

## THE VISIT SYNOPSIS:

*Der Besuch der alten Dame* ("The Visit of the Old Lady") premiered in Zurich, Switzerland in 1956. It was such a success that productions (now with the shortened title, *The Visit*) sprang up in England and America over the next two years. Durrenmatt called this story "A Tragic Comedy." More than any other of his plays, this story of an old lady who returns home to wreak an exact and merciless vengeance on her old flame intimately joins comedy and tragedy to support each other in nearly every scene.

The play has three major characters: the old lady, Claire Zachanassian; her former love and object of her ruthless justice, Alfred Ill; and the townspeople of Gullen, who make up a possible allegorical composite of society itself. Through these characters, Durrenmatt is able to give the audience a darkly comic, breathless debate about the nature of justice, redemption and ultimately, salvation.

Claire is a Shelleyesque patchwork, held together only by her hate. Since her betrayal at the hands of Ill and the Gulleners, she has spent her life in a single-minded vengeance. Her justice is god-like. Durrenmatt compares her to an ancient idol. She is like the statue of Justice - eternal, something out of myth. When the townspeople first refuse her offer of a billion dollars for the life of Alfred Ill, she says quietly, "I'll wait," and you can imagine her waiting centuries.

With the ashes of World War II still in their mouths, the people of Europe in the 1950's faced the growing Cold War and the shadow of the atomic bomb. The question of how a man can hold on to his ideals in the face of grinding poverty was still a strong one. Many saw Claire Zachanassian as a symbol of that desperate fear, but Durrenmatt was steadfast: "Claire Zachanassian represents namely the richest woman in the world who is enabled by her money to act like the heroine of a Greek tragedy, absolutely, cruelly, perhaps like Medea..."

Durrenmatt uses the people of the town to show the weakness of authority, the disorder just beneath the civilization's order. When the Gulleners begin to buy expensive items on credit, Alfred Ill panics, and goes for help to his Family, the Government (the Mayor), the Law (Policemen) and the Church (Pastor), he is rebuffed at every turn. Even the teacher, representing Intellectualism, sees what is happening but is too weak to fight it. With nowhere to turn, Ill takes responsibility for his crime. He achieves the serenity and acceptance that Durrenmatt saw as the pinnacle of human heroism. He gains stature in our eyes through this transformation. He rejects the city's offer to commit suicide; the town, too, must be made to face its responsibility. In the end, Ill is the only character that changes and takes true responsibility for his life.

With *The Visit*, Durrenmatt wrote a classical tragedy for the 21st century, a modern answer to ancient questions of honor, forgiveness, sacrifice, loyalty and community.