

The Lower Depths

M. Gorky

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I have known about the play for a long time, in fact the only play by Gorky I have known about, and clearly his most famous one, a copy of which has been in my library since the mid 70's and never read. Never read, maybe out of fear of confronting a depressing one. And finally I give it attention, and it turns out to be rather different from what I had expected. Although the play is a grim and tragic one with deaths and suicides, it does not grip you as a similar story might have done. This may be due to the medium, a play should be enacted and performed on a stage, to just read it is but to encounter a mere pale shadow of the real thing. One may compare with the score of a piece of music, it provides the ingredients to be interpreted and cooked into a dish to be palatable. In a play the voices are everything and only by being played out do they obtain their full significance, as well as being fleshed out by visual embodiment. Reading a play makes it rather abstract, and the abstractness is enhanced by a formality of dialogue that will render things rather absurd. In fact the impression given by the play in question is that of absurd theater later to be developed by Beckett and Ionesco. You tend not to take it seriously by your heart as much as savoring its peculiarities by your reason. Plays by Ibsen, Strindberg (at least the early ones) and Chekhov are far more realistic, giving your slices of real life, while that of Lower Depths, rather presents a bizarre fantasy, a distorted dream if you so like. Thus the play leaves an aftertaste of a curiosity and a conversation piece, rather than one of bitterness and pathos. It is interesting, but merely intellectually so; yet the piece was a resounding success in Moscow, unlike the predictions of the censors. So something was right, the quality of a piece of drama is more than any art due to the reaction of the audiences, this being its ultimate justification, as in all the arts which are essentially popular. A play is a collective effort in which the author plays a significant part, of course, but not an exclusive one as in a story or novel. When it comes to the 20th century development - the movie - the role of the author(s) is reduced even more significantly to that of script writers, hardly acknowledged in the credits, instead the director claims almost complete authority and responsibility. Another significant distinction between theater and the film is authenticity. In the theater every performance of a play has to be reenacted, this is why there will be subtle differences from night to night; while the films are canned products which exist in countless multiples and are viewed second hand and we are not witnesses to its creation in real time as in a performance. Films are artifices in a sense that theater performances are not. In fact as Walter Benjamin remarked, by composition and juxtaposition things can be shown on film that never occurred. An amateur cannot not be employed as an actor on stage, but can be done so, often advantageously and for that reason, in a film.

The Lower Depths is a melodrama engaging stock characters in a stylized not to say absurd way, as we have already noted. Down-and-out characters, such as a petty thief, a declass  nobleman, an alcoholic, a prostitute, a tuberculosic woman and a holy fool, sharing tight living quarters in a basement deprived of daylight. At the very bottom of existence

we are led to understand. Above them there are the landlord along with a much younger wife and sister-in-law and their uncle, which also happens to be the local policeman. The landlord's wife has an affair with the thief, hoping to get out of the situation she is caught in, while the thief takes advantage of it, starting to lust after her younger sister, causing a frenzy of jealousy between the two. He jilts the older wife for the younger pleading with her to join him, but she is reluctant. Then she is beaten up by her older sister and brother-in-law, who gets killed in a scuffle with the thief. Then there is the holy fool and pilgrim, expounding on the conflict between telling the truth and simple compassion. Before that the young tuberculosic woman dies, her ordeal being ignored by her older husband, she only finding words of comfort from the pilgrim. The prostitute dreams and speaks about true love she has read about in books and is being ridiculed. Then there are speeches about some lofty subjects and one of the characters commit suicide at the very end. (Very moving, according to Chekhov, but I could not have cared less).

Gorky was immensely popular at his time, especially around the turn of the century, having come from literally nowhere and making a splash on the literary scene at thirty, the play under consideration being written and performed while that instant fame was still hot. Literary success has much in common with political, name recognition being essential. During a time before the modern movie industry, successful authors, in the sense of having caught the attention of mass audiences, were true celebrities, in the way they had never been before (when there was no general literacy), nor would ever be in the future (after the decline of literacy).

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