

'Rosencrantz and
Guildenstern'
alive and well
8/4/99
By Neal Ross

My one regret in writing this review for "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" is that there are only five local showings left before the production, like the title characters, drift into oblivion.

But don't let my bad timing keep you from seeing this outstanding Sonoma Valley Shakespeare Festival presentation of Tom Stoppard's early masterpiece, playing through Sept. 11 at the Gundlach Bunschu Winery.

Stoppard, familiar to mainstream audiences as the author of last year's multi-Oscar-winning film "Shakespeare In Love," penned this gut-chilling 1966 comedy about two minor characters from Shakespeare's "Hamlet" – childhood friends of the tragic prince who exist only as a plot device.

The pair's behind-the-scenes explorations of life, death and the nature of reality – do we exist only to die? How do we know? And what do we do in the meantime? – have made this play an intellectual cult classic, along the lines of Becket's "Waiting for Godot" or Sartre's "No Exit." But don't be fooled – far from a dry discourse, the play crackles with humor and deep emotion.

Director John Vissman's bare-stage approach perfectly captures the surreality of the proceedings, which largely take place in an indeterminate space outside of "Hamlet's" main action. Vissman's surgically-precise master's touch is perhaps most evident during one exquisitely chilling moment that, alone, is worth the price of admission.

Brenden Elwood and Chris Schloemp shine respectively as the sweetly naive Rosencrantz and the desperately philosophical Guildenstern, both easily switching between Stoppard's modern English and Shakespeare's Elizabethan script. The energy between these two capable actors is simultaneously playful and intense – particularly during R&G's "Questions" game, where Elwood and Schloemp cagily circle through the hillside audience like reality-wrangling sumo wrestlers.

R&G's existential angst is offset by The Player, world-weary head of a wandering acting troupe. Ira Rose's brilliant, larger-than-life performance fills the stage, but without overwhelming Elwood or Schloemp – his seen-it-all counterpoint is at turns compassionate and mocking.

Space prohibits listing the rest of the able cast, who – some in dual and triple roles – flit in and out of the goings-on in near-faultless complement to the main players. Best Award In A Small Part, however, goes to Justin Oliphant as the wandering actor Alfred. Oliphant breathes real life into a three-line-plus-sobs part that a lesser artist would have mugged through.

Only one hazard marred the evening – our pre-play picnic dinner was buzzed by curious yellowjackets. I slew five with my drink-bottle before finishing my Caesar salad. Be warned – but don't let them keep you from an otherwise excellent entertainment.

"Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead" plays Aug. 15, 27 and 28, and Sept. 3 and 11 at the Gundlach Bunschu Winery, 2000 Denmark St., Sonoma. Curtain is at 7 p.m. Fridays, 6:30 Saturdays and Sundays; gates open an hour before to accommodate picnickers. Tickets are \$18 for general admission, \$10 for teens. Lawn seating only –

bring chairs or rent them at the theater, and take some warm clothing along as the hillside can be a bit chilly. For more information, call 575-3854 or click over to <http://www.sonomashakes.com>.