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**Hamlet's dopey bit players get a turn in the spotlight**

Tony-winning comedy plays at Heritage this weekend

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Hamlet may be the most melancholy tale in all of stage history, but the story behind the story, it seems, is full of yuks.

Proving the old theatre adage that there are no small parts, two of the Bard's most famous peripheral players finally get to take centre stage in their own story, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, which wraps up this weekend at the Heritage Theatre.

The play, a modern English re-imagining by acclaimed playwright Tom Stoppard, tells the tale of Hamlet's bewildered chums, who are summoned to Denmark by his mother and stepfather/uncle-- the Queen (Esther Jaciuk) and new-King (David Cairns) -- to try to suss out the cause of the prince's lingering depression.

This show has been kicking around since the mid-'60s, winning the Tony for Best Play in 1968. Those familiar with Shakespeare's play know that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are only seen in small snippets, appearing only long enough for the king to mix them up before sending them off to England with Hamlet, only to have their off-stage deaths announced in the final few lines of the Bard's play, giving birth to Stoppard's title.

Stoppard pokes fun at the lack of back story Shakespeare gave the two, with Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern unable to recall what they did before the opening scenes, having sprung fully-formed into Act 1.

The show has an underlying Waiting For Godot feel to it, as the boys hang about in the hope something will soon happen to resolve their stasis.

Along the way, they encounter a group of players (who will eventually also make their way to Elsinore, to add their own important turning point to the goings-on), various members of the royal family, and, of course, the sun in their little universe, Hamlet (Stratford veteran David Joseph Phillips) himself.

The pair, played with charm and impeccable comic timing by Christopher Morris and Alan Lee, turn passing time into an art form, spinning coins and waxing rhapsodic on the 'sometimes you're up, sometime you're down' school of philosophy and grilling each other with a game of questions, as these unwitting pawns slowly drift towards the inevitable.

Stoppard won an Oscar in 1998 for writing the film Shakespeare in Love, and the style of dialogue is much the same, clever at every turn, and often laugh-out-loud funny.

As with Shakespeare in Love, the audience knows the basic outline of the tale and where it all has to end up, but it is the gaps in between that provide the real entertainment.

The Heritage Theatre's production of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead is a real treat for theatre lovers, and an especially nice companion piece for those who caught the fine production of Hamlet at this year's Shakespeare in the Square festival.

It's also straightforward enough to be enjoyed by those who have never heard of Hamlet (as hard as that is to imagine), but who know what it is to be a small cog in the big machine.

The show includes two intermission.

The show runs Thursday to Saturday at 8 p.m. as well as Sunday at 2 p.m.

The Heritage Theatre is located at 84 Main St. N.

For more information, call 905-874-2800.

