Various men of the town of Guellen are gathered at the train station where a decrease in train traffic is indicative of Guellen's overall financial troubles. They look forward with great expectation to the visit of a millionaire woman, Claire Zachanassian. Guellen is her hometown, and she is known for her charitable donations to many other cities; the men note sorrowfully that Claire is the town’s only hope of salvation.

Claire arrives, after pulling the emergency brake on a train that normally would not stop in Guellen. She arrives with her seventh (!) husband and her butler. A man called Alfred III addresses her; he is her past lover and the two recall the pet names they once used for one another. She asks to see a few places - Petersen's Barn and the Village Wood - and refuses an automobile when it is offered to her. Rather, she is accompanied by two men who act as her servants and carry her around in a chair. Strangely, the townspeople note that she brought a coffin with her and make a special place for it at the hotel.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this scene?

1. What does the name of the town (Guellen) mean in German?
   (a) Manure.
   (b) Revenge.
   (c) Poison.
   (d) Love.

2. Where did the millionairess, Claire, found a kindergarten?
   (a) Kalberstadt.
   (b) Guellen.
   (c) Kaffigan.
   (d) Humboldt.

3. Who did Claire have do her portrait?
   (a) Zimt.
   (b) Picasso.
   (c) Klimt.
   (d) Renoir.

4. What is the name of the oil company Claire owns?
   (a) Getty Oil.
   (b) Armenian Oil.
   (c) American Oil.
   (d) Gulf Oil.

5. Who do the townspeople remark spent a night in their town?
   (a) Matisse.
   (b) Goethe.
   (c) Schindler.
   (d) Renoir.

6. What is the name of the hotel in the town square?
   (a) The Golden Apostle.
   (b) The Quartz Inn.
   (c) The Garden Tree.
   (d) The Goethe Hotel.

7. Who do the townspeople say invented gunpowder in the town?
   (a) Bertold Brahms.
   (b) Gustav Windtroft.
   (c) Bertold Schneiderman.
   (d) Bertold Schwartz.

8. How old is Ill in The Visit?
   (a) 65.
   (b) 95.
   (c) 85.
   (d) 75.

9. To whom was the town museum?
   (a) Germany.
   (b) Italy.
   (c) America.
   (d) France.

10. What colour hair did Claire have in her youth?
    (a) Brunette.
    (b) Black.
    (c) Red.
    (d) Blonde.
Understanding and Interpretation

1. Describe the town of Guellen. How does it compare to other towns in the region?

2. How are ‘trains’ important to the opening scene?

3. What do you find humorous about the opening scene? If you were a director, what moments could you humorously ‘play up’ for the audience?

4. Claire has a habit of giving nicknames to people she knows or who work for her? Find examples of this habit. What does it imply about her attitude towards others?

5. Who is Alfred III? What is his position in the town? What is his history with Claire? Summarise Ill’s character here:
Dramatic Study: Exposition

The way a dramatist opens a play is extremely important. He or she is inviting you into the ideas and action and situating you in the world of the play. Because a theatre audience does not typically read a play, the playwright’s tools are different to those of a novelist who may write paragraphs of description at the beginning of chapter 1. Instead, the dramatist has the audience see and hear expository information.

Imagine sitting in a theatre as the house lights go down and the stage lights come up. What do you see first? Often the set design and lighting has an impact. Modern plays may have special effects such as weather effects, video projection and the like. *The Visit* opens on the platform of Guellen, a rundown and dilapidated town in the middle of a severe economic downturn. In the opening stage directions, Dürrenmatt instructs the set designer of *The Visit* to include certain features such as “a rusty signal cabin,” “a barren little building,” and “ramshackle station buildings.” All should be “depicted in bare outline”.

As well as visual information, the audience receives auditory information. You may hear sound effects connected to the weather or background action. The very first line of Dürrenmatt’s work is a stage direction informing the sound designer to provide “clangor of railway-station bell” before the curtain rises. Most importantly, certain characters may be onstage at curtain-up, or will enter from the sides of the stage. These characters may have lines of dialogue that provide expository information for the audience to hear. Older plays often provide formal speeches for the audience in the form of prologues, where a narrator simply stands on stage and gives the audience information directly. The earliest theatre traditions, such as the Greek tradition, featured a Chorus that might provide exposition. In *The Visit*, Dürrenmatt hearkens back to this tradition by having five unnamed characters – Man One, Man Two and so on – discuss Guellen’s dire economic situation on the platform of the town’s dilapidated train station.

Activity

Based on the opening stage directions and first few lines of the play, sketch the opening of *The Visit* from the perspective of someone sitting in the audience when the curtain rises. Annotate your sketch with expository information from the text along with your own comments and analysis.

Concept art by Scott Pask (left) became the set of *The Visit* at the Lyceum theatre in New York, 2015.
Dramatic Study: Entrances

‘It’s more than time that millionairess got here. They say she founded a hospital in Kalberstadt.’

Playwrights often help to build impressions of characters by deliberately constructed entrances. Delaying the entrance of a main character can help to build suspense. Shakespeare was a master of the delayed entrance: in his famous play Macbeth, it is fully three scenes before the main character arrives on stage. Before this, three witches build suspense by foretelling his arrival on a blasted heath, and the audience learn about Macbeth’s bravery and martial prowess through the character of a Captain who reports of his exploits in battle. Perhaps you have studied other plays (or even seen a film or read a novel) in which the entrance of the main character is delayed to create certain effects?

In The Visit, Claire’s arrival is anticipated with much fanfare by the people of the town; considerable time is spent on-stage before she arrives, building up the preparations for her entrance. For example, it is quite notable that the first line of dialogue about Claire mentions that she is a ‘millionaire’. But – her entrance does not quite pan out as expected and, once she arrives, several things she does or says hint that she has plans that may not align with the townspeople’s hopes. In fact, Claire’s arrival represents disruption to the equilibrium of the setting.

Activity

Consider the impact of entrances (delayed or otherwise) by considering one other play you have seen or read alongside The Visit. If this is the first drama text you have studied, use a novel for this exercise instead:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claire Zachanassian in The Visit</th>
<th>Other:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Delayed entrance – other characters discuss her arrival first.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Described as a ‘millionaire’ so money seems to be her defining characteristic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Man Two mentions how she founded a kindergarten...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Important Theme: Artifice and Pretence

‘This is no time for wild enthusiasm, the mood you want is an inward, an almost tearful sympathy for one of our children.’

In the town of Guellen, nothing is as it seems. Appearance and reality are inverted: characters’ motivations are not what they claim, false appearances disguise the truth of things, and even the town’s economic downturn is revealed to… well, you’ll get to that later. From the very beginning of the play, where the townspeople of Guellen are furiously preparing for Claire’s visit, attempting to dress up their poverty and impress the billionairess, Durrenmatt creates an atmosphere of distrust. If everyone is acting in their own best interests, how can one trust that kindness and compassion are not blatant attempts to manipulate others?

When the play opens, the townspeople of Guellen are trying to impress Claire Zachanassian in the hopes that she might endow the town with a large donation. Perhaps the most absurd of these attempts, which include sloppily painted welcome signs and a discordant choir performance, is the Mayor’s blatant distortion of Claire’s past. He rewrites her bad school grades and behaviour record into a speech honouring her for her smarts and charity work. Like a sleazy politician, the Mayor uses words in a calculated way to flatter Claire into giving money. Hypocritically, he even tells the townspeople to “be relaxed” and “sincere” on page 16!

Claire ruins all this by arriving early. By interrupting the Mayor’s preparations before they are complete, attention is called to the contrast between appearance and reality. The sign is not finished, the musical performers haven’t arrived, and no one has had time to put on the right clothes. Even the Mayor’s wife is still getting ready at home. Having been put on the spot, the Mayor tries to cover all this up by passing round a single hat in a scene that is visually funny but calls attention to the pretence of it all quite pointedly.

Ill’s conversation with Claire reveals the differences between the Guelleners and her. She does not try to hide her age or disability, for example, bluntly correcting Ill when he tries to compliment her appearance: “Don’t be daft. I’ve grown old and fat,” she says, “and lost my left leg.” Claire is the only character willing to tell the truth as she sees it, and her arrival is going to expose the town – and people – for what and who they really are.

Activity

Choose three lines of dialogue or stage directions from Act 1 Scene 1 that reveal the theme of artifice and pretence:

1. **Schoolmaster:** Clara Wascher’s marks… were appalling. So was her conduct. She only passed in botany and zoology.
   **Mayor:** (takes note) Good. Botany and zoology. A pass. That’s good.

2. 

3.