

Theatre: Swiss Rebel

Duerrenmatt Drama Opens at Jan Hus

By **BROOKS ATKINSON**

ADD to the growing list of theatre insurgents: Friedrich Duerrenmatt, author of "Fools Are Passing Through," which was acted at the Jan Hus Auditorium last evening.

He is a Swiss playwright. This is the first of his plays to be done in New York. The second will be "The Visit," in which the Lunts will appear here next month. Since Switzerland is a solid, sensible, peaceful and prosperous country, Herr Duerrenmatt is naturally full of despair. He has written an abstract drama that combines some familiar features of Pirandello, Beckett and Ionesco and ends in two murders by poison and one by gunfire.

"The world for me stands as something monstrous, an enigma of calamity that has to be accepted but to which there must be no surrender," he says in the program. Don't hold him responsible for the translation. But things are tough all over.

For an hour or so "Fools Are Passing Through" is an entertaining improvisation. It seems to be arguing that the fanatics on both sides—good and evil—are headed for disaster, and that the moderates—good or evil—get along fine. "Christianity is the comedy of the West," says one of the characters. "Justice and freedom are the travesty of the East."

Although the play begins with a murder by three gunmen, the victim pulls himself together, introduces himself to the audience, makes a few imposing observations and then turns the play over to the two chief characters. They are, one, a luscious widow who has just poisoned her husband and, two, the Public Prosecutor of Herr Duerrenmatt's unspecified country, who has done away with his wife. Being equals and well met, they accordingly marry.

Herr Duerrenmatt's style of playwriting is so eccentric, his sense of humor so amiable and his side remarks so cosmic that "Fools Are Passing Through" begins amusingly. Among his apothegms scribbled on the program by an anxious theatregoer are: "The truth is always madness" and "Nonsense is the only sense left to us."

Torn out of context, these observations seem random and trivial. Once the novelty of the methodless playwriting has worn off they seem to be characteristic of the play as a whole. The intricacies within intricacies become tedious; the crises become tepid and the philosophy, hollow. As a full-length play "Fools Are Passing Through" is a bone-crusher.

Maximilian Slater's direc-



Gladys Holland

The Cast

FOOLS ARE PASSING THROUGH, a play by Friedrich Duerrenmatt. Adapted and directed by Maximilian Slater; scenery by Richard Mason; music arranged by Lazlo Revez; costumes by Elizabeth Landis; presented by William Gyimes and Nahum Yablonovitz; production stage manager, Eugene Stuckmann. At the Jan Hus Auditorium, 351 East Seventy-fourth Street.

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| St. Claude | Carl Low |
| 3 men in raincoats | Ben Ardery
Robert Barringer
Michael Green |
| Count Bodo | Martin Waldron |
| Florestan | Herbert Voland |
| Lucretia | Muriel Dooley |
| Vanessa | Gladys Holland |
| Diego | Shepard Kerman |
| Professor Neuhuber | Robert Pirk |

tion takes the play at face value. There is some good acting by Herbert Voland as the sanctimonious, pitiless Public Prosecutor, Carl Low as the blandly cynical revolutionary and Gladys Holland as the faithless woman whose personal charm and primitive intellect fascinate men of all kinds. Although the performance is satisfactory, who can say on the basis of a single viewing that a madder style of direction might not pull the whole play into sharper focus? Like Beckett's "Endgame" and Ionesco's "The Lesson," "Fools Are Passing Through" is peculiarly susceptible to direction.

When the curtain had been up for a full half-hour, a disgruntled-looking theatregoer angrily crossed the theatre in front of the stage and sat down in an empty chair in the first row. At the first intermission he tried to pull himself together. "Is this 'Asmodée'?" he inquired. "Asmodée" is playing across the street in Theatre 74. After canvassing the situation during the intermission, the disgruntled theatregoer returned to "Fools Are Passing Through" for the remaining two acts. He groaned a good deal and pondered the significance of the title, but he sat to the end. He'll catch "Asmodée" later in the week.

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