ROSENCRANTZ AND GUIDELSTERN ARE DEAD
Written and directed by Tom Stoppard.
Starring Gary Oldman, Tim Roth and Richard Dreyfuss.
Now playing at the Loew's Nickelodeon and the Loews-Harvard Square Cinemas.

By DEBORAH A. LEVINSON

Tom Stoppard's existential masterpiece, Rosencrantz and Guidelstern are Dead, has finally come to the big screen. It's not a great film, but it is a good one, and definitely worth seeing. This is, if you've read the play. Having read the play five or six times and seen it staged twice, I was adequately prepared to see the film. If you haven't read Rosencrantz and Guidelstern, though, you may not have the fullest idea what's going on.

Who are these two insignificant clowns, anyway? Why do they keep getting themselves mixed up? Who are the scruffy actors who keep appearing? And what exactly does this whole thing have to do with Hamlet?

Actually, the play has less to do with Hamlet than it does with life, death and one's place in the universe. Stoppard takes the two less important characters in Hamlet and shows the play from their point of view — their confusion, their bewilderment and their utter inability to cope with their situation.

Gary Oldman is Rosencrantz and Nancy and Pick Up Your Ears, plays Rosencrantz, has a slightly dim -kicker-fascinated with the laws of the natural universe. The scene in which he takes an owl from a neighbor's window, a mushroom picker, and uses steam power to make it sit, soap, is priceless. Tim Roth plays Guidelstern, the prototype of the pair, and the one who is always probing for answers in the few, quiet 70 clean what affability, Hamlet.

Both actors are good in their roles. They resemble one another, always a plus in a play that demands that its major characters look almost like twins. They seemed to be having tremendous fun with their parts, especially in the hilarious Oraciones scene, where staged by Stoppard in a somewhat frenzied fashion.

Richard Dreyfuss is excellent as the Player, the leader of a troupe of low-class actors. Though the Player and his company have fallen on hard times — Guidelstern comments that they are nothing but "a comic pornographer and a raddle of prostitutes" — they have been invited to play The Murder of Georges at Belstone. Stoppard uses the Player as a foil for Rosencrantz and Guidelstern, a combination omniscient being and confessor, who utters such truths as "We're actors! We're the opposite of people!" and trips to keep the pair from being too confounded.

There's only one problem with Rosencrantz and Guidelstern (besides the uniformly murky lightings and Stoppard's substantial changes Stoppard made to his play in order to film it. On stage, once, the play takes a full three hours to present. The film is only two hours long and contains some small passages of new material. (One of the new scenes, in which Rosencrantz tries juggling, is quite funny.)

Due to time constraints, however, Stoppard cuts significant portions of the play. Half of act three, including the hilarious stage directions involving Hamlet dressed in a bikini, reclining behind a beach umbrella, is gone. The refrain of complete i.e., "Consistency is all we ask . . . give us this day our daily flesh," is gone, and the line "Fear! The crack that might flood your brain with light," is truncated to just "Fear!" — an enormous difference in tone and meaning.

These are criticisms from one who knows the play all too well. Someone who has, neither read nor seen the play will not notice the cuts in the dialogue and may not catch the subtleties of the verbal exchanges between Rosencrantz, Guidelstern and the Player. You might understand the film without this prior knowledge; then again, you might not. Still, if you want to see Rosencrantz and Guidelstern are Dead badly enough, the film is easily worth the extra $4 for a copy of the play.

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