Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead.
by Tom Stoppard, presented by the Boston Shakespeare Company.

Imagine how you would feel being thrust into the middle of Hamlet, with all the scheming, plotting, and spying, but without the benefit of knowing what was going on or why you were really there.

Imagine a comedy about two of "the most marginal figures in all of Shakespeare," whom are thrust into such a situation, and who are often so indistinguishable that not only do other people have difficulty telling them apart, but also they themselves have trouble determining who is Rosencrantz and who is Guildenstern.

Imagine the Boston Shakespeare Company, whose interpretation of the great tragedy Hamlet turned it into a comedy, performing a real comedy.

If you can imagine all that, then you can imagine a hilarious and absurd play entitled Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, written by Tom Stoppard.

Stoppard's play treats the two friends from Hamlet who are put in a situation they really don't understand, surrounded by people who know more than they do, and eventually sent to a fate that they perhaps do not deserve. The title characters wonder who they are, why they are, and what will happen to them.

Such a framework naturally permits Stoppard to comment on many philosophical questions, and, of course, on Shakespeare's masterpiece.

But even if you aren't a philosopher or a fan of Shakespeare, you will want to see this play, because, above all, it is very funny. While it does become somewhat more serious and philosophical as the action progresses, act one is as funny as any comedy you will see this year.

Stoppard skillfully combines slapstick, satire, and clever dialogue to make this an extraordinary comical play. In one brilliantly written sequence, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern play a word game whose object is to only ask questions, and respond to questions with other questions. The loser is the first person to make a statement that is, the first person who answers a question loses. It is entirely fitting that we are later told that the perceptive Hamlet is able to beat the constantly confused title characters at this game without even knowing that he is playing it.

The bits of Hamlet that make it into Stoppard's comedy are played for all the humor possible, and all of Shakespeare's characters become caricatures. This helps explain why the BSC turned its production of Hamlet into a comedy, especially considering that most of the major roles in both plays have been double-cast.

Fortunately for Stoppard's play, the BSC's cast is very strong, with excellent performances from Mark Cartier as Guildenstern, Craig Calman as Rosencrantz, and Courtenay Vance as The Player. The title characters were extremely funny, though I personally thought Rosencrantz was a little funnier... or was it Guildenstern who was funnier?

Joseph Romm