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On the death of Friedrich Dürrenmatt

# The World – A Labyrinth

*On 14 December 1990, shortly before his seventieth birthday and on the eve of the 700th Anniversary of the Confederation, the writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt died. His works, some of which achieved world fame during his lifetime, are concerned with a critical analysis of Switzerland, the world, the universe and of the people who have been thrown into these worlds.*

As soon as you start to study Dürrenmatt in more detail, you soon find yourself caught in a remarkable conflict. On the one hand you are so fascinated by the writer's almost inexhaustible imagination and originality, that no sooner do you think you can find your way around a play or a thriller, that you are thrown by a sudden twist in the plot. The abundance of ideas, surprises and attempts at alienation does not make his work easily accessible, and often leaves you with the feeling that there is nothing to take home afterwards. Over and over again not only Dürrenmatt's themes but also his forms of expression seem to slip away. It is typical that his horribly grotesque comedies – for him the only possible form in which to represent the world adequately (except for a thriller) – do not allow themselves to be forced into one direction or technique. Dürrenmatt, who himself often directed and, like Brecht, would have loved to have his own ensemble, never became a theatre routinist adhering to established patterns and experiences. It is the same with his language. Although he endlessly rewrote and polished up his texts, style

was always less important to him than experimenting with new figures and situations.

## Fundamental Tendencies

Despite all the contradictory impressions that Dürrenmatt's work create – which nevertheless also express the ambivalence of man and



Friedrich Dürrenmatt during the award of the Georg Büchner Prize (1986)...

his time – some typical features can be drawn out.

Firstly, Dürrenmatt always strongly resisted the demand that literature should console, raise hopes and preach morals. This would not even have been possible for him. To him, the world was too much of a labyrinth in which he desperately sought a reason without ever finding one. Neither religion nor patriotism could help the son of a parson. Probably the only thing he ever believed in was, like Socrates whom he so much admired, his own doubts.

Secondly, Dürrenmatt always defended himself against any kind of ideology, against following the crowd. An example of this is

## Dürrenmatt's life and Work

Friedrich Dürrenmatt was born in Konolfingen near Berne on 5th January 1921, son of a Protestant minister.

After taking his school-leaving examination in Berne, he took up studies in literature, philosophy and natural sciences in Zurich and Berne. Undecided whether to take up a career as a painter or writer, he decided at an early stage on the latter.

He married in 1947 and lived in the Neuchâtel Jura from 1952 until he died on 14 December 1990.

### Plays

- It is Written (1947)
- Romolus the Great (1949)
- The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi (1952)
- An Angel Comes to Babylon (1953)
- Hercules and the Augean Stables (1954)
- The Old Lady's Visit (1956)
- The Physicians (1962) (?)
- The Meteor (1966)
- Achterloo (1983)

Radio plays often led to theatre plays and stories; most of them have been frequently revised.

### Prose

- The Judge and the Hangman (1952)
- The Suspicion (1953)
- Greek Male Seeks Greek Female (1955)
- The Trouble (1956)
- The Promise (1958)
- The Tunnel (1964)
- "War in Winter in Tibet", "The Eclipse of the Moon", "The Rebel" (1981)
- "Building a Tower" (1990)

one of his best portrayed heroes, the "ironical" hero Romolus the Great, who appears in the play of the same title. The last Roman Emperor does not understand why he should defend the remains of the Roman Empire against the Teutons and prefers instead to breed chickens in peace.

In another play, probably the most famous, "Besuch der alten Dame" (The Old Lady's Visit), Dürrenmatt's inclination towards ancient ideals of justice and humanity become clearly apparent. The multi-millionaire Claire Zachanassian returns to her home town of Gullen to avenge a wrong done to her long ago. At that time, when she, Kläri Wäscher, became pregnant, she was defamed by her lover Ill as a prostitute and driven out of town. Now she is willing to use her wealth to help put bankrupt Gullen back on its feet, but only on the condition that "her" justice is carried out, which for her means "total revenge" and

## The Chamber of the National Council!

On 2 May it finally happened! For the Jubilee Session of the Federal Chambers, so it had been decided, one did not wish to listen to celebratory speeches but to take the opportunity to "muck out" the Chamber of the National Council – if only on stage. Friedrich Dürrenmatt's comedy "Herkules und der Stall des Augias" (Hercules and the Augean Stables), a satire on the clumsiness of the democratic machinery, was performed on stage, after a lot of to-ings and fro-ings and of course not without the inevitable protests.



nothing less than the death of her former lover. At first thoroughly outraged, "in the name of humanity", which they now suddenly reflected upon, the people of Güllen reject this proposition. Gradually however, they yield to the temptation of money and decide to sacri-

*...and in a self-portrait of 1982. For decades only insiders knew that the dramatist was also a talented painter. (Photos: Keystone)*

## Death of Max Frisch

On 4 April 1991, only a few months after the death of his writer colleague, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Max Frisch died from cancer, shortly before his eightieth birthday. In its next edition the "Swiss Review" will dedicate an article to this world renowned author, and, beside Dürrenmatt, the most important representative of Swiss contemporary literature.

fice their morality by killing Ill. The latter is ready to sacrifice himself to atone for the injustice he has done. Thus in this tragicomedy the decline of humanity and its morals and the ridiculous corruptibility of a town on the one hand, and the acceptance by an individual of his everlasting guilt on the other, run side by side, the whole, typical for Dürrenmatt, grotesquely distorted.

## Dürrenmatt's Paintings

Friedrich Dürrenmatt had already been painting before he started to write and did not stop until the end of his life. His final decision

about whether to be a writer or an artist (see insert) was not an easy one for him as he was afraid of failing as both. In 1946 he gave up his literary studies suspecting that the theatre, to some extent the link between writing and



painting, could be the way out of his dilemma. He would most probably have preferred to have been an artist than a writer because "you can hold a sheet of paper away from you to see what is wrong but you cannot do so with a text". It has already been mentioned that he subsequently re-wrote almost all his comedies.

Thus fine arts are not only a by-product but a very significant part of Dürrenmatt's overall work, after writing the means of expressing one's thoughts. It is from these thoughts, from the invention and not from the observation of reality (except for in a few cases) that Dürrenmatt's pictures derive. They are gloomy and expressionist and depict, just as in his writing, a distorted, caricatured anti-world. Of course, not all his subjects are pure fantasy. Many figures are to be found in the Old Testament and above all in Greek mythology which is a central theme for many of his books and paintings – Atlas desperately trying to carry the world although he is too tired, Sisyphus attempting in vain to roll the rock up the mountain and the lonely Minotaur searching for a way out of the labyrinth... And from behind these masks the individual being steps out, confronting a world which, in Dürrenmatt's eyes, is no longer comprehensible and therefore no longer to master.

## A new Swiss Literary Archive

In 1988 Dürrenmatt promised to donate the literary rights of his works to the Confederation, craftily imposing the condition, however, that the money should be used to create a Swiss archive for literature. Did the writer want to test the Confederation's speed in reacting to such a generous gesture? (It is said that these works would have been worth one million Marks to the German literary archive in Marbach/Neckar). For once, it was demonstrated how quickly (so untypical of the Swiss) one could act if necessary. Already at the beginning of this year the new Swiss literary archive was opened, despite the unfavorable conditions which prevailed in 1988. Shortly before, the people had rejected the addition of a cultural article to the Federal Constitution which would have allowed the then Federal Office for Cultural Affairs to

construct a national literary archive. By affinitating the archive with the Swiss National Library has at last experienced its long overdue increase in importance thanks to the significant growth in the Dürrenmatt inheritance, the Federal Office for cultural affairs came up with an elegant solution.

The peculiarity of the new literary archive, which is however neither the first nor the only one in Switzerland (there is, for example, already a Robert Walser archive and a Max Frisch archive), lies in its commission to take literature in all four of the national languages into consideration and to build up a central register to ease the access to the estates of literary works scattered all over Switzerland. Just as important will be the evaluation of the archive's works, as not only exhibitions but also publications are being planned.

Heidi Willumat