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WHAT IS THE ANSWER?

FRIEDRICH DÜERRENMATT'S "PHYSICISTS"
AT THE ALDWYCH THEATRE A GREAT SUCCESS

One of the difficulties a Swiss writer writing in German has to face is how to cut through the barrier of language without betraying or losing what is essentially Swiss. Even if he succeeds and becomes known and possibly famous in the German-speaking world his works are rarely successful in translation. Jeremias Gotthelf, so rich and picturesque, so close to his Bernese farmers, has been translated into English without carrying much conviction. Gottfried Keller, wrapped up in his Swiss bourgeois life, so vivid and imaginative in the original, has lost much of his lustre in translation.

I don't know whether plays are more or less difficult to translate than prose. I imagine dialogue to be harder to reproduce than narrative. The media of acting and scenery may both help and hinder a true reproduction of the original. Whatever the general rule there seems no doubt at all that the translator and producer of Friedrich Duerrenmatt's play "The Physicists" have succeeded in recreating the original to perfection. In fact, I would go further and say that in English the play hits you even more forcibly than in German. Whilst inevitably much had to be modified in dialogue, Duerrenmatt's language seems to have gained rather than lost in the translation by James Kirkup. I spoke to the translator at a reception which the Swiss Ambassador and Madame Daeniker gave to some British scientists, personalities of the theatre world and members of the press, to meet the author. He told me that he had found Duerrenmatt's play most rewarding in translation and that he, as a poet himself, was attracted by a poetic quality in the Swiss playwright which was lacking in most other German writers of to-day.

Of course, other plays of his have been translated into English and performed in this country, "The Fire-Raisers" and "The Visit". "An Angel came to Babylon" had its first performance in the English language at the W. R. Hearst Greek Theatre in Berkeley, California on 27th September last year. "The Visit" was also produced by Peter Brook whose work is greatly admired by Duerrenmatt and who was chosen by the author for the English production of "The Physicists". But Duerrenmatt (so the "Times" reported on 5th January) remains unhappy with "The Visit" as done over here. "The main trouble was" (I quote) "that it was sold completely to the original stars. That was a great mistake. Consequently I had no control over the text used which was considerably adapted by another writer, and even Peter Brook had his hands tied. The whole approach to the play was too heavy and realistic". The original stars referred to were Alfred Lunt and his wife Lynn Fontane. Kenneth Tynan of the "Observer" goes as far as to say that "under pressure from the Lunts he [the producer] softened Duerrenmatt's "The Visit"; but the hard edges of "The Physicists" are intact and unmelted".

It is this "intactness" both of the drama as well as the language which struck me. Some typical growths of Duerrenmatt's imagination have had to be pruned and on the face of it something worth while may have disappeared, but only superficially. Out of the transformation the final product emerged more striking, more concentrated even than in the original.

Nor am I the only one to feel like that. Last summer the *Conseiller Social* at the Swiss Embassy in Washington Monsieur Lukas F. Burckhardt gave a lecture on the Swiss background of Friedrich Duerrenmatt to the Chapter of the American Goethe Society in Washington D.C. (reproduced in German in the "Amerikanische Schweizerzeitung" on 22nd August 1962). He and his wife met the young Duerrenmatt when Monsieur Burckhardt was a member of the Council of the Municipal Theatre in Basle. It was at the time when the Council succeeded in getting the German producer Kurt Horwitz from the Zurich "Schauspielhaus" to come to Basle. He had just produced Duerrenmatt's first play "Es steht geschrieben" which shocked the Zurich public by its forthright language. "The Blind", the first Duerrenmatt play Horwitz produced in Basle was no success either. But he and a small circle believed in Duerrenmatt's greatness and helped him to achieve it.

Monsieur Burckhardt recalled the early days when Duerrenmatt was not even able to express himself in everyday language. The son of a protestant clergyman he grew up in a Bernese village with men and women of a kind we know from Gotthelf's tales — outwardly solid, ponderous and realistic, inwardly full of passion. Duerrenmatt was in his most important formative years when war broke out. He had difficulties in adjusting himself to life. At university he was not successful. In the eyes of the examination-conscious Swiss he was something of a failure. As a young man he was full of a rich imagination struggling hard to find a way of expressing himself. His command of German was poor and he just could not find the right words. Monsieur Burckhardt remembers the Duerrenmatts when they lived cheaply in an old Basle patrician mansion due for demolition. There was hardly any furniture. But Duerrenmatt had painted the whole bedroom walls with more than life size luscious green creepers with dozens of monkeys playing on their branches.

Monsieur Burckhardt went on to describe the change which had taken place when he met the author again in 1960, a successful playwright. He had remained absolutely faithful to himself, but was now able to express the most subtle and delicate things authoritatively. His clumsiness of expression had developed into something positive. Whatever he talked about had colour and character; he had found his language colloquially as well as in his new great plays.

We don't know how it happened that Duerrenmatt developed into greatness. Monsieur Burckhardt believes that much of it is due to that group of German refugee actors who helped drama on the Basle and Zurich stage to unequalled height, having had much of the culture in their own country cruelly destroyed. The producer Horwitz, his Viennese wife and their friends were able to save some of the cultural and artistic values and take them into Switzerland. The best of the German-Jewish and Austrian-Catholic traits, combined with love for the beautiful and great, dominated in that circle and no word of hatred was ever heard. They gave Duerrenmatt a unique opportunity to learn his *métier* in order to speak his own language today in a way which is comprehensible not only to the Bernese and the Swiss, but to man as such.

Duerrenmatt might easily have remained the great Bernese who, like Gotthelf, thundered as a prophet but could not make himself heard outside the language frontier. But he has managed to transcend the barriers of language and arbitrariness of expression without losing the strength inherent in his Bernese origin.

"The Physicists" were first performed at the Zurich "Schauspielhaus" on 26th February 1962 and had their British Première on 9th January 1963 at the Aldwych Theatre, presented by the Governors of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon. It is a masterly production brilliantly acted. It is full of drama and suspense, full of satire and humour. As a play it is great and Mr. Duerrenmatt has been acclaimed almost unanimously as one of the great contemporary dramatists. The "Times Literary Supplement" devoted much space to a very flattering appraisal of his works. The reviews have been excellent with, as far as I have heard, only the "Daily Telegraph" as an exception. Harold Hobson in the "Sunday Times" says that most modern writers lack the "theatrical virtue of surprise" and that the merit of "The Physicists" is that its development is inevitable, but not foreseeable". The "Observer" says the "prophetic satire" is conceived and carried out like a chess problem. "But beneath the Arctic cap of the argument there simmers a passionate concern for human survival and this wedding of logic and charity is what prompts me to hail the piece as Duerrenmatt's finest work".

The author calls "Thy Physicists" a Comedy. It takes as a subject the public responsibility of the scientist for the result of his discoveries. Three scientists have taken refuge in a madhouse so that the world should not be given the chance to exploit the discovery of the most brilliant of them for evil purposes. It is no new problem, but since the birth of the atomic bomb it has entered on a new phase. Nor is it the first time the subject has been dealt with on the stage. C. P. Snow's "The New Men" is only one of the examples of recent attempts to tackle the vast problem. I have heard it said in Switzerland where the play was also a great success that Duerrenmatt has failed to give an answer. He discussed the play in the "Times" a few days before it opened in London and he said that he did not know what the right answer was himself. "It is more the dramatist's job to pose questions than to provide answers." Finally, in the 21 points of his summing-up which appeared in the "Times" a few days after the Première he repeats that he told a story which is paradoxical as a drama about physicists must be a paradox. "It cannot have as its goal an explanation of the nature of physics but only the effect of physics on life. The effects are the concern of all. What concerns all can only be resolved by all." He concludes "Dramatic art can inveigle the spectator into exposing himself to reality, but cannot compel him to hold his own against it or to dominate it".

There is no answer — yet.

Mariann.



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