

## Heldenplatz

*Th.Bermhard*

June 30- July 1, 2013

Professor Schuster is dead. He is survived by his three children, his sickly younger brother, and his wife and not to forget his Housekeeper - Frau Zittel. An apartment is being cleaned out, and the Housekeeper and the maid are busy packing things up. Originally the belongings should have been sent to Oxford, but that is no longer the case as a result of Professor Schuster's suicide, by throwing himself out of the window. Who was he? We learn a lot from Frau Zittel who repeatedly quotes him. He was a pedant, exasperated that his housekeeper never never could fold his shirts properly, and he was a misanthrope. Everything went against his grain. He hated Vienna, and he had no desire to return to Oxford. His wife was a pain, always being sent to a mental hospital. His children were a disappointment. The whole Austrian Nation was a stinking and corrupt anachronism, and the shouting from Heldenplatz fifty years ago, when Hitler announced the Anschluss, were still echoing, but now with renewed force. In short Professor Schuster is a sensitive and complicated person, and most likely a Jew to boot.

In the next scene we meet the family at the funeral. There is the younger brother, who never was expected to outlive his older healthier one. He is the happy brother, he refuses to see and hear. He steadfastly refuses to sign a petition and a protest against a new road to be built right through his beloved town of residence. He will not live then, he refuses to engage himself. His life is soon over. His nieces try in vain to persuade him. After all he knows people, he has influence, a word from him would carry so much weight. To no avail. He does not want trouble, at his age, at the very end of life, he certainly deserves Peace and Quiet. So he is the happy one, the one ready to close an eye, yet the diatribes he directs against the Austrian government are as bitter, as exaggeratedly merciless, as those you would have expected from his older brother. There is no 'Socialismus' worth its name, it is all a sham. Austria is dominated by the Catholic and the Nazis. In fact there is no distinction. A solid majority of stupidity. But as opposed to his brother, he refuses to be bothered by it, to let it influence his life. The older professor Schuster could not do that, he was bothered, in fact he was trapped, and the only place out was through the window, i.e. through suicide.

Then there is a final lunch at the apartment which has been sold, far too soon. There is also a house just bought in Oxford which has to be sold as well. Probably at a loss. It is so hard to find a house and once you have found it, it is even harder to get rid of it. The family is bourgeois, solidly so, with all the petty prejudices that comes with that, such as their disapproval of the recent consort of the son, a mere actress. It is the very paragon of tastelessness to even involve her in the funeral, to let her travel in the same car as the mother. But being bourgeois does not hamper them from ridiculing all the standard bourgeois virtues. But there really is no contradiction in that.

The play associates to the absurd contraptions of a Beckett or an Ionescu. But there is, as in all absurdity, an inescapable logic to it all. The people tend to speak in monologues,

even the dead professor gets his voice heard through the echoes faithfully relayed by his somewhat awed housekeeper. The housekeeper who eventually would be more important to him than his wife, whose interests he could not share whose psychotic condition was a nuisance. Frau Zittel is a blank slate onto which he freely can project what he wants. There is a very suggestible rhythm to the lines spoken by the characters. On the page they are broken off unconventionally creating a typography (and punctuation) that makes you think of formal poetry as well as giving the illusion of hurried speech, in which one word is seamlessly attached to the next, rushing along without stop. The thoughts come quickly, too quickly for the quill to register, only the tongue can give proper credit to the unchecked flow of the brain. Only the tongue can make it usher out with the impatient promptness that characterizes the soliloquy. It is characteristic of the technical presentation of the play, that the lines spoken are prefigured by the same name that just appeared. As if allowing both the actor and the reader to draw a breath of air. In spoken language repetition is legion. That is part of Bernhard's style. The constant repetition. A thought is as if held in the hand. Turned around over and over again. It makes for a sense of insistence. Thoughts are half-baked and can only be cooked by repetition.

There is no resolution in the end, as there is no resolution in real life. Professor Schuster hated debates. They led nowhere. The same with a play. It leads nowhere, to suggest some kind of closure is to grossly misunderstand the nature of a play, of dramatic manifestation.

There are only monologues, and they all sound disturbingly similar, as if merely echoes of themselves. It is like a character in a room of mirrors, which duplicate him endlessly, by tossing his image back and forth, screaming at the top of his voice, being heard by no-one. Unhappiness is being isolated, of being unable to reach out, to touch. If you cannot do that, if your thoughts are not heard, let alone understood, you are condemned to eternal dissatisfaction out of which there is no escape except through the window and the extinction this offers.

Professor Schuster was always partial to suicide, his brother reflects, playing with the idea already as a child, while he himself always lacked the proper temperament for it. He just does not want to get bothered. He was the professor of philosophy, the brother, however, was the real philosopher. A most complicated and tortured individual, and as such having his share of admirers, one of whom actually has managed to attend the intimate affair, and allowed a few feeble lines.

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