



THE VISIT : FRIEDRICH DURRENMATT

- BURRA V. SUBRAHMANYAM

I enjoyed watching this play of Friedrich Durrenmatt (A Swiss - German playwright) put on the stage on 20th November, 1981 by the dramatic circle Hyderabad, a well known playing group of Hyderabad, and it was enacted with remarkable skill and subtlety. It came alive and set one thinking only twin planes of personal and political drama in the play. Doctor Nagabhushana Sharma, the regisseur, with his back ground of study of modern theatre in America, made a memorable event of it. The actors and actresses, a few excepted, helped a fine success. They and the Max Mueller Bhavan, Hyderabad, deserve the thanks of the limited audience that flocked to the Bal Bhavan Auditorium, for their having re-created . THE VISIT and made it seem real and sound true (even on an absurdly small stage) in spite of the play's troublesome admixture of the realistic, the symbolistic, the grotesque and even the absurd. A woman, seduced and stranded in life, pregnant and penniless, forty five years ago, in the German (or Swiss - German) town of Guellen, finding herself during the earlier years of her shame in Hamburg brothel and in the later years of her shame in the marital beds, quickly enough in succession, of nine or ten husbands, the richest of whom enriched not themselves but her; who directed her wealth and influence with Elizabethan vengeance, towards making a butler of the judge that once dismissed her claim in paternity against her seducer, and towards rendering castrated and blind the two perjured witnesses who deposed against her in that claim; who pays a visit to her native town in Europe. (She is an American millionairess now) to revenge herself this time on her seducer by bribing the citizens (yes, the citizens), the Mayor, the Police-Chief, the Priest, the Schoolmaster et al, with a million out of her exchequer, and calls upon them to earn the million by foregathering and killing her seducer in a calculated murder to be committed by whom? - - by that community as one lot, not by her alone, or by a chosen hireling, alone; and who, first thwarted by the popularity in town of her once cherished lover, waits patiently, and ultimately bands the populace to her will by following an economic policy as elaborate and complete as the Allied revivification (Coca-colonisation, if you like) or Germany after world war two - is a likely and covetable heroine for realistic drama, for symbolistic drama, for grotesque drama or for all the three in one. And that is Durrenmatt's THE VISIT. The three in one.

If THE VISIT was only personal Drama, it would not be literature. It would not be drama either. A pronounced Greek Goddess of so much revenge has no place in the sophisticated twentieth-century theatre. And we are nearing the twenty-first.



Claire is thoroughly artificial (a handmade of ivory, a log made of wood and plastic etc.), highly morally, Lymn Fontaine is said to have played Clair only on the stubborn realistic plane, in New York and in London, in 1957. That was, and remains, perhaps the only way to play the larger than life heroine of THE VISIT. It is unbelievable that the woman could contain her vengeance for forty five years with the intensity displayed by her in the play except in furtherance of a symbolist play. It is inconceivable too that her physical structure should be so largely pre-fabricated - except symbolically. But she herself, as a character in the play, cannot afford to strike a stage-note of disbelief in her plastic leg or in her less plastic vengefulness. The woman must believe herself. And the woman must be believed and accepted, both on the stage and in the auditorium. Neither body has a choice in the matter. If a rhinoceros can trespass on to the stage, so at least can Claire. The consequence of a willing suspension of disbelief must be borne cheerfully in both the areas of the theatre. Clairs is undoubtedly an ogre. Children, in their own way, welcome agree in their fairy tales. Clairs is an ogre but not a vericature. She is grotesque but not comical. It will be easy to decide how to play her on the stage only if it is first decided that she, with her encouragement, is an external element in the main play, an evil Ariel unguided by a Prospero. Ariel and the island were a fantast. Miranda and Ferdianand's dukedom were a reality, Claire is grotesque. Guellin is natural.

Dr. Polly Chenoy as Claire did well. She was fumbling in places, but her speeches went off nicely. Her acting was tolerable, even pleasing. Her appearance, however, was a little unconvincing. Claire was an elderly woman. Pictures of THE VISIT in its first presentation in German, on the German Stage, show Therese Kishae, the first Claire, as looking quite old and fat, unlike the still slightly demurs and very bridal-looking portrait of Claire by Dr. Chenoy. It was a difficult role, and Dr. Chenoy took a lot of care not to spoil it for the audience. What even a kishae or a Fontaine could aim to do was after all, to come and pass (PIPPA PASSES) and allow the less grotesque part of the play to realise itself or to reveal itself in symbol.

Claire moves fast across the stage, and lets the others stay and act on it.

Who are these others? The Mayor? The Police-Chief? The School-master? The Priest? Aflred Ill? No, not these individually : except Alfred Ill. There are only three characters in this play. Claire, Ill - and the people of Guellen. The Mayor is they. The priest is they. And they themselves come on the stage, in their own numbers, in two very important scenes. Like the citizens of Rome in JULIUS CAESAR. In the Bal Bhavan production they made two neat, immovable columns of themselves on either side of the stage, but they did not act on it. In their first scene, their still bodies, their dumb faces and their aparkless eyes made it appear that the Mayor's



decision not to sacrifice Ill, not to yield to Claire, was his own single decision, and not their collective decision of which he was their spokesman. It was, in fact, their collective decision. The Mayor announced it. It should have been acted as a collective decision, visibly conveyed (by motion and gesture) to their Mayor. No one need have uttered a word so to decide or so to convey the decision. It was not so acted at Bal Bahvan. That was a flaw in the production.

It was necessary that the earlier scene should be not uproariously but obviously. The people of Guellen and Alfred Ill, and that, equally, the later scene should be, not blatantly but hesitantly. The people of Guellen Versus Alfred Ill. The first was not sufficiently obvious, and the second was not sufficiently resistant, in the production. There should have been a progressive fall, not a sudden one, from the former situation to the latter situation. One missed here the progressiveness of that fall. It was absolutely necessary that the Mayor, the Police-Chief, the Priest, the Schoolmaster and the rest should have exhibited a wavering between their loyalty to follow citizen Alfred Ill and their greed for the foreign Claire's blandishments. The schoolmaster (Mr. Mavillapalli) had that part for him mapped out by Durrenmatt himself. In the scenes immediately following on the rejection of Claire's offer, the Mayor (Mr. Malkote) started off as one who had already abandoned Ill. He was already transformed overnight. He acted transformed. He did not act the transformation on the stage. His conflict during a transformation could have been shown even within the limited scope of the script of the play as Durrenmatt handed it. Even if the needed cue was insufficient or vague or missing in the text, even if the written line was too straight and the written word was too rigid, it was necessary to pause and waver, to read between the lines and to act above the words, to exhibit traces of earlier comredery and to show a guilty streak of solicitude for Alfred Ill even while forsaking him. So often, Shakespeare and Ibsen and Strindberg and Chekhov are acted between the lines and above the words. The Police-Chief (Mr. Mathur) treated the paranoiac Ill as a criminal, not as a complainant, must less as once a friend. Mr. Mathur was sitting unruffled in his chair all the time, repelling Ill who stood and shrieked. Durrenmatt's script certainly allowed Mr. Mathur at some stage, to rise, cajole, pat and still be firm. The Mayor and the Police-Chief, being not just their little selves individually but, more significantly each, the collective self of Guellen, owed a duty to their maker to represent and to portray the people of Guellen in a slow but not-too-slow progression into the town's acceptance of Claire's offer of affluence "On credit" and the consequent abandonment of Alfred Ill.

The Schoolmaster's sentimentality seemed a little exaggerated in the light of the regimented unkindness towards Alfred Ill of the Mayor and the Police-Chief in this production. It was too much of a contrast. That should not have been. The



Schoolmaster's scene would have gone off better a little underplayed. The man and woman who came to make purchases in Alfred III's shop, wearing their now Yellow-soled shoes ("Not on thy sole but one thy soul, harsh Jew" I THE MERCHANT OF VENICE) seemed quite unaware of their ordained purpose namely within natural bounds of acting to register their changing attitude towards Alfred III. Two of the woman even reassure III that their sympathies are with him, but they spoke so casually, from their recumbent postures on the inner stage, without so much as moving towards Alfred III, without showing any physical evidence on the stage, inner or outer, of a true concern for Alfred III. They, like the Mayor and the Police-Chief, failed, in this production, to enact the conflict between loyalty and greed. They too did not enact the transformation of the community. The simultaneous but contrasted re-births of the community and or Alfred III are the back-bone of the play. The production had a hunch-back there.

The elevation on which Claire sat, and ordered drinks and dinners and business deals (the "deal" with Russin was significant), and merrily changed her husbands between drinks was neatly set up and skilfully lighted and darkened from time to time. The interruptions from the height to the pitiful and obedient play of forces below were well-managed-and-timed.

Dr. Sharma made an excellent job of it. In fact Dr. Sharma made the best use of the available stage space to create the atmosphere of the station and the other locales. All credit is due to him and his man for the satisfying improvisations on the stage.

The best acted scene of the play was the station scene when Alfred III (Mr. B.S. Prakash) attempts to escape from Guellen. The scene, as it occurs in the play, is half way between reality and hallucination, and would have been even more effective on the stage if played throughout in a dim half-light just enough to show the faces, except perhaps when starting the scene and when ending it. In this production the light was, however, effectively dimmed at an appropriate time. The encircling Guelleners exhibited correct proportions of reality and non-reality for the scene. Mr. Prakash acted with admirable restraint and skill in this pivotal scene of the play. The modulations of his voice in the agony of Alfred III, in Alfred III's realisation that the train has left and that he just must die, in Alfred III's cry that he is lost, were worthy of a finished professional actor abroad. The effect was stupendous. When the dim light goes and bright light is suddenly focused and blooded on a figure lying collapsed on a piece of baggage on the platform, Alfred III's tragedy is complete. Also, resurrection has just begun.

Two later scenes which are of great pathetic significance for the play went somewhat marred in this production. The first was the scene in which Alfred III is



about to be left alone to his fate by his half-unconcerned wife and children. In the text, it was the scene of the family's newly acquired Mercedes. It was meant to show that Alfred Ill's family too came under Claire's spell. The scene and the script had to be altered, perhaps to suit the low potential of the Bal Bhavan stage. Mr. B.S. Prakash's "Cinema".... A good idea!" sounded pathetic enough, as the family departed, but the wife and the rest (The actors, of course) did not seem to contribute much to the pathos. The mutilation of the script was itself unfortunate. The second scene was the scene in the woods when a chastened Alfred Ill, in a retrospective wood, dwells on the thought of his child (by Claire) which died after its first year. Claire's tragedy began with that child. So, in fact, in a sense, did Alfred Ill's. Claire, in her preoccupation with her scheme of revenge, quite forgets the child, the first cause so to speak. Alfred Ill, in his penitence and resurrection, reaches back to his original sin, and contemplates the child of his past, which he had cynically disowned then. He is now genuinely eager to know a little about the child from Claire. Claire, now, is cynically indifferent about the dead child. She probably always was. Mr. Prakash made every attempt to act this pathetic moment in the play. There was a gap in acting between the two of them.

The scene in which the Guelleners meet over the final abandonment of Alfred Ill was excellently produced and directed on the side of spectacle and speech, but not so well in one important aspect. That was in the matter of the immobility, inactivity and lack of emotion of the men and women who played the Gulleners. It was their scene, but they did not act it theirs. They did not act at all. One would have liked them at least to show ugly signs of reveling in their riches "on credit". One of them could have covetously fingered the material of another's gown or scarf. A third could have gored enviously at a costly suit or tie. A few of them could have looked derisively at Alfred Ill and eyed each other immediately. There was no action on the stage demonstrative of their demoralization. Nothing obvious or indicative was performed by the fellow-citizens of Alfred Ill, on those lines. And, of course, there was no sign of a lest lingering thought among them for Alfred Ill who was about to be murdered. Or of a final opinion or judgement on their part that he deserved to die this death. The ensemble of the Geullener crowd was a failure : drama-wise and stage-wise. The Guelleners' gross behaviour towards Alfred Ill did not register or make its theatrical mark in this production. And that was unfortunate because the Guelleners as a lot were the third and last character in the play : in a cast of but three.

Mr. B.S. Prakash, as Alfred Ill, was, at a first look, perhaps a little on the short side, and not so immediately impressive to look fully the one who seduced Claire and foiled her litigation or the one who was to succeed the tail Mr. Malkote as Mayor of Guellen. But, soon, he with the fine ranges and timbres of his voice, the consummate



variety of his acting abilities and his scrupulous adherence to the text, gathered the threads of the story, took over the reins of the play, and carried it to its inevitable and it matters not to the actor who plays Alfred Ill whether the play is real or allegorical, whether there are symbols to search for in the play or whether the play is a cinematic record of events. He is an allegory himself, if there is allegory in the play. He is a symbol, if the story is symbolic. "I cannot suffer from makaria," says the mosquito, "because I am the malaria." As other see Alfred Ill, he may be a symbol of something in the playwright's mind; of something else, probably, in the mind of the audience. But as Alfred Ill sees himself he is just Alfred Ill. And Mr. Prakash just acted Alfred Ill. Victim of a stored memory, victim of a blind code of summary justice, victim of vengeance, victim of greed, victim of a value less society which passed by unconcerned when, years ago, he is seduced an innocent girl and condemned her mercilessly to a brothel, and lost his soul, which also passed by unconcerned when, years later, he meditated on his past offence, paid for it gorgeously with his life, and gained his soul. Here was a community of men and women which deteriorated with Marshall Aid from Claire Zechanassian. Here was a shopkeeper who rose to his full stature as men when about to be destroyed by lesser creatures. Descent and Ascent. Mr. Prakash played his role of ascension with commendable success. The Guelleners did not play their other role with equal success in this production. That was largely because they stuck chiefly to their individual roles and insufficiently to their collective role. Their collective greed. On their collective demoralization.

Keats, in his poem, ISABELLA, describes the march, out of Florence, of Isabella's two brothers and, held between them, Lorengo, their sister's lover whom the brothers are about to kill in order to uphold family honour. They have yet to kill him. He is yet alive. Keats says,

" The two brothers and their murdered man
Rode past fair Florence"

Keats, if alive, might have persuaded Durrenmatt to call his play, THEIR MURDERED MAN. Alfred Ill was Claire's and the Guelleners' "murdered man" long before the actual murder. Claire, one remembers, got down from the train, in the very first scene, with Alfred Ill's coffin among her baggages. Alfred Ill's traumatic fear of death till he shade that fear (and becomes immortal) is the play's basic structure. His love of life, his fear of death and his conquest over the fear of death were beautifully conceived in the play. Dr. Sharma and Mr. Prakash executed this concept on the stage with fidelity and truth - and beauty.

Was it only, then, the individual story of an Alfred Ill which Durrenmatt decorated with the grotesque and the improbable? One thinks, not. Durrenmatt was



a Swiss-German, a German still. A Swiss German in mid-twentieth Century, is a German who sits in a ring-side seat, poised just outside German territory, watching the ring (in German territory) which encloses a view of the wrestling match between Hitler and Western Democracy. (The wrestling match with Russia was a different story. Clairs belonged to the U.S. not to the U.S.S.R). And the German Durrenmatt watched Germany both before and after world war-two. He watched his Deutschland (West Germany) proud of its culture of one kind, ashamed of its culture of another kind, proud of Goethe and Schiller, ashamed of the Kaiuer and Hitler. Ashamed of Hitler also because Hitler, by his fall, exposed Germany to American charity, American aid with strings Germany in earlier eras abused France, England and America. Wronged the Allies. Not as much wronging, may be, as the wronging of Claire by Alfred III. Lloyd George, in the first flush before and during the Treaty of Versailles, after world war- one, voiced the demand that the Kaiser be hanged. All the Allius demanded that Germany be forced to make reparations. The Germans judged the reparations claimed as being far out of proportion to the sins alleged to have been committed by Germany. Then, America flushed industrial finance into Germany. Germany raised its head again. And Hitler rose. And Hitler fall. In World War - Two Hitler committed suicide, and avoided the trails of Nuremburg. A coward he. Alfred III does not his name sound near enough to Adolf Hitler's? scorned to commit suicide, and sought instead that he be judged and killed by his persecutors. No coward he. Because, allegorically, symbolically, Alfred III was a greater man, a greater German than Adolf Hitler. He stood for a strain of German culture that ought not to be killed even if it occasionally produced a Hitler a stain that it cannot be wiped out, that should not be sought to be wiped out.

Could not Alfred III symbolize that ever lasting Germany which is mistaken for Hitler's Germany, the Germany that rises out of Germany's ashes like a phoenix, the Germany that outlasts all the Reasons and the Brezhnev's of the world, the Germany that survives with its marvelous science its magnificent music and it profound philosophy and literature could not the Guelleners symbolise the common German People, the low once, the ones who move away from the core of German culture to American Dollar-dam and Coca-cola? And could not Claire symbolise the avenging Allies, avenging America the much-divorcing, much marrying America, the patronizing, dole-dealing, demoralizing America - which can sometimes destroy more than it can re-create?

Only Durrenmatt knows about these symbols. Or, perhaps, not even he.

