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Theatre

FRISCH AND DUERRENMATT

by CHARLOTTE PETER

Swiss playwrights Max Frisch and Friedrich Dürrenmatt are usually bracketed together. Both are famous, successful, have their plays performed at the Zurich Playhouse, deal pointedly with present-day problems, and experiment in the Bert Brecht manner with dramatic forms and possibilities. Though at rock bottom good Swiss, both live on not particularly amicable terms with their own country.

A few years ago Max Frisch published a work with the characteristic title "Achtung! Die Schweiz", in which he appealed for a genuinely Swiss deed. A new town, such as his fellow Swiss Le Corbusier had designed abroad, should be built in Switzerland. There was nothing realistic, he wrote, about being devoid of new ideas, their forebears' embalming way of life at festival time, and making a fancy dress parade out of Swiss tradition. For, he maintained, contrary to the reprehensible opinions of the Weary Willies, Switzerland was the triumph of a Utopian idea over prevalent circumstances. The pamphleteer-style publication aroused a great deal of attention — and a great deal of disapproval as well. People found the idea of a new town far too "foreign" in spite of the fact that Frisch, who had studied architecture, provided a realistic, concrete backing for his idea.

A Row at Zurich

There was even a bigger uproar at the première of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's first play "It is Written". This provoked the first and only row in Zurich's theatre history, in the foyer of the Zurich Playhouse. In fact, the police had to intervene. As a result, everyone was suddenly talking about the young author, but it still was a good ten years before Dürrenmatt broke through abroad with his play "The Visit". Max Frisch's experience was similar. Despite the breadth of his subjects and style, he was unknown outside Switzerland for a long time.

So much for the similarities between Switzerland's two national writers. There are, of course, also many differences — of origin, development, style, personality, temperament and, in particular, of artistic intention. It is true that both attack the abuses of their time, but each uses a weapon peculiarly his own. Despite the fact that his works are often played out on the level of sex and marriage, Max Frisch is a needle-sharp analyst, sophisticated to the point of being slipshod, witty, cool and precise.

Frisch derives from an extremely heterogeneous milieu. Apart from Swiss, his forebears include an Austrian and a South German, in addition to solid citizens, a "pseudo-artist with a cravat to match" — as Frisch wrote in his diary, an aristocrat and a Bohemian. His own artistic development is almost as varied. Born in Zurich on 15th May 1911, he attended school there and subsequently began to study German philology in the "department store of the local University".

Shortly afterwards his father died and the family suffered financial distress. Driven by necessity, the 22-year-old Frisch tried his luck at journalism. This was also the period of his first foreign travels in Eastern Europe, and of his first literary efforts, all of which, however, ended in the fire. At the age of 25, Frisch had the chance of studying architecture at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology. He qualified in 1940, opened an office and designed, among other work, Zurich's Letzigraben open-air swimming pool, a typical example of the pleasing new-pin slick Swiss style of architecture that Frisch was to condemn so severely in his later work.

"Genuinely Swiss" Play

At about the same time, Frisch's first books, "Blätter aus meinem Brotsack", "J'adore ce qui me brûle oder Die Schwierigen", and "Bin oder die Reise nach Peking" appeared, followed in 1946 by his first play, "Santa Cruz".

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a phantasmagoria about a noble knight, an unfaithful wife and a remote castle. A bigger stir was caused by his second play, "Die Chinesische Mauer", in which a young man in roll-neck pullover talks to Napoleon, Columbus and other historical figures. His two war plays, "Nun singen sie wieder" and "Als der Krieg zu Ende war", attracted even more attention. Hans Bänziger describes the latter play as "a masterpiece of political humanism" and thus as something genuinely Swiss. Frisch counters distress with morality, while his contemporaries in Germany give it straightforward expression.

No Salvation

All the more surprising, then, was "Graf Oederland", the play in which Frisch first advances his central theme, the question of identity and individuality, the play of the eternal Hamlet or, in Frisch's version, the play about the petty civil servant who reaches for the axe to free himself and at the end is forced to realise that there is no salvation for this world.

In 1953 Frisch went to California and Mexico at the invitation of the Rockefeller Foundation and there gained new and decisive stimulus. Back home, he eventually won a leading place in modern literature with his two novels, "I'm Not Stiller" and "Homo Faber". His new play, "Andorra", is to be performed for the first time at the Zurich Playhouse shortly. Frisch himself describes the artistic aim of all his work as "To disintegrate ideologies, exorcise political abstractions, upset the arsenal of weapons and stay politically neutral so that I can always present man truthfully".

Wealth of Ideas

Very different is Friedrich Dürrenmatt, who likes the comic-grotesque, gaudy colours, the macabre, the abstruse, the caricature, and who, moreover, suffers from too many inspirations.

In comparison with Frisch's career, Dürrenmatt's seems positively straightforward. Born on 5th January 1921, son of a Bernese country parson belonging to a solid

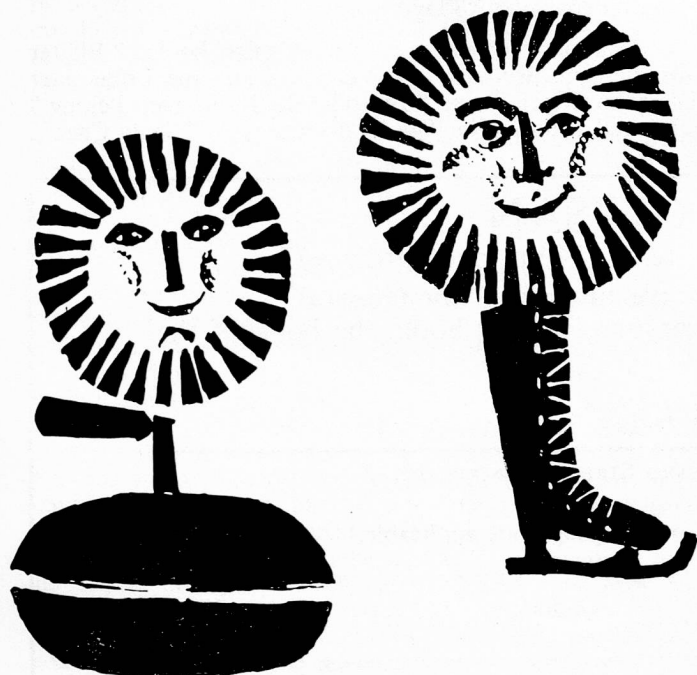
Swiss family, he began writing early in life. Practically from the day he left school he lived as a freelance writer in an out-of-the-way little village on the Lake of Biene. He married at 24 and never felt the urge to travel abroad. He once said: "You can only watch the world from points behind the moon." Dürrenmatt's turbulent, riotous imagination is in inverse proportion to this outward limitation. In the course of a single evening he can throw up enough ideas to keep the average scribe going for a lifetime.

Dürrenmatt gets a special kick out of shocking and flabbergasting people. Every one of his plays — be it "Hercules and the Augean Stables", "The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi", "Romulus the Great" or "An Angel Comes to Babylon" — abounds in the bizarre, the outrageous and the perverse. The jocular is delivered with grand pathos, gravity presented in the form of facetious tableaux.

Rediscovering Truths

In one play a market woman offers lettuce heads for sale while human heads are rolling at the hands of the executioner; and the Roman emperor Romulus prefers hens to heroes. In Dürrenmatt's work there is rarely a likeable or even a positive character, which is why he has been accused of writing plays without heroes. At all events, he writes plays attacking all and sundry, and whoever feels affronted straightway has the satisfaction of seeing his adversary affronted too.

The first performance of "The Visit" was given in Zurich in 1956. Soon afterwards it was staged in New York, Paris, London, Tokio and Moscow, and made Dürrenmatt world-famous. "I became a writer to make a nuisance of myself", says Dürrenmatt, in the gruff way he has, about this play. But the critics think otherwise. One of the most prominent wrote: "A Dürrenmatt never smashes up humanity's household effects unless he is bent on the rediscovery of important truths men have concealed and stifled."



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