

Die Physiker

F.Dürrenmatt

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The key thoughts expressed in this short play are
Alles Denkbare wird einmal gedacht. Jetzt oder in die Zukunft.
and

Was einmal gedacht wurde, kann nicht mehr zurückgenommen werden.

The play written in the early 60's refers to the unearthing of one of nature's terrible secrets, the thermonuclear explosion, which threatens the entire survival of mankind. Those forebodings of Doomsday were, in the context of the Cold War gaining momentum, very much on peoples minds in the fifties and early sixties (to be briefly revived in the early eighties.) The analogy with Mankind having tasted the forbidden fruit of Knowledge was obvious, driving home the point that Knowledge and the control of Nature is not necessarily a good thing. The physicists that had discovered the phenomenon were obviously to blame. But were they? After all anything that can be thought will sooner or later be thought, and once something is thought it cannot be unthought. The discovery was inevitable as well as undoable. Thus the classic ingredients of Tragedy.

The play is such is very simple and schematic, reminiscent of the absurdist plays of an Ionescu, but crystal clear. Maybe simply too crystal clear? Its action can easily be summarized in a few lines as follows. Three physicists are interned in a sumptuous Institution for the insane headed by a resolute female psychiatrist somewhere in Switzerland. One of the young nurses have just been strangled by one of the physicists that claims that he is Einstein and after the murder retreats to his room to play the violin in order to calm himself down. The case is being duly investigated by a tired Inspector (after all Dürrenmatt is also a writer of crime-fiction, be it not of the unabashedly commercial type) more interested in trying to smoke his cigar than to bring the obvious culprit to justice. After all the latter is insane and hence without responsibility. In fact it is not clear whether a crime has been committed in the first place, would it not be better to consider the whole thing an accident? The trouble is that three months earlier another strangulation of a young nurse was committed by the other inmate, referring himself to as Newton. Should not the routines of the Institution be changed, the nurses replaced by strong guards? The third inmate by name of Mbius seems harmless. He has been interred for twenty years his case considered stable but hopeless, his problem consisting of being subjected to repeated visitations of King Salomo. He is being visited by his former wife and their three sons along with the missionary she has just married to say good-bye before they embark on a mission to a remote group of islands in the Pacific. Mbius heaps abuse on them when his sons try to humour him by playing flute, and they have to leave hurriedly. The remaining nurse expresses her love for Mbius and urges him to escape with her. He is not insane after all, he is a great physicist. It ends up with Mbius strangling her.

None of the nurses now being left, strong guards, former boxing champions, one of

them a negro, arrive pushing a dinner tray loaded with delicious food and then leave. The inspector, on his third visit, comments sadly on the difference between his own simple station and those of the inmates. When finally the inmates are left to themselves (the guards in the meantime having returned turning the whole place into a prison by installing bars on the windows) it transpires that all three physicists have been simulating insanity, performing their murders when their respective secrets were threatened to be exposed. Newton and Einstein as agents of opposing camps to fetter out the discovery of Mbius, who has discovered the ultimate discovery, namely the method of all discovery. And having realised its potential for evil and the annihilation of Mankind retreated into a feigned insanity. When the other inmates, for the first time revealing their true identities to the others find out that Mbius has already burned his manuscript they become aghast. Does that mean they they will for ever be confined to their roles as lunatics? Then the head of the Institute appears. It transpires that she has visions of King Salomo and on his instigation she has made copies of the manuscript before it was burned and is now the master of the world. And the final interchange, including the words quoted above by the Doctor and Mbius respectively, is made before the curtains go down. For the physicists, the curtains really go down, as they have no choice but for ever to remain inmates. And maybe when everything has been said and done they were nothing but insane all along, the play after all being classified as a comedy by its author.

As the synopsis reveals the play is schematic, written in a very naked and simple language, with few attempts to delineate characters or to present a psychological drama. The whole play hinges on the abstract idea of the terribleness of knowledge, and that in consequence any action (including that of petty murder) to avoid world catastrophe is justified. Apparently the play shortly after its presentation became for a few years the most frequently performed one on the German stage. Maybe understandably giving the simplicity of the play, not least in its transparency to interpretation, as well as the tenors of the times. A minor revision of the play was performed by the author in 1980, notably concomitant with the revival of the nuclear fear, as referred to above.

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