



Tragedy Without Tears

The Visit" is one of the most extraordinary theatrical works of our time. It is very possible that, with it, the thirty-seven-year-old Swiss playwright Duerrenmatt has arrived at a new dramatic form for modern tragedy.

The play begins casually, with a comedic tone. Some rather ordinary people in the impoverished town of Gullen are awaiting the visit of Claire Zachanassian, who left the place a teen-aged nobody but who has now through a series of fortunate marriages snowballed herself into one of the world's wealthiest women. The townspeople hope she will give them some money to help restore prosperity. And to act as persuader they pick their popular and affable grocer, Anton Schill. Anton, someone vaguely remembers, had been Claire's lover before he married a local merchant's daughter, but this is thought to be more in his favor than not.

What holds our interest through the first act is not so much the story as the theatrical cameos director Peter Brook and designer Teo Otto have fashioned with the aid of an expert cast headed by Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt. We hear imaginary express trains roar across the front of the stage as a bored stationmaster routinely salutes the conductor from the platform: Life as usual in a dead town. Then occurs the slight variance in routine which is to set Gullen off on a course of action that will try its citizens' souls. *The Flying Dutchman* makes an unscheduled stop. Mme. Zachanassian has, instead of taking the tiresome local, merely pulled the emergency cord aboard the express. A sophisticated audience sees nothing too startling in this event. A brilliantly devised entrance for the play's star. No more. And even after Claire's dramatic arrival there are only a few lightly played hints of something ominous to come.

We are further disarmed by a light and charming scene in which Anton takes Claire walking in the woods that witnessed their earlier trysts. It seems only a humorous fancy that Claire remembers the by-gone events with great clarity, whereas Anton recalls them not as they were but as he would like them to have been.

Not until the end of Act I does the play's first complication arise. Claire offers the town 1 billion marks



Duerrenmatt—"a new form."

to be divided equally amongst its citizens with one proviso, but before the townspeople bother to hear the proviso they start up dancing with joy. However, it turns out that Mme. Zachanassian is an extremist. She is extremely generous, but she also wants extreme justice. Anton Schill, it is revealed, had bribed witnesses to discredit her when she had accused him of being the father of her unborn child forty years back. She demands that the town take Anton's life.

The town's immediate outward reaction to her proposal is a self-righteous rejection. The laws of society and the laws of the jungle are not the same. Claire is not disturbed. With omniscient calm she announces that she will wait.

ACT II begins with Anton jolly because of this show of support from his fellow men. But as he serves customers in his store he notices people who heretofore have been very thrifty in their purchases now spending beyond their means. When he seeks reassurance from the Burgomaster he finds the Town Hall being refurbished with a new typewriter. And in the midst of receiving religious solace from the pastor, he hears the ringing of the church's new bell. Paranoiacally, he feels that this spending means the town has already tacitly accepted Claire's proposal. He sees the townspeople as trapping and hunting him down. And when he tries to leave town there is a beau-

tifully-staged scene at the railway station in which the men of the town seem to be lined up as a phalanx between him and the train. Anton becomes immobilized like some fear-crazed animal. Yet for most of this act the play still preserves a fundamentally comedic and casual tone.

It is the third act in which the play's large issues are allowed to erupt. A schoolteacher passionately begs Claire to be merciful and not to push the town into this immoral act. Her answer is, "The town made me into a whore. I will make the town into a brothel." Then we watch the painful process of a mass tragedy coming to a boil. But this mass tragedy is theatrically relieved in several ways. It is relieved by a love scene between Anton, who is now resigned to his death, and Claire, who feels that she is reclaiming her boyhood sweetheart. She says, "The dreams of youth are sacred, don't you think?"

Later, the agony of Anton's death sentence is made remote when the newsreel cameraman requests that it be done over again for the film. Thus, instead of identifying ourselves with Anton, we tend to see the author's view of a world in which society's institutions, and laws, have debased rather than ennobled the individual. We move away from personal emotional involvement to a more Olympian view.

AT FIRST glance, this removal appears to have made "The Visit" colder and less moving. And it must be admitted that Mr. Duerrenmatt's play never rolls for very long on the inner fuel of its own interacting ingredients. The story of "The Visit" is one of inevitable tragedy, but its details often seem author-imposed and humorous.

On the other hand, this seeming fault may be "The Visit's" greatest virtue. It is "Camino Real" without belief in Romanticism, and "The Threepenny Opera" without belief in Marxism. It is "Our Town" without belief in an after-life, and "The Entertainer" without belief in the present one. All by itself it succeeds in being a convincing tragedy in a godless and ignoble world.

There may be those who will argue that "The Visit" is not a tragedy at all, and certainly it does not meet the classical definitions. Yet it accomplishes so many of the things we expect of tragedy, without giving in to any of the presumptions that make classical tragedy unsatisfactory to moderns, that we realize our whole concept of the subject must be re-examined.

In Claire Zachanassian, "The Visit" has an individual whose money and

insistence on stern justice give her the power and the mystery of a pre-New Testament God. In Anton Schill it has a victim who, like Hamlet, conquers his fear and rises to a state of resignation about death. He says simply, "A useless life will come to an end." (At the *individual* end of the spectrum we see ourselves as capable of a temporary divine serenity.) And in the townspeople Duerrenmatt has the most corruptible of all forces, the social human being. There is no need for plagues or thunderbolts when there are towns to be had. (At the *mass* end of the spectrum we see ourselves as capable of vileness and hypocrisy.)

The play and Peter Brook's staging of it overshadow the individual performances. It would be hard to think of any other actress who could play Claire Zachanassian with such a convincing combination of resolute evil purpose and divine grace as does Miss Fontanne. When she says, "The world and I have been on most intimate terms," we feel that here is a woman who has seen and done everything

and that each bad experience has only served to increase her will power. On the other hand, when she exults in the removal of her true love from the world's foulness, we feel her triumph to be holy and benevolent.

Alfred Lunt brings enormous skill and versatility to the role of Anton Schill. One is tempted to say that he brings too much, because while he demonstrates the character perfectly we do not feel the sort of intense suffering we did in Olivier's performance of Archie Rice in "The Entertainer." At the same time, the perfection and ease with which he performs each difficult scene is probably greater than any other living actor could achieve. His artistry is superb and this portrayal is the finest he has given in many years.

Outstanding in the large supporting cast is one of England's most dynamic young actors, Peter Woodthorpe, who plays the schoolteacher. Displaying that unteachable innate stage sense which marks him as a potentially great actor, he makes every second of his performance vital and memorable. One must also salute the dry delivery of Eric Porter, who as the Burgomaster tells the welcoming committee, "The secret is to be sincerely moved."

Teo Otto's use of selective realism adds universality to the play. His third act setting, composed of nothing but an arrangement of painted lamps, is as stunning a design as we've had all season.

MAURICE VALENCY's adaptation has undoubtedly softened and humanized the harsh Expressionistic original. Whether this is an improvement or not can only be determined after someone produces a more literal translation. However, one must remember that Mr. Valency's changes were made with the approval and the cooperation of Mr. Duerrenmatt, who revised many of the scenes himself. The play's present form was also influenced by the reception afforded a variety of versions by audiences over many weeks of pre-Broadway testing. And one suspects that Mr. Valency's working away from the grotesqueness which originally drew Mme. Zachanassian as a woman with an ivory hand and a wooden leg, and away from the sternness which presented her as a revenge-driven creature, into a person whose motivation is really a perverted love for her victim were wise moves that do not obscure the play's essential values. For in its present form "The Visit" is a staggering and unforgettable theatrical achievement.

—HENRY HEWES.

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SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

Best-Seller Week

THE moment of flashback in a movie is usually indicated when the screen begins to shimmer and undulate. The technique is to close up first on the face, then on the eyes of one of the characters, and as the eyes grow thoughtful and dreamy we go into the past. Most of the events of "Ten North Frederick," taken from the John O'Hara novel, are told seemingly through the reverie of Ann Chapin, the daughter of Joseph B. Chapin, solid citizen of Gibbville, Pennsylvania. Shortly after the movie begins, Ann Chapin (Diane Varsi) lies back on her bed and remembers a great deal about herself and her father, whose funeral has just taken place. In fact, the guests are still downstairs. But there is something funny about this flashback. Ann Chapin seems to be able to remember a great many things she doesn't know.

For instance, she remembers an idyllic love affair her father (Gary Cooper) has had with a model in New York. This affair is pictured in considerable detail. We see Joe Chapin meeting Kate Drummond (Suzy Parker) at his daughter's apartment in New York. Ann is out at the time, and she doesn't realize her father ever knew Kate Drummond until long after the funeral—and the flashback. I may be getting rather picayune to stress such a detail of a movie's plot construction, but it seems to me that a serious flaw in elementary story logic exists here, and Philip Dunne, who both wrote the screen play and directed the movie, knows better.

At other points in the long flashback, Ann remembers scenes between her father and her ambitious mother (Geraldine Fitzgerald) which are shocking and which were presumably kept private. She remembers, although she couldn't possibly have been present, her mother telling her father that she had, years before, been unfaithful to him. She was also, presumably, present in her mind's eye when Joe Chapin engages in some fairly shoddy political maneuverings, and when, to ease the pain of a setback, he spends an evening drinking and talking to a chippy in a hotel room. Mr. Dunne's writing problem was admittedly difficult: how to tell the story of a man whose funeral has just taken place. It would have been difficult for him to have remembered anything while lying in a coffin. Nevertheless, Billy Wilder did not hesi-

tate to have William Holden remember a great many things in Sunset Boulevard while floating face-down in a swimming pool. Mr. Dunne eschewed this device, but he has still, I think, chosen the wrong focus.

Aside from this, the movie attempts to explain and depict the essential tragedy of a leading citizen of a small town who, while remaining a gentleman, got himself into all sorts of hot water. When his wife suggests to him that it is within his powers to become President of the country, he doesn't tell her that she is talking through her snooty head, but agrees, saying, in effect: "Okay, I'll try to make President." He starts out by bribing a politician with \$100,000, hardly an auspicious way to begin. The double moral standard of the leading character is never made either clear or ironic in Gary Cooper's simplified playing. Miss Fitzgerald is a good deal more striking as the wife, and Tom Tully has a few good, if ambiguous, moments as the politician. The material for a fine, trenchant movie was there, but that long flashback seems to have gotten in the way.

* * *

Two other best-sellers have come out unsatisfactorily in their screen versions. Robert Ryan and Buddy Hackett have themselves a ball as Ty Ty and Pluto in Caldwell's "God's Little Acre," but the story seems curiously archaic when moved up from the Depression Thirties to the present. And when Aldo Ray gets himself shot while trying to start up a silent cotton mill I was carried right back to the days when militant little theatre groups put on plays of social consciousness. Tina Louise and Fay Spain make attempts to look provocative, but are incapable of achieving the lusty, earthy humor that characterized the book. In "Too Much, Too Soon" Dorothy Malone and Errol Flynn play two members of the Barrymore family. Errol Flynn drinks himself to death; Dorothy Malone rescues herself by writing a book. In between I counted eighteen fifths being boozed by both parties. Nothing could be duller. But is there, somewhere in the sky, a Happy Drinking Ground from which John Barrymore can view this impersonation of his splendid self by Errol Flynn? That would make it all worthwhile. —HOLLIS ALPERT.