antiquity, and maybe some of my points would work just as well with other ancient comedians, but I chose Plautus and I do believe (as I shall argue) that he was a good choice – his unique combination of various sources, I think, is a point in itself. Here is the place where I must excuse myself for the third thing I will not do: paying comprehensive attention to *what* exactly Plautus got from *where* exactly – that would be an immense task, most of which has been already done anyway. My main concern here is *how* he uses and configures what he borrows, as this is much more relevant to Stoppard's text. See Fraenkel (2007) for a lot more on these issues.

as “motivic matches” that are clearly different in *origin* at first sight. Still, differences of supposed “message” do not rule out the possibility of the parallel between their “form” (which, I believe, is not necessarily “skin deep”, especially not on stage) and their theatrical use (cf. Fraenkel 2007: 280).

One of the shared contexts which might immediately justify finding certain Plautine parallels in Stoppard is that they both manage to float in the space between their respective cultures’ high-brow and popular culture – they both write popular comedies, which a little later turn out to have a rather nuanced side to them. Similarly, both are more or less self-taught, but (most of the time) easily make a living out of their writing (Segal 1987: 1 and *RE* s.v. Plautus; Delaney 2001), and their texts are also capable of the eventual shift from the popular stage to the learned library.

For Stoppard, this popular aspect is evident in his screenplays for numerous popular films, from experimental to blockbuster, (Delaney 2001: 1–9). *R&G* is no exception from this point of view:³ due to its metatheatrical parody or “exposure”⁴ of Shakespeare, and its quite digestible approach to the theatre of the absurd (in comparison with, say, Beckett – see Sales 1988: 139–150 and Fleming 2001: 49 and 51), the play was an instant success, and not only in sophisticated circles, (Delaney 2001: 30 and Fleming 2001: 48). This is even truer of the author’s own filmed version of *R&G*, which seems to work in an even more audience-friendly way, (Fleming 2001: 51–52).

In the case of Plautus, one might think that the strong religious connections of Roman theatre simply exclude a profit-oriented operation comparable to modern popular entertainment, but this seems to be a modern, (post-) Christian understanding of the situation: business was not out of question at Roman religious festivals, even if it was kept decently indirect. While the organisation of *ludi* was the duty of the *aediles* towards the public, and admission to the plays was indeed free for everyone, playwrights and troupe leaders were still independent businesspeople, who had to establish enough

³ From others, it might be – see Fleming (2001: 48).

⁴ Metatheatricality of various sorts is also one of the most striking shared traits of Stoppard and Plautus, as it is evident in the case of a play on (at least) another play like *R&G* (Fleming 2001: 49) and as it is articulated by Slater in his book on Plautus (1985). This second book is also important as it contains the one and only scholarly comparison of my two authors to date (as far as I know), and even this one is only half a footnote long (169) – but I absolutely agree with its suggestion that from some points of view, theatre (and especially meta-theatre) had come full circle between my two authors. Cf. Slater (1985: 177) and Fraenkel (2007: 259 – 264) on how a similar “full circle” existed between the bombastic and subtly meta-dramatic nature of Old Comedy, and the more refined and “illusory” New Comedy – a process which would be reversed, if temporarily and sometimes *ad absurdum* (according to Fraenkel), by Plautus.

popularity with the audience to keep them in the theatre (nothing physical or customary kept them from going over to see other attractions), and thus, to solicit mutually fruitful contracts with the *aediles* for future festivals. Judged by what we know, Plautus and his people were not the ones who would lose an audience to tightrope walkers or boxers, see Segal (1987: esp. 1–3); Marshall (2006: 20–31, esp. 21; and 83–86).

Another common point may be their shared social outlook of bordering on being a foreigner to the cultures they owe their success to – while both of them are proficient speakers of the language and competent inhabitants of its cultural space. The normative Roman name *Titus Maccius Plautus* is obviously a posthumous fabrication – it is stitched together from a common all-Italian *praenomen*, an elegant Latin surname termination (*-ius*) glued to a name of the Italian comic stock character *Maccus*, and then, the possibly even more ironic hypercorrection of another stock character *Plotus*' name, which might either refer to a kind of dog, or to a flat-footed person (Dér 1989: 24–26 and *RE* s.v. PLAUTUS), along with all biographical data on Plautus). We know he used the latter two names when referring to himself in plays, but we are quite unlikely to ever find out what name his mother called him back home in Umbria. Something like Titus might even be right, if we are lucky.

Similarly, Sir Tom Stoppard was born Tomáš Straußler in Zlín, Moravia, into a secular Jewish family, who, after having to leave the country in 1939, lived in various parts of the British Empire. With the death of his father, his adoption by his stepfather Kenneth Stoppard, and their moving to England, he virtually became a model English schoolboy in a few years – by that time, he had even lost his native competence of Czech. This “silence”, however, was often broken by his stepfather, reminding him in tense moments that it was him who “made him British” by giving him his name – a gift he would later consider withdrawing when his stepson managed to discover and embrace a wider portion of his non-British heritage (biographical data from the Guardian interview from 2008 and Delaney 2001: 25–26). Stoppard himself, although noting how strictly unconscious it is, does acknowledge the tremendous effect of this problem of names and unstable identities on his writing. In his words:

My mother married again and my name was changed to my stepfather's when I was about eight years old. This I didn't care one way or another about; but then it occurred to me that in practically everything I had written there was something about people getting each other's names wrong, usually in a completely gratuitous way, nothing to do with character or plot.

Delaney (2001: 25–26).

These data do not *prove* or *support* anything – satirical narrators and comic implied authors are quite likely to pose as outsiders even if they are in fact not⁵ –, but they bring to mind that maybe all this is one of the reasons why both authors' heroes are quite often concerned about their names and affiliations.

With regard to Plautus, this might be what makes him embrace the Saturnalian ethic of Roman theatre so well, which by definition favours swapping identities according to the Carnival principle “to each man someone else's”, (Segal 1987: esp. 15–69 and 99–136). In strong parallelism with the inversion- and revelry-laden nature of these Roman festivities, *palliata*'s slaves almost always become masters (gaining temporary freedom), while masters are shown as non-masters, that is, slaves and foreigners (responsibility off their backs), just as gods sometimes become people; for all this, see e. g. Fraenkel (2007: esp. 165–172); Segal (1987 and 2001); and Parker (2001: esp. 134–137).⁶ Belonging to this tradition, Plautus' comedy tends to speak a lot about aliases, disguises, lost children, and in general, about lost and recovered identities (as much as it loves “travesties” in the literary sense of the word – more on that later). One of the most striking examples of this is *Amphitruo*, where Jupiter and Mercury are capable of not only feigning but actually *taking away* a person's identity so much that they have none left, especially if that person is a slave:

MERCURIUS *quid nunc? vincon argumentis te non esse Sosiam?*
 SOSIA *tu negas med esse? M. quid ego ni negem, qui egomet siem?*
 S. *per Iovem iuro med esse neque me falsum dicere.*
 M. *at ego per Mercurium iuro tibi Iovem non credere;*
nam iniurato scio plus credet mihi quam iurato tibi.
 S. *quis ego sum saltem, si non sum Sosia? te interrogo.*

(*Amphitruo* 432–437)⁷

⁵ Cf. with the whole phenomenon of the *palliata*.

⁶ In accordance with my introductory remarks, I will not settle for detecting comic *topoi* as the explanation, or even as the *meaning* of such situations in Plautus, because I believe that a conventional possibility does not rule out genuine interest in the very same timeless problems which are treated more evidently in “modern” literature *to our eyes* – on the contrary, it might even prove the lasting existence of such an interest. This is also true *vice versa*: even if we see in *R&G*, how motifs like this are shaped by 20th-century philosophy, they can still be *funny* – see Stoppard as quoted by Fleming again (2001: 51) – and they can look exactly the same on stage as their ancient, “silly” counterparts – see my word-by-word parallels later on.

⁷ Plautine *loci* are going to be referred to using the title and the line numbers customary in Classics, while for modern ones, I am going to use the title of the play (sometimes abbreviated) and page numbers from the edition specified in my bibliography.

MERCURIUS What now? Have I persuaded you that you are not Sosia?
 SOSIA You deny that I am *me*? M. Why not, if I know who *I am*?
 S. By Jove, I swear I am *me*, I don't lie!
 M. By Mercury, Jove shall not believe you;
 he trusts me more unsworn than you sworn.
 S. But then I must ask you *who I am*, if not Sosia? (translation mine)

By the former's sheer puzzlement at the world and the latter's more structured outlook (and by the names in front of their lines), Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are quite easily distinguishable characters for the reader, (Fleming 2001: 267), but in the intra-diegetical world, they themselves never become quite sure which of them is which. At one point, they resort to devise a game of "catching" each other "unawares" to try and decide who is who – and they never succeed in doing so in the course of the play:

GUIL (*seriously*) What's your name?
 ROS What's yours?
 [...]

 GUIL (*sharply*) Rosencrantz!
 ROS (*jumps*) What?
 (*Hamlet goes. Triumph dawns on them, they smile.*)
 GUIL There! How was that?
 ROS Clever!
 [...]

 GUIL (*snaps*) Guildenstern!
 ROS (*jumps*) What?
 (*He is immediately crestfallen, Guil is disgusted.*)
 GUIL Consistency is all I ask! (36–37)

When in doubt, maybe an ever better strategy to recover people's identities is digging into their pasts and trying to reconstruct how they have become what they are at the present – both when only memory itself is at stake and when one's civic pedigree is badly in need to be verified. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in fact try to reconstruct their formative past in an iconic scene of the play. They ask each other of their oldest memories – and again, as with their names, they fail to go any further beyond their relevance to the plot of *Hamlet*, the minute when they "were sent for" – as they say – by Claudius; cf. Nyuszty (2010: 13). Apart from the motivic match (even the sub-motif of deficient information also about one's *own* identity is *there* in Plautus, viz. Sosia above), there is also a direct textual parallel to Plautus here: the iconic line of this game ("What's the first thing you

remember?” – 6) is actually a word-by-word echo of Plautus’ *Menaechmi* (*quid longissime meministi* – 1111), where – as quite often in Hellenistic and Roman comedy – the identity of the heroes (the two *Menaechmi*) is restored by their knowledge of their original persons’ biography:⁸ the only real solution for that problem in a world of piracy and the slave trade. But without such opportunities, no one is entitled to a name and a safe identity, not even protagonists.

Still, for all that, these slaves and captives and nonentities “caught up in the action” (*R&G* 14) *are* protagonists. As during the aforementioned Saturnalian carnivals – in Plautus’ case, in fact, during such a carnival – roles of slaves and masters might be reversed on stage, even if only in a controlled manner; see Segal (1987) and Fraenkel (2007) again. Mirroring the festivities, free youngsters and merry old citizens can get rid of their responsibilities already by their Greek stage dress (e. g. Segal 1987: 33–41; Parker 2011: 131) and sometimes by another layer of misunderstanding and/or trickery, while clever slaves, whose cunning can help the young master toward his goals can be lauded as *fathers*, *patrons* or even *gods* – all this in a society where the authority of fathers, gods, and military or social superiors overrides practically all other ethical maxims; see Segal (1987: esp. 99–136); Marshall (2006: 171). Just as the two Shakespearean nobodies can, as Segal has already noticed in his seminal book on Plautus (1987: esp. 103ff.), receive varied (if sometimes hesitant) flattery from their king and his wife. And then, later on, they can even have their own play – in which the inversion of high-prestige and low-prestige characters is implicit in both the situation of being “sent for” and the quasi-mythological storyline of the Shakespearean play, about which each and every spectator has heard, and in which everyone knows who belongs to the “main cast” and who does not.

There is something else about Saturnalian time. As the time of all types of celebration and ritual, Saturnalian time is another type of time, when ordinary time stops, and a type of time that is also circular, as there is a point of each and every year when the river of time jumps into another riverbed in which it flows briefly before returning into its normal run. This “elasticity” of time is often articulated in Plautus, (see Marshall 2006: 174–184, esp. 176, quoting Duckworth for the expression, and 203), as it is in *Amphitruo* where time does indeed stop on the level of the plot to provide Jupiter with

⁸ This is in striking parallel with the long process by which Tom Stoppard (in his own words) “turned out to be Jewish” in his sixties – it was only after the changes in the Eastern Bloc when he learned that all his grandparents were Jewish (he had known about one out of four) and that a lot of his relatives perished in the Shoah; see Delaney (2001: 34–35, with citations).

enough time to seduce Alcmena. This however, does not prevent us from understanding the motif also on a metatheatrical level:

SOSIA ...*credo ego hac noctu Nocturnum obdormivisse ebrium.*

[...]

ita statim stant signa, neque nox quoquam concedit die.

(*Amphitruo* 272; 276)

SOSIA I think the Evening Star's got wasted and overslept tonight.

[...]

The stars just stopped and night won't give place to day. (translation mine)

Something very similar is also highlighted at the very beginning of Stoppard's play,⁹ when in a game of heads and tails, the two gentlemen cannot understand why it is heads for the entire game. One of the solutions they come up with is to declare that "time has stopped dead". This is a double-edged line again. On the plot level, it is just one of the two gentlemen's ideas to solve a riddle, but on a meta-dramatic level (as a speech act), it might as well be a recognition of time stopping, or at least *changing*. Guildenstern might be saying it to himself (as a reflection), to Rosencrantz (who does not seem to be paying much attention) – or he might be speaking to the audience, as an introductory gesture comparable to the similar prologues (or even more similar quasi-prologues) in Plautus, which facilitate the ritual shift into the "elastic time" and topsy-turvy society of the play (Slater 1985: 151–153). Later, even more closely mirroring the mentioned Plautine lines, they also try to guess what time it is and which way the wind blows from the movement of the sun (49–50): almost needless to say, unsuccessfully (as they cannot see the sun from the stage, obviously). The circularity of the Eliadean eternal return of theatre (which is also made fun of in Plautus' joking references to different performances, e. g. *Menaechmi* 72–76) is also hinted at in Stoppard: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's last dialogue contains an out-of-place reference to "knowing it better next time" (117).¹⁰

Another sign of this alternative flow of time is the prevailing of not only slaves over masters, but also of diction over action (even more than it is in-

⁹ This is simultaneously a reference to a line in Beckett (29), which (along with the theme in general in *Godot*) I nevertheless read as meaning something slightly different. There, being static and repetitive seems to be more of an inherent trait of time itself, while Rosencrantz and Guildenstern actually do meet "their Godot", Hamlet – which does nothing to make the absurdities cease; see Nyusztay (2010: 13) and Sales (1988: 144).

¹⁰ From a philological point of view, this might also be connected to an earlier version of the ending (later deleted by Stoppard), which is usually read as a symbolic resumption of the play (Fleming 2001: 51 and 266, with citations).

evitable in *any* type of theatre – see Fraenkel (2007) on Plautus’ pleonastic poetry). As one might expect in a still predominantly oral society, Plautus’ plays tend to focus a lot on talking, and when there is some action, that also tends to be verbal – be it spoken iambic dialogue or *canticum* and *recitativo* sung to the accompaniment of the *tibicen*; for these three categories, see Marshall (2006: 204–205). I am thinking especially about the classical ῥαγών and *flagitatio* which most of the time are included *instead of* actual brawling and *flagellatio* (Segal 1987: 141, cf. 101; Parker 2011: 132–137). These ritualised types of argument between antagonists in fact form the most important “action” of the plays; cf. Fraenkel (2007: 271–272).¹¹ In Stoppard’s play, two thousand years after the days when such a verbal duel goes without saying, the two Danish gentleman play something that is akin to, but even more ritualised than the ῥαγών.¹² They play a game following the rules of tennis – as shown right away by the Anglo-French expression “love” (from *l’oeuf* ‘the egg’ i.e. zero, i.e. no points), which is specific to tennis (as opposed to, e.g. the Latinate “nil” meaning the same in football) – but with asking a question instead of a serve, and answering with another question in place of returning the ball:

ROS Could we play at questions?
 GUIL What good would that do?
 ROS Practice!
 GUIL Statement! One-love.
 ROS Cheating!
 GUIL How?
 ROS I hadn’t started yet.
 GUIL Statement. Two-love.
 ROS Are you counting that?
 GUIL What?
 ROS Are you counting that?
 GUIL Foul! No repetitions. Three-love. First game to... (33)

¹¹ Even if they are not the most “active” elements physically: those must have been the – forever lost – components of dance and gesture (Marshall 2006: 167–170). Here one must be especially aware of the *caveat* of immense temporal and cultural distance (Marshall 2006: 81–82), survived only by the texts themselves (more or less).

¹² This is also related to the games in *Waiting for Godot* (Sales 1988: 139–150, esp. 140 and 149), but as usual, the Stoppardian take on the motif seems to be less far-fetched and arbitrary than the original (cf. Nyusztay *ibidem* and Sales 1988: 139–150), especially by its stronger ritualisation and the added social aspect of a “poor man’s version”.

Tennis was a game in use in late Renaissance courts, including the one we picture in *Hamlet*.¹³ These people might be familiar with such an elegant pastime, but in this tense situation (“on mission”), they have to play it with what they are entitled to at the moment: words. Also, this metaphor is very much like the frequent meta-dramatic jokes in Plautus (see Slater 1985): it exposes the sheer symbolicity and rituality of *all* theatre.

There is ample space for pointing out this artificiality in both *corpora*: they both operate between theatrical worlds and make much use of juxtaposing contrasting generic, cultural, and thematic elements. Plautus’ plays are said to be Greek in origin. They are set in Greek cities and feature characters who have Greek names and wear Greek clothing. At the same time, however, the whole phenomenon of his work is unmistakably Roman, from the social questions of Roman life to the detailed description of typical Italian pork dishes (paradoxically prepared by supposedly “Greek” cooks for a “Greek feast”). And, most importantly, as demonstrated above, it is heavily imbued with the spirit of the *Saturnalia*; see Fraenkel (2007: esp. 165–172, 398–201) and Segal (1987: 34–36). Most of the time, this being “Greek” for Plautus and his primary audience must have been scarcely more than a (deeply Roman) way to escape what they usually were – that is, Romans – and getting rid of all the *pietas*, *gravitas*, and *duritia* which come with that, (Segal 1987: 33–69 and Slater 1985: 153).

Stoppard engages in a similar type of contamination by singling out two minor characters from Shakespeare (taken to be “classical”), and sticking them into a radically different, strongly post-classical theatrical world based on the work of Beckett, and (as I am arguing here) paradoxically bordering on the pre- or sub-classical – for example, on the archaic and popular comedy of Plautus. Such a decidedly twisted situation is very frequently reflected on in the play (as it is in Plautus), by using and abusing the similar device of Shakespeare’s play, the Players inside the play who reflect upon the nature of Shakespearean tragedy:¹⁴

PLAYER We’re more of the love, blood, and rhetoric school. [...] Well, I can do you blood and love without the rhetoric, and I can do you blood and rhetoric without the love, and I can do you all three concurrent or consecutive, but I can’t do you love and rhetoric without the blood. Blood is compulsory – they’re all blood, you see. (24)

¹³ E. g. King Henry: What treasure, uncle? – Exeter: Tennis-balls, my liege. [...] – *Henry V*, I. 2.

¹⁴ Cf. this with Slater’s understanding (1985: esp. 168–178) of Plautus’ trickster slaves as “on-stage playwrights”, who – in addition to the inversion by which they are in control of the plot – engage in a scripted and simulated version of stage improvisation.

Such reflection on the world(s) of the text might seem to be something exclusively modern – but, as has now been recognised by readers of Hellenistic literature, it is definitely not. Genre-conscious self-reference and self-parody are as integral a part of Plautine theatre as of the theatre of the absurd. Plautus often alludes to his “borrowing” from Greek dramatists (e. g. *Demophilus scripsit, Maccus vortit barbare – Asinaria* 11), the irreality and temporariness of his theatrical world (e. g. *Menaechmi* 72–76 again), the conventional and thus quite transparent “Greekness” of the *palliata* (e. g. *Stichus* 446–8 and Parker (2001: 131) *ad loc.*), which often exposes the unmistakably Roman social situations and Italian dramaturgy at work behind it, the latter can also serve as a butt to jokes: see Slater (1985: esp. 21–24). Although we are not surprised by how Plautus is any more (due to his status of a classic), his is still a theatrical world which converts Greek plays’ plots (often more than one at a time) into Latin-language festive plays that still profess to picture Greek contexts but are full of references to Roman society and ritual, and in addition are obviously sifted through non-Roman Italian creative forces and conventions (e.g. Maccus himself). These constituents, if we force ourselves to look at them from some distance, do not really seem to make more sense together than to write a slightly more digestible post-Beckettian comedy, (see Sales 1988: 139–150; Fleming 2001: 49) on two Shakespearean extras. This game with genres and contexts is very much like those other games on the plot level: in fact, both authors like grabbing elements of a tradition and cramming them into the disguise of another tradition (just like one person in another’s place), and then poking fun at how preposterous they look, sharing their amusement with the audience.

In addition to all this, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tend to speak a very strange language: when they speak their Shakespearean lines, they use proficient Shakespearean English, but when they speak to each other, they use a more modern idiom, and often ponder upon the old-fashioned utterances of the other characters, e. g. “Draw him on to pleasures – glean what afflicts him!” – 31; also cf. Fleming (2001: 53–54). This brings to mind another play of Stoppard, where schoolboys of a fictive nation stage an adaptation of *Hamlet* in English. The language of their country is made up of English words, but their meanings are scrambled – hence the abundance of four-letter words, for example, in the schoolmaster’s introductory speech (*Dogg’s Hamlet*, 160 and Sales 1988: 126–130). Actually, the only thing we understand from the speech happens to be the heavily over- and misused Latin quotation *mens sana in corpore sano*.

This reflection upon the dire arbitrariness of language is not missing from Plautus either. Near the ending of his *Poenulus*, the uncle of the eponymous

Carthaginian youth enters the scene with a monologue that is supposed to be in Punic, and of which a casual reader only understands the Greek names:

HANNO *Yth alonim ualonuth sicorathi symacom syth
chy mlachthi in ythmum ysthyalm ych-ibarcu mysehi
li pho caneth yth bynuthi uad edin byn ui
bymarob syllohom alonim ubymysyrthohom
byth limmoth ynnochu thuulech-antidamas chon
ys sidobrim chifel yth chyl is chon chen liful
yth binim ys dybur ch-innocho-tnu agorastocles
yth emanethi ky chirs aelichot sithi nasot
bynu yid ch-illuch ily gubulim lasibithim
bodi aly thera ynnynu yslym min cho-th iusim [...]*

(*Poenulus* 930–939;
emphases mine)

Whether the monologue is nonsense or in actual Punic, the primary audience of the play did not understand much of it: it is very much like the schoolmaster’s speech in Stoppard. If they did have the chance to get some of its meaning, then it is comparable to the Elizabethan lines of *R&G*, or another play of Stoppard, *Travesties*, where the stage versions of Lenin and his wife Krupskaya are quoted with English phonetic approximation – that is, to some extent, their words are rendered gibberish (even when, in the printed version, translated in brackets) –, and where the English nonsense poem of an on-stage Tristan Tzara happens to make sense in French (Zinman 2001: 123 with citations):

TZARA Eel ate enormous appletzara
key dairy chef’s hat he’ll learn oomparah!
Ill raced alas whispers kill later nut east,
noon avuncular ill day Clara!
[...]

NADYA Vylodya!

LENIN Shto takoya? (*What is it?*)

NADYA Bronsky pishol...

(*Travesties* 18–19.)

Another important shared theme of the two *corpora* is the problem of being exposed to and unprotected towards the world. That is a quite constant undertone of Plautus’ plays: the *servus* and even the free characters, however successful they are at times, are always in immediate danger of being beaten up badly, separated from their loved ones, or even killed, (Parker 2001).¹⁵

¹⁵ This, however, does not render the plays “serious”: that would kill off the ambiguo-

This is most strikingly underlined in his least comic comedy, the *Captivi*, where in addition to the solemn, sad tone of the whole play the disaster is very near when it is finally avoided.

Plautine protagonists are constantly at the mercy of sheer luck (and their fathers and masters) – as are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (within the play) to the royal will¹⁶ and (outside it) the even more merciless will of the Shakespearean plot¹⁷ – the point of their existence there is, it seems to be “sent for”, (Nyusztay 2010: 13; Fleming 2001: 53) and killed offstage. In Stoppard’s rendering of the story, that off-stage moment of disappearance or death is on-stage and reflected upon – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern talk about it before they disappear (116–117).

With that in mind, it is rather unsurprising that both authors tend to push the “classic” boundaries between tragedy and comedy. It is true that, to cite Stoppard’s own words (from the 2008 Guardian interview), the possibilities of “laughter through unshed tears”, that is, the blending of the two genres was already explored before Plautus (e. g. the comic messengers, guards and slaves of Greek tragedy, or plays like Euripides’ *Alcestis*); but his stress on the relationship of slaves and masters actually starts a new chapter of this fusion (see Fraenkel (2007) again) – this problematisation inherently lends dire undertones to even to the most furious farce (Parker 2001). After all, the coinage of the word *tragicomedy* firmly belongs to Plautus (see the prologue to *Amphitruo*, esp. 50–63): even if, on the primary level, it refers to the the less novel mixing of low-prestige farce with mythological stories, it still fulfils its modern meaning too, at the same time, as it opens a play with one of the most tragic characters in Roman comedy, the desperate Alcumena (see Marshall 2005: 192; cf. Euripides’ *Alcestis* again). If one takes a look at Roman civilisation in general, this might make more sense: the

ity which is necessary for therapeutic laughter to take place – cf. Segal (1987: esp. 13–19), quoting Freud and Grotjahn; and Marshall’s handling of the topic (2006: 185–192).

¹⁶ This twofold exposure involving an actual social class conflict is, on the one hand, a step away from Beckett’s text, where all of the protagonists are visibly underclass and thus have no “class” as compared to each other – and on the other hand, it is also a step *towards* the tradition of comic *social* inversion, a tradition to which Plautus firmly belongs.

¹⁷ It is also worth pointing out that the Plautine stage also has something like this: the “will” (i. e. preset behaviour) of a mask/stock character (whom the audience knows quite well) does provide opportunities quite exactly like the ever-present, inevitable “will” of Shakespeare (excuse the pun) and his universally known story of *Hamlet* in *R&G* – this is what Stoppard is playing with all the time. Plautus also makes use of this with his frequent meta-dramatic jokes, especially the (more or less literally) “speaking to his mask” type of them; see Slater (1985: esp. 21–24) again.

hermetic division between tragic and comic would be of as little relevance to those cultural circumstances as to the twentieth century and its theatre of the absurd. One only needs to think of the strong macabre connotations of Roman Bacchic imagery (surviving well into the Christian era) and, for example, the fact that on the funerals of Roman senators (and later, even emperors) it was not unusual to have a more or less (often rather less) serious impersonation of the deceased by professional actors, often their own favourites, (Sumi 2002: 559–585).¹⁸

To sum things up, I believe, and hope I have been credibly arguing, that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is (among other things) something of a modernised Saturnalian play, and it can be read quite fruitfully in parallel with Plautus' plays due to the pronounced similarities of their theatrical worlds. These include their (of course, not identical, but still similar) inversions of high- and low-prestige characters, their generous use of time, their meta-dramatic and at the same time popular nature, some of the overall themes of their comedy, and, maybe most importantly, their shared tragicomic flavour.

Of course, as I have already implied, there are numerous differences. For example, the mentioned "tragicomic flavour" is immensely more prominent in Stoppard than in Plautus, perhaps with the exception of *Captivi*; cf. Marshall (2006: 185–192). Or, if we think of the subject protagonists whose fate both playwrights represent, they are not the primary focal figures for the mainly non-slave primary audience of Roman theatre¹⁹ – unlike in the case of Stoppard's play, where they are likely to stand for "all of us". The Plautine clever slave quite often functions like a mere extension of the stock "young master" figure, (Parker 2001: 135–136), with whom the (free) spectator usually identifies, and who can do things (or get things done) that he normally cannot while he is aided by or disguised as the non-Roman character like the slave or the foreigner.²⁰ Also, obviously, the particular force impending on these protagonists, and from which they lack protection, is quite different: although there are overlaps, in Plautus, that force is the actual order of society, while for Stoppard, it is much more the text of

¹⁸ Cf. Terence's plays performed on occasion of Aemilius Paullus' funeral, qtd. by Dér (1989: 126).

¹⁹ Be this a simplification of the composition of the audience, it is still likely to go back to Plautus's own time, and indeed to Plautus himself; see Marshall (2006: 77–79).

²⁰ The proto-absurdist doubling of the focal character see (Nyusztay 2010: 24 and 175–177 on this in Shakespeare and Stoppard) is even more obvious in the latter version, as in the case of the twin *Menaechmi* – it is all gain, no pain for the "foreigner" brother (Segal 2001).

Shakespeare – cf. again Nyusztay (2010: 13) and Fleming (2001: 60–65) with citations.

Another obvious difference might be the loss of ritual context. Still, the secular, but most of the times highly formal and often socially meaningful modern ritual of “going to the theatre” must be taken into consideration. This is in effect with any kind of theatre, but especially if it is Shakespeare, with his increasingly old-fashioned language, which accidentally happens to be even *biblical* because of the King James Bible (1611), roughly contemporary with him. Stoppard certainly does take all this into consideration (as does Plautus in his own context – cf. again Slater 1985: 169): he is a full-fledged absurdist from the point of view of playing with the presuppositions of his implied audience (e. g. by breaking the fourth wall so often or by making his protagonists know a lot less about *Hamlet*, its world and even its language than the spectators themselves).

But then again, where do the similarities come from? They seem rooted not only in the intermediate texts of William Shakespeare – from whose *Hamlet* the problem of servant and master, for example, is almost²¹ totally absent – but also in the societies and cultures they are working in and dealing with. From such a point of view, our (post)modernity can be viewed as an extended Hellenistic era, with its mass wars which yield tragic and/or curious life stories and its inevitably pluralistic world of ideas. What connects them, however, through all the centuries between, is an often latent, but definitely ever-present tradition of Carnival-inspired comedy. Thus, in my reading, the most important feature of Stoppard’s (conscious or incidental) invention seem to be the pairing up of a frightening late 20th-century view of the human condition (usually paired up with the absurd as a matter of course) with a quasi-classic, but even more importantly archaic and popular breed of comedy, which, if one goes beyond its surface, is as self-reflexive, and as *bricolage* as what we call the theatre of the absurd, and which *does* indeed have some of its roots in similar frames of existence. This means a kind of return to the beginnings of the European comic tradition for the expression of “modern” content which had been thought to be incompatible with the same tradition’s more contemporary forms (like Shakespearean comedy). It is the (deliberate or unconscious) recognition of how long and diverse the tradition is and how well-applicable some of its previous stages can be to what *we* want to say *now*: maybe some ancients were a bit more modern from some points of view than we would have thought. This is how

²¹ If one does not focus on the fate of Polonius and his family, which, although it does constitute an important layer of the text, is by no means the main concern of the plot – and even if it was, if there is a “trickster” in *Hamlet*, it is the eponymous prince himself.

pre- and post-classical, pre- and post-Aristotelian, pre- and post-highbrow turn out to be natural matches for Stoppard: in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, the transition between these alternatives can be so seamless that it might take an article like this to try and put a finger on it.²²

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²² This, from the point of view of literary history, might raise the question of Stoppard's relationship to Classics. Although I find the question of authorial intention to be of secondary importance, cf. Fleming (2001: 50 with citations), it might be worth noting that as a person (in addition to being an avid reader, judged by his writing), he did have O-levels in Greek and Latin, and visited some notably Classical spots in the Mediterranean a few times, e. g. Capri – Delaney (2001: 27). As a writer (apart from other learned allusions), he has also written a play, *The Invention of Love*, about the famous Classicist A. E. Housman, see Delaney (2001: 9).

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