

*Roundabout Theatre
Company*

THE VISIT

Study Guide
January 1 - February 23, 1992

Friedrich Dürrenmatt

The Visit is perhaps the best known play of Friedrich Dürrenmatt, but it is certainly not his only contribution to modern literature. The playwright is author of several novels, plays, short stories and radio scripts as well as an accomplished artist. He won numerous literary awards, including Europe's prestigious Schiller Prize for his contribution to German literature.

Friedrich Dürrenmatt was born in January 1921 near Berne, Switzerland. The son of a Protestant minister, Dürrenmatt spent his childhood in the small town of Konolfingen in the shadow of the larger city. In 1941, he began studies in philosophy at the University of Berne, and later attended the University of Zurich.

Writing in German, Dürrenmatt began his literary career in the late Forties with short stories, criticism, and radio and television scripts. After the critical failure of his first two dramas -- **Es Steht Schreiben (It Is Written, 1947)** and **Der Blinde (The Blind Man, 1949)** -- he shifted his attention to comedy. **Romulus Der Grosse (Romulus the Great, 1949)**, **Die Ehe Des Herrn Mississippi (The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi, 1952)** and **Ein Engel Kommt Nach Babylon (An Angel Comes to Babylon, 1953)** established Dürrenmatt as a leading playwright in his native country.

However, it was not until 1956 that Dürrenmatt achieved international success with **Der Besuch Der Alten Dame (The Visit of The Old Lady)**. The play opened in Zurich's Schauspielhaus on January 29, 1956, before moving to Paris (1957). Maurice Valency's adaptation of the play, **The Visit**, opened at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre on Broadway on May 5, 1958, directed by Peter Brook starring Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. The drama won the 1958 New York Drama Critics Award as Best Play.

While his reputation was already ensured in German speaking countries, **The Visit** pushed Dürrenmatt into the international arena. The play won numerous European Awards and in 1959 Dürrenmatt was awarded the Schiller Prize.

Dürrenmatt next achieved success with **Die Physiker (The Physicists)**, 1962) produced on Broadway in 1964. Set in an insane asylum, the play is an indictment of the advance of science and under Peter Brook's staging, the play received both critical and commercial praise. After 1964, Dürrenmatt continued to write for the stage and adapted several plays including William Shakespeare's **King John** and **Titus Andronicus**. **Play Strindberg**, his adaptation of August Strindberg's **The Dance of Death** was produced in New York in 1971.

Although Dürrenmatt is remembered primarily for the success of **The Visit**, he was a prolific writer and his contribution to literature is of great significance. Influenced by Kafka and Brecht, Dürrenmatt brought significant attention to German theatre and his work has been translated into more than fifty languages. His plays combine elements of the macabre and the grotesque with humor, providing critiques of society - whether it be the love of money (**The Visit**), the progress of science (**The Physicists**), the modern world (**Portrait of a Planet**, 1971) or Swiss society (**Justice**, 1985). Friedrich Dürrenmatt died in Switzerland on 14 December, 1990.

The Visit

Friedrich Dürrenmatt's macabre drama examines greed and the power of money in a small town. Claire Zachanassian, a glamorous, fabulously wealthy woman, returns to her impoverished hometown of Gullen after a long and mysterious absence. A notorious

philanthropist, she is greeted with open arms by the Gulleners who hope that she will endow them and the town with much needed prosperity.

But as the play unfolds, we learn that she has come to Gullen for justice. When Claire was 17, she was seduced and impregnated by Anton Schill, who abandoned her and forced her to leave the town in disgrace. Now she has returned to Gullen for revenge - and will give the townsfolk one billion marks only if they murder Schill. Having set the premise, Dürrenmatt proceeds to question the morality of the townsfolk as they are drawn towards an inevitable tragic conclusion.

When Claire Zachanassian arrives in Gullen, she is borne in on a sedan chair accompanied by American gangsters, her eighth husband, and a pair of blind men. Highly visible among the luggage and her entourage is a coffin which she obviously has an immediate purpose. When townsfolk greet Claire at Gullen railway station, the audience is prepared for her imminent demands by the morbid nature of her conversations. She makes Schill uncomfortable by telling him "I've waited for this moment. All my life. Ever since I left Gullen". She also recommends that capital punishment be restored, and asks questions about death certificates and strangulation. Her focus on death increases the aura of mystery surrounding her. Who are Mike and Max, and why did she buy their freedom from the electric chair ("now they're condemned to my chair")? Who are the two blind men that accompany her on the visit?

The combined effect of her entourage and her strange requests unnerves the Gulleners:

Teacher: "I have seen things to make one's hair stand on end. But when this woman suddenly appeared on the platform, a shudder tore through me. It was as though out of the clear sky all at once a fury descended upon us, beating its black wings - "

During Act One Dürrenmatt exposes her past through small clues in the conversation. We learn that after leaving Gullen, Claire worked as a prostitute until she met and married Zachanassian ("It was my hair that entangled him"). Since then Claire has travelled through the world, using her wealth to assemble the necessary components for her revenge.

When at the end of Act One she provides her shocking condition "I wish to buy justice ... I want the life of Anton Schill" her demands are rejected by the Burgomeister. However by Act Two, the Gulleners behave as though they have already received her money. Claire has given the town a new lease on life and the inhabitants are -- *ironically* -- purchasing goods on credit from Schill. Despite Schill's fears "Out of this prosperity comes the absolute need to kill me," the chief of police has been won over by dreams of financial and refuses to acknowledge any danger. In this scene, Dürrenmatt emphasizes this dreadful irony: "You're the most popular man in town ... The most important". Only Schill can see the implications that this statement has.

Although Claire Zachanassian puts a price on the head of Anton Schill, the Gulleners believe they are motivated by the desire to right the wrongs of her past (and implicitly *their* past, not mercenary gain. As the play progresses, the people of Gullen rationalize the crime in different ways. The Burgomeister tells Schill that he is no longer eligible to be elected Burgomeister on the basis of "moral qualifications"; the "whitewashing" of Schill's family in these events; and the public trial in which the townsfolk blindly repeat their acceptance "Not out of love for worldly gain ... but out of love for the right." Their tunnel vision emphasizes their own greed and there is little that Schill can do except await death.

The calm manner in which the Gulleners accept Claire's money begs the greater question of communal guilt. There are multiple levels of guilt, the most obvious being the Gulleners impending murder of

Schill. The other level concerns the guilt shared by the whole town for Claire's expulsion. The Gülleners are prepared to offer Schill as a scapegoat because they are embarrassed about their role in her misfortune. Instead, they are prepared to whitewash the past, and ignore the repercussions of Schill's fate.

Only the Teacher is objective, acting as Dürrenmatt's voice of reason. By providing the mouthpiece for morality in Gullen, he alone confronts Claire to argue for Anton Schill's life:

Teacher: "But Madame, one injustice cannot cure another. What good will it do to force us to commit murder? Horror succeeds horror, shame is piled on shame. Murder settles nothing."

Claire: "It settles everything for me."

She refuses to grant pity and allows fate to run its course.

When the Teacher talks to Schill, he discovers that the shopkeeper has no spirit left to fight and has accepted death. Both characters acknowledge Schill's crime, but as the Teacher exclaims, "... that does not justify your murder ... In a little while they will have justified everything and forgotten everything." Schill absolves him of guilt, but the Teacher cannot ignore the reality of the situation so easily -- "I will hold it against myself all my life."

At the mock trial, the Teacher again comes to the defense of Schill, but the town will not listen. The Gülleners shout that they are not propelled by mercenary motives. Only the policeman, the Teacher and one of the Gülleners vote against accepting Claire Zachanassian's money. The remainder of the townsfolk are drawn to committing a crime by turning their backs on Schill. Even Schill's family concur with the final decision -- Frau Schill has a new fur coat and the children are taking French lessons.

At its very basic level, **The Visit** is about greed and corruption in a small town. Dürrenmatt's tragedy examines the nature of evil, and how the power of money subjugates modern society. The town of Gullen is not necessarily evil, but accept the blood money without qualms. Schill is given to Claire as a sacrificial lamb; he is torn down from his respected position in Gullen and murdered for his -- and the community's --sins. Towards the end of the play the Burgomeister asks Schill to commit suicide but Schill refuses to make their job any easier. Yet at the end of the play, Schill is left dead on stage ("Died of joy") and the Gulleners simply turn their backs in groups of two or three. Claire gives them the money and departs. The gradual transformation of Gullen from a shabby town to its new elegance is complete. And the only indication of their guilt is the ironic silence of the resplendent townsfolk. Society has committed murder for the sake of prosperity -- and gotten away with it!