

LUNTS IN 'THE VISIT'

They Give a Masterly Performance In Bitter Drama by Swiss Writer

By **BROOKS ATKINSON**

IN 1928 Alfred Lunt appeared in a savagely satirical production of Ben Jonson's "Volpone" for the Theatre Guild.

The fact is recalled here to suggest that Friedrich Duerrenmatt's "The Visit" probably does not surprise him now. What it has to say about money is even more brutal. For it is concerned less with greed than with the power money has to destroy people and communities. "The Visit" is steeped in the kind of ruthless bitterness that characterizes a good deal of contemporary European drama. Brilliantly staged by Peter Brook, magnificently acted by Mr. Lunt and Miss Fontanne, it concludes the formal Broadway season triumphantly.

Mr. Duerrenmatt is a Swiss dramatist who writes in German. "The Visit" has been adapted by Maurice Valency, the Columbia teacher who adapted Giraudoux's "The Madwoman of Chaillot" and "Ondine." Without being familiar with the original work, no one can express an opinion about the merits of the adaptation. But it is easy to appreciate the simple candor of the dialogue, the unhurried flow of the narrative and the colloquial tone of the entire work.

Mr. Duerrenmatt is a comic writer whose point of view is not so much cynical as annihilating. Earlier in the season an off-Broadway group presented his "Fools Are Passing Through," which was amusingly malicious but a little willful. The author seemed to be a little too pleased with his own ingenuity.

Amusing Act One

"The Visit" also begins amusingly. In a bankrupt, stagnant village, the leaders are assembled on the railroad station platform to welcome a fabulously rich lady who left the town under disreputable circumstances when she was a young woman. Everyone hopes that now she will be bountiful with the village. This part of the play Mr. Duerrenmatt writes with the wry fantastification of a modern satirist. The grandeur of the lady's arrival, her regal disdain for railroad rules and regulations, the bizarre splendor of her entourage, the obsequiousness of the villagers are in a vein of comic make-believe.

But Mr. Duerrenmatt is not really in a humorous mood. Under the antic surface there is a deep well of disgust. A Swiss reader has been obliging enough to inform this department that the name of the town, Gullen, is a variant of Gulle, which means "sewage" in a rough translation. At the proper time in Gullen the wealthy lady announces the terms of her offer. She will give a billion marks if the villagers will exterminate their elderly storekeeper. When she was a girl he seduced her and in court denied the paternity of their child. She proposes to repair

that act of injustice by having him murdered.

This would be too monstrous an idea to make plausible in the theatre if Mr. Duerrenmatt were a less ingenious dramatist. But he carries forward his grisly program with logic and in even temper. Nothing rude or flamboyant is said.

But the slow, almost imperceptible hardening of opinion among the villagers, their unprecedented purchase of luxuries on credit against the lady's offer, their unctuous politeness toward the grocer, the apparent reasonableness of their decision to take his life, his silent acceptance of fate—make "The Visit" at once believable and horrifying. Money has power; much money has much power. In conflict with Moloch, morality is complaisant. When the rich lady departs with the coffin of the grocer, abstract justice triumphs and so does Mr. Duerrenmatt's immorality play.

Graphic Acting

The writing is so temperate, the point of view so mordant that "The Visit" would probably have an impact in the theatre even if the production were not so perceptive. But Mr. Brook, a talented British director, has staged a subtly organized production that graphically expresses all the moods of the play. In the light scenes early in the play, he handles the satirical fantastifications in good humor. He avoids obvious melodrama in the middle scenes when the ghastly choice is being made.

The climactic scene in the town meeting is a stunning piece of theatre—the silent weight of public determination visible in the impassive look on the faces of the people, the feeble collapse of the opposition, the orderly assembly of the villagers to witness the strangling, the hideous shuffling of feet and the panic-stricken drawing back from the spectacle of a passionless crime. In these heartless details Mr. Brook conveys everything that the script implies without exploiting it. His taste is as impeccable as his skill.

The Lunts are giving one of their most masterly performances. They have been taking the theatre so casually for so many seasons that thousands of theatregoers have probably never seen them in serious parts. "The Visit" provides a rare opportunity to see their mastery of detail and mood applied to a pitiless drama of ideas.

When Miss Fontanne makes her entrance as the lady of wealth in the first scene, her familiar combination of irony and grandeur promises another evening of witty entertainment. But that is not what she has in mind. The grandeur becomes power. The coolness disguises ferocity. Reserved, detached, elegant, responsive, intelligent, Miss Fontanne gives a superb performance that is meticulous-

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