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# The Swiss Observer

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## THE LIFE AND WORK OF MAX FRISCH

by Philip Clarke

Max Frisch, dramatist, novelist and political writer, was born in Zurich, the son of an architect, on 15th May, 1911. He and his fellow-countryman, Friedrich Durrenmatt, have become two of the most important German-speaking writers to consistently reach a world-wide audience in the post-war years, and so it is possibly inevitable that they are at times viewed as being of German nationality, and are even more inevitably coupled.

Both, however, exhibit a uniquely Swiss attitude to the Third Reich, being able to view the troubles of the time in a wider perspective and both being deeply concerned with the question of the extent of individual responsibility and how it can be faced. Whilst the Germans have laboured with the knowledge of their direct involvement in the past, producing a greater introversion, Frisch, in particular, had to grapple with the possibly greater problem of a soporific self-satisfaction and an unbroken prosperity arising from non-involvement.

### From architecture to play writing

Although Frisch and Durrenmatt have a great deal in common with almost parallel development as well as being joint subjects of the only major biographical work on either ("Frisch and Durrenmatt" by Hans Banziger), Frisch can be characterised by his greater morality, perseverance at the same philosophical problem, and a clarity in style and presentation; Durrenmatt does not have this, although he is considered to be more dramatically inventive and imaginative.

Clarity of plot and conceptual simplification, especially noticeable in *Andorra*, his most successful play, stem from Frisch's almost scientific imposition of meaning on to the bewildering nature of his experiences. Indeed, his background is in architecture, which he studied at the Polytechnikum in Zurich for five years, gaining a diploma in 1941. Prior to this, his education had followed the arts, at the Realgymnasium, Zurich, and then



reading Germanistik at Zurich University from 1931-1933. After these two years he was forced to give up his studies for economic reasons and become a freelance journalist, during which time he began travelling—an activity maintained avidly to the present day.

However, from 1942 to 1954, when he published *Stiller*, his life was split between writing and architecture, for it was not until this latter date that he wound up his business in Zurich to become a full-time writer. Works published before this include *Tagebuch*, containing the seeds of many themes developed in later writings, *Graf Oederland*, *Don Juan Oder die Liebe zur Geometrie* and *Die Chinesische Mauer*; by this time he had travelled around Western and Eastern Europe, the United States and Mexico, and in 1951 had received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.

*Stiller* (published in England as "I'm not Stiller") was the first of Frisch's world-famous works, followed by the two novels *Homo Faber* and *Mein Name Sie Gantanbein* ("A Wilderness of Mirrors") and the plays *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* ("The Fire Raisers") and *Andorra*.

Among the accolades Frisch has

received over the last fifteen years are the Literature Prize of the City of Zurich, the George Buchner prize, and Honorary L.D. from the University of Marburg, and the Schiller prize of Baden-Wurtemberg. In 1948, Frisch met and was deeply influenced by one of the masters of modern drama, Bertolt Brecht, whose unshakeable commitment to the principles of Marxism fascinated Frisch. Brecht's parables for the theatre are all simple stories in which characters — or often caricatures — are used for the purpose of communicating to the audience a "message" or social moral. The techniques he used were new to the theatre at that time, for he believed that audiences should be prevented from becoming emotionally involved with the play and should instead remain intellectually detached in order to consider the wider social implications of the story. Thus actors step out of role to address the audience, narrators are used, the action is broken up with songs, poems and placards, making the whole actively antagonistic to realism.

Few could have failed to have been impressed by Brecht's overwhelming and enigmatic presence, characterised by a sincere seriousness and sober attempts at communication of his ideals, let alone with a mind as puzzled and probing as Frisch's.

### A central theme: Role playing

A look at *Andorra*, probably Frisch's best play, will reveal this strong influence, not only in style, but in the overall moral concern which distinguishes the author. *Andorra* is a model country, unconnected with the country of the same name, but undoubtedly related to Frisch's concern with his own nationality and the smug attitudes embodied in "it can't happen here". The central theme is anti-semitism demonstrated in a freely-invented parable. The youth Andri has been brought up by the schoolteacher who has let it be known that he is a Jew, rescued from persecution. In fact, how-

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ever, he is the schoolteacher's illegitimate son, a fact he wished to conceal partly to protect himself and partly in a vain attempt to fight prejudice. The people of the town—the close-fisted innkeeper, the churlish and self-important carpenter, the vain doctor, the lecherous soldier and the clergyman with a conveniently distorted use of good will—variously project their views of how Jews ought to behave on to Andri as he grows up. They all have pride in their liberalism, helping Andri in the way that they think fit. The carpenter, despite evidence and the boy's protestations to the contrary, does not concede that Andri can use his hands to build furniture.

All the actors in the play, excepting Andri and Barblin, are known only by their status and position in the society, underlining the universal significance of the story and its moral. In addition, Frisch uses a perfect "alienation" technique adopted from Brecht—between scenes, a character from the play steps into a witness box and addresses the audience as if in a trial concerning Andri's death.

The theme touches on a basic concept of Frisch's, expressed in the commandment "Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image"—by seeing any human being in the light of a preconceived idea we fail to perceive the unique in him and automatically distort or ignore the truth. Frisch says "We can't help putting people into categories; but at the same time we all bear the guilt of doing so. We even put ourselves into categories; we invent ourselves and then use this invented self as a working hypothesis to cover the facts of our lives".

We are introduced here to the problem that Frisch has portrayed in all his writings, from many aspects and with few solutions—that the indi-

vidual is forced to play roles in his life, roles that may be chosen of free will, or that may be forced on the individual by others; but that in both instances will be a constriction on the expression of basic personality. This concern is set off in the novels by a radical technique somewhat similar to that used in the plays. Flashback sequences are linked with sections of dramatic dialogue, reminiscences and sudden changes of individuals' roles, sometimes assuming that of narrator.

## Other variations on a theme

*Stiller* is basically a dialectic novel with the central character, Stiller, fighting acquaintances who force the role of Stiller on him for so long that he is forced to accept it; *Homo Faber* takes another aspect of the problem. An engineer believes the whole world, including the people in it, to be completely predictable and calculable, until chance rears its head and he discovers that the girl he is in love with is in fact his daughter. Having categorised the girl as a lover, he is forced to change his view, even to the extent of revoking the "scientific" category that he has placed himself in.

Greater maturity of style and thought is apparent in *Mein Name sie Gantenbein*, in which the individual voluntarily adopts the role of a blind man so that he can watch the way others react to him; he watches his wife take a lover whilst playing the role of the faithful spouse to his face—a superb example of a facade that would be unquestionably accepted in a normal situation.

An earlier play, *Graf Oderland*, shows a similar choosing of a role. A respected judge, the embodiment of law and order, suddenly breaks with his routine life and turns criminal. He becomes the head of a terrorist movement and, from the sewers beneath the city, challenges the city authorities. At the moment of triumph, however, he cynically reinstates the government and himself chooses death as the only way to absolute freedom. All along, the audience are left in doubt as to whether he is in fact an insane madman, or acting purposively throughout. With Frisch's well-maintained compelling logic, the play demonstrates not only the inevitable paradox of a "government for freedom", but also the close proximity of chaos and order both in the individual and in society at large.

One of the earliest plays, *Die Chinesische Mauer*, brings out the inevitability of the course of history; it is a type of fantastic revue ranging over thousands of years. The self-righteous emperor builds the Great Wall of China to hold up the passing of time and prevent any future events from coming to pass. He is intruded upon, by a stroke of high dramatic

irony, by stock figures from history and fiction such as Napoleon, Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, Columbus, etc. They are introduced and strung together by Der Heutige, the man of today, and although each character has different and deep knowledge of the collapse of empires and fortunes, we all are forced to realise through the eyes and mouth of the "comper" that we are powerless to stem the course of history, whilst the emperors' ears are deaf to warnings. Many critics have related the moral to the fateful impasse man has reached by the invention of the atom bomb.

## Romance and the revolution

It was just after writing this play that Frisch met Brecht, and the next play he produced, *Als der Krieg zur Ende War* ("When the War Came to an End, 1949") showed a strong influence in style, rather masking the ideational development. A German woman in Berlin, just after the capitulation, is torn between her love for a Russian officer, who is billeted in the house, and her husband, who she keeps hidden in the basement. When she discovers that her husband is guilty of war crimes, and that he has quietly connived at her adultery to save his own skin, she commits suicide. In many ways, the possible deep analysis of feelings and facades is prevented from attaining success by the determined usage of Brechtian form, whereby the heroine frequently steps out of her part to comment "objectively" on her actions.

Frisch's first play, *Santa Cruz*, was almost a pure romance. Three characters—a nobleman, his wife and a light-hearted rover named Pelegrin—have met long ago in a tropical port where the woman was Pelegrin's mistress. Through his reappearance in a snow-bound manor house the couple are forced to relive the past in their minds, resulting in the husband's decision to seek adventure and the wife's to resist temptation. The skilful interplay of past and present, dream and reality, and subdued poetics make the play a poetic experience.

Although it was *Andorra* that was my own introduction to Frisch's work, which stemmed from a deep interest in Brecht's work, I feel that *Biedermann und Die Brandstifter* is the best demonstration of his preoccupations, his ramifications of style and also his shortcomings. The play is in two parts, the first being the basic story and the second an epilogue supposedly taking place in Hell. It is Frisch's first and only excursion into the realm of black comedy, rating inclusion in Esslin's authoritative work on Absurd Theatre. The latter describes it as a theatre of intellectual fantasy, airing contemporary problems in a vein of disillusioned tragicomedy. Whilst the true Absurd

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