

FIRST NIGHT REPORT

WALTER KERR

'The Visit'

LUNT-FONTANNE THEATER

A new play in three acts by Friedrich Duerrenmatt, adapted by Maurice Valency, staged by Peter Brook, settings by Teo Otto, Lynn Fontanne's clothes by Antonio del Castillo, lighting by Paul Morrison, presented by the Producers Theater with the following cast:

Hofbauer	Kenneth Thornett
Burgomaster	Eric Porter
Professor Muller	Peter Woodthorpe
Pastor	William Hansen
Anton Schill	Alfred Lunt
Claire Zahanassian	Lynn Fontanne
Pedro Cabral	Myles Eason
Bobby	John Wyse
Police Chief Schultz	John Randolph
Frau Burgomaster	Frieda Altman
Frau Block	Gertrude Kinnell
Frau Schill	Daphne Newton
Doctor Nusslin	Howard Fischer

THE new Lunt-Fontanne Theater, with its powder-blue walls, floating gilt feathers, and tapering candles reflected on crystal, is as soft as a theater can be. The play, Friedrich Duerrenmatt's "The Visit," with its fanged heroine, its symbolic black panther loping through small town streets, and its bitter stare into the corrupt hearts of a whole community, is as hard as the nails in the coffin that waits patiently in the wings for a victim all night.

Both effects work. The playhouse is immediately inviting, sweeping and gracious in its gesture of welcome. The play coils a longer noose, stating its ruthless premises rather bleakly at first, then slowly, almost imperceptibly, winding its grim threads around your throat as firmly as Lynn Fontanne's web binds a flailing Alfred Lunt.

One expects the Lunts to be superb, even in trivia. They are here not in trivia, and they are superb in a different way. Miss Fontanne's arrogant, ultimately grisly, triumph begins early. The lady sweeps into a tiny, bankrupt European village, dismisses the express that has brought her there ("No, take the train away, I don't want it any more"), summons the gangsters she has "bought in America" to hoist her into her red, quilted-satin sedan chair, and offers the community a billion marks if they will simply kill the native who has seduced and abandoned her as a child.

The regal, tight-lipped smile is familiar. What is new is almost unspoken, an inexplicable hatred that seems to eat itself alive and thrive on the nourishment as Miss Fontanne listens glassily to every plea that might save Mr. Lunt, as she languidly exhales snowdrifts of cigar-smoke while listening to a foolish rhapsody, as she fixes her eyes on a raised rifle and coolly, imperiously talks it and its owner down. The malice is alive, implacable even when it is invisible, a source of enormous, chillingly felt, strength. This is as much mesmerism as acting.

Mr. Lunt, as the unlucky villager who once behaved badly must now reconcile himself to the fact that not a single friend is guileless enough to save him, hitches up his sluggish suspenders, grins feebly over his soiled and tieless shirt, picks his nose while he continues to hope, and gives us little to go on by way of sympathy for awhile.

The sympathy comes at last, as this disbelieving man discovers every one he knows spending the death money in advance (even his wife wears a new fur coat), as he engages in

a futile and terrifying ballet of escape on a railway platform, as he achieves a crushed but clear-eyed dignity in his willingness to die. A knot is apt to form in your stomach as you watch Mr. Lunt clutch his; and the simplicity of his final scenes is very, very moving.

Something of the appalling fascination that seeps through the playhouse is due to director Peter Brook's manipulation of abandoned figures in constantly constricting space. The idle, silky, subtly threatening movement of presumably innocent townfolk as they halt their man's escape by night, the terror of a line of stubborn backs blocking his every turn, the infinitely slow and quiet encircling that ends in a most discreet murder—all are images of insinuating power.

And playwright Duerrenmatt has his own methods. The substance of the evening is by no means easy to take. First Premise: once greed has been loosed in the human heart, there is nothing in the universe that can keep it from accomplishing its ends; connivance with evil is immediate and eternal. Second Premise: once a single act of betrayal has been casually committed, "everything else had to come—there is no escaping." The Duerrenmatt despair has exceedingly deep roots.

But the very brutality with which it is dramatized gives it a stinging theatrical life: the massive stomping of chairs in a meeting-place to signify virtue and suggest vice, the furious irony of a venal man telling his victim he is glad "to see there's a spark of decency left in him," the smiling rationalization of a desperately corrupt species, are made to stare right at us with an almost childlike candor. The flesh crawls; the play moves of its own astonishing power.

It shouldn't take any foolish threats that this may be the last time the Lunts will be performing in New York to get you to see the crown jewels of the theater giving off this cold, brilliant light.

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