Write a commentary of the following passage, paying particular attention to its main themes and to dramatic form.

Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*  
(*1966*)  
Act Two

GUILDENSTERN: Ah! I'd forgotten - you performed a dramatic spectacle by the wayside - a thing much thought of in the New Testament. How did yours compare as an impromptu?
PLAYER: Badly - neither witnessed nor reported.
GUIL: Yes, I'm sorry we had to miss it. I hope you didn't leave anything out - I'd be furious to think I didn't miss all of it.
(The PLAYER, progressively aggrieved, now bursts out.)
PLAYER: We can't look each other in the face! (Pause, more in control.) You don't understand the humiliation of it - to be tricked out of a single assumption, which makes our existence viable - that somebody is watching... The plot was two corpses gone before we caught sight of ourselves, stripped naked in the middle of nowhere and pouring ourselves down a bottomless well.
ROSENCRANTZ: Is that thirty eight?
PLAYER (lost): There we are - demented children mincing about in clothes that no one ever wore, speaking as no man ever spoke, swearing love in wigs and rhymed couplets, killing each other with wooden swords, hollow protestations of faith hurled after empty promises of vengeance - and every gesture, every pose, vanishing into the thin unpopulated air. We ransomed our dignity to the clouds, and the uncomprehending birds listened. (He rounds on them.) Don't you see?! We're actors - we're the opposite of people! (They recoil nonplussed, his voice calms.) Think, in your head, now, think of the most... private... secret... intimate... thing you have ever done secure in the knowledge of its privacy...
(He gives them - and the audience - a good pause. ROS takes a shifty look. He strikes with his voice and his head.) Well, I saw you do it!
(ROS leaps up, dissembling madly.)
ROS: You never! It's a lie! (He catches himself with a giggle in a vacuum and sits down again.)
PLAYER: We're actors... We pledged our identities, secure in the conventions of our trade; that someone would be watching. And then, gradually, no one was. We were caught, high and dry. It was not until the murder's long soliloquy that we were able to look around; frozen we were in the profil, our eyes searched you out, first confidently, then hesitantly, then desperately as each patch of turf, each log, each exposed corned in every direction proved uninhabited, and all the while the murderous King addressed the horizon with his dreary interminable guilt... Our heads began to move, wary as lizards, the corpse of unsullied Rosalinda peeped through his fingers, and the King faltered. Even then, habit and a stubborn trust that our audience spied upon us from behind the nearest bush, forced our bodies to blunder on long after they had emptied of meaning, until like runaway carts they dragged to a halt. No one came forward. No one shouted at us. The silence was unbreakable, it imposed itself upon us; it was obscene. We took off our crowns and swords and cloth of gold and moved silent on the road to Elsinore.
(Silence. Then GUIL claps solo with slow measured irony.)
GUIL: Brilliantly re-created - if these eyes could weep!... Rather strong on metaphor, mind you. No criticism - only a matter of taste. And so here you are - with a vengeance. That's a figure of
speech... isn’t it? Well let’s say we’ve made up for it, for you may have no doubt whom to thank for your performance at the court.

ROS: We are counting on you to take him out of himself. You are the pleasures which we draw him on to - *(he escapes a fractional giggle but recovers immediately)* and by that I don’t mean your usual filth; you can’t treat royalty like people with normal perverted desires. They know nothing of that and you know nothing of them, to your mutual survival. So give him a good clean show suitable for all the family, or you can rest assured you’ll be playing the tavern tonight.

GUIL: Or the night, after.

ROS: Or not.

PLAYER: We already have an entry here. And always have had.

GUIL: You’ve played for him before?

PLAYER: Yes, sir.

ROS: And what’s his bent?

PLAYER: Classical.

ROS: Saucy!

GUIL: What will you play?

PLAYER: "The Murder of Gonzago".

GUIL: Full of fine cadence and corpses.

PLAYER: Pirated from the Italian...

ROS: What is it about?

PLAYER: It’s about a King and Queen...

GUIL: Escapism! What else?

PLAYER: Blood - -

GUIL: - Love and rhetoric.

PLAYER: Yes. *(Going.)*

GUIL: Where are you going?

PLAYER: I can come and go as I please.

GUIL: You’re evidently a man who knows his way around.

PLAYER: I’ve been here before.

GUIL: We’re still finding our feet.

PLAYER: I should concentrate on not losing your heads.

GUIL: Do you speak from knowledge?

PLAYER: Precedent.

GUIL: You’ve been here before.

PLAYER: And I know which way the wind is blowing.

GUIL: Operating on two levels, are we?! How clever! I expect it comes naturally to you, being in the business so to speak.

*(The PLAYER’s grave face does not change. He makes to move off again. GUIL for the second time cuts him off.)* The truth is, we value your company, for want of any other. We have been left so much to our own devices - after a while one welcomes the uncertainty of being left to other people’s.

PLAYER: Uncertainty is the normal state. You’re nobody special.

*(He makes to leave again. GUIL loses his cool.)*

GUIL: But for God’s sake what are we supposed to do?

PLAYER: Relax. Respond. That’s what people do. You can’t go through life questioning your situation at every turn.

GUIL: But we don’t know what’s going on, or what to do with ourselves. We don’t know how to act.

PLAYER: Act natural. You know why you’re here at least.

GUIL: We only know what we’re told, and that’s little enough. And for all we know it isn’t even true.

PLAYER: For all anyone knows, nothing is. Everything has to be taken on trust; truth is only that which is taken to be true. It’s the currency of living. There may be nothing behind it, but it doesn’t make any difference so long as it is honoured. One acts on assumptions.
Appendices
1. (From an internet study guide on the play)

Sources
The main source of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Title
The title is taken directly from the final scene of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In earlier scenes, Prince Hamlet ordered the deaths of the two messengers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. By the end of Shakespeare's play, Prince Hamlet, Laertes, Ophelia, King Claudius and Gertrude all lie dead. An ambassador from England arrives to bluntly report "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead" (*Hamlet*. Act V, Scene ii., line.411) and so they join all the stabbed, poisoned, drowned key characters. By the end of *Hamlet*, Horatio is the only main figure left alive.

Characters
*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*; a pair of schoolmates and childhood friends of Hamlet
*The Player*: a traveling actor
*Hamlet*: the Prince of Denmark
*Tragedians*: traveling with the Player, including Alfred
*King Claudius*: the King of Denmark, Hamlet’s uncle and stepfather
*Gertrude*: the Queen of Denmark, and Hamlet’s mother
*Polonius*: Claudius’ chief adviser
*Ophelia*: Polonius’ daughter
*Horatio*: a friend and schoolmate of Hamlet
*Fortinbras*: the nephew of the King of Norway
*Soldiers, courtiers, and musicians*

2. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

Dramatis Personae
*Claudius*, King of Denmark.
*Hamlet*, Son to the former, and Nephew to the present King.
*Polonius*, Lord Chamberlain.
*Horatio*, Friend to Hamlet.
*Laertes*, Son to Polonius.
*Voltimand*, Courtier.
*Cornelius*, Courtier.
*Rosencrantz*, Courtier.
*Guildenstern*, Courtier.
*Osric*, Courtier.
*A Gentleman*, Courtier.
*A Priest*.
*Marcellus*, Officer.
*Bernardo*, Officer.
*Francisco*, a Soldier.
*Reynaldo*, Servant to Polonius.
*Players*.
*Two Clowns, Grave-diggers.*
Act II Scene I

Scene II. A room in the Castle.

[Enter King, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Attendants.]

King.
Welcome, dear Rosencrantz and Guildenstern!
Moreover that we much did long to see you,
The need we have to use you did provoke
Our hasty sending. Something have you heard
Of Hamlet's transformation; so I call it,
Since nor the exterior nor the inward man
Resembles that it was. What it should be,
More than his father's death, that thus hath put him
So much from the understanding of himself,
I cannot dream of: I entreat you both
That, being of so young days brought up with him,
And since so neighbour'd to his youth and humour,
That you vouchsafe your rest here in our court
Some little time: so by your companies
To draw him on to pleasures, and to gather,
So much as from occasion you may glean,
Whether aught, to us unknown, afflicts him thus,
That, open'd, lies within our remedy.

Queen.
Good gentlemen, he hath much talk'd of you,
And sure I am two men there are not living
To whom he more adheres. If it will please you
To show us so much gentry and good-will
As to expend your time with us awhile,
For the supply and profit of our hope,
Your visitation shall receive such thanks
As fits a king's remembrance.

Ros.
Both your majesties
Might, by the sovereign power you have of us,
Put your dread pleasures more into command
Than to entreaty.

Guil.
We both obey,
And here give up ourselves, in the full bent,
To lay our service freely at your feet,
To be commanded.

King.
Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern.

Queen.
Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz:
And I beseech you instantly to visit
My too-much-changed son.–Go, some of you,
And bring these gentlemen where Hamlet is.

Guil.
Heavens make our presence and our practices
Pleasant and helpful to him!

Queen.
Ay, amen!

[Exeunt Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and some Attendants].