

# A Touch of the Absurd

—introducing Gao Xingjian, and  
his play *The Bus-stop*

By Geremie Barmé

IN JUNE 1983 the controversial playwright Gao Xingjian staged his second play, *The Bus-stop* (*Chezhan* 車站), in the small theatre-in-the-round studio of the Capital Theatre in Peking. Gao's earlier production *Alarm Signal* (*Juedui xinhao* 絕對信號), a deft psychological study of an unemployed youth torn between love and revenge on an uncaring society, had been staged in the same theatre in late 1982 to marvelous effect and widespread public acclaim. Both stylistically and thematically *The Bus-stop* goes further than *Alarm Signal* in breaking away from the staid fifty year-old conventions of the Chinese theatre. It is also the first play to introduce elements of the Theatre of the Absurd to a Chinese audience.<sup>1</sup>

*The Bus-stop*, not surprisingly, is a play all about waiting. A number of people more or less representing a cross-section of Chinese urban society gather at a bus-stop on the outskirts of a large city on a Saturday afternoon expecting to catch a ride into town. There is an avuncular old man who is looking forward to a crucial game of chess at the cultural palace; a garrulous young ruffian bent on spending his wages on the strange new food that he has heard so much about—yoghurt; a studious bespectacled young man preparing for his university entrance exams by mumbling English sentences such as, 'Open your books! Open your pigs! . . .' like grace-bestowing mantras; a mother with a job in the local township off to spend the weekend with her husband and child who live in the city; a girl approaching the age of spinsterhood going to meet a prospective husband; an earthy carpenter with a jovial manner and a job in the city, off to teach his trade to a group of young apprentices; and, Director Ma, the porcine but jocular head of a general supplies store off to town to be fêted by some of his cronies. A mysterious and silent stranger stands with the group waiting for the bus. Although none of the others knows what he is doing there, the audience recognizes him as the weary wayfarer of Lu Xun's one-scene play *The Passer-By*, used by playwright Gao as a prelude to *The Bus-stop*. *The Passer-By* is one of the works in Lu Xun's sombre and brooding

<sup>1</sup>For a full Chinese text of *Alarm Signal* by Gao Xingjian and Liu Huiyuan, see *Works and Criticism* 作品與爭鳴, No. 3, 1983, pp. 17-36; the text of *The Bus-stop* can be found in *October* 十月, No. 3, 1983, pp. 119-38.

collection of prose-poetry, *Wild Grass*. Written in 1925, it is a heavily symbolic work about a lone traveller who stops to ask for a drink of water from an old man and a young girl who live in a hovel on the wayside. The old man, drained of all energy and hope, offers no solace or guidance to the traveller, while the young girl scampers to get him a drink and cloth to bandage his feet. Not deterred by the old man's advice to give up his trek, and beckoned onwards by a voice, the Passer-By trudges on. Gao gives a very orthodox interpretation of this play as an allegory of the journey and struggle of the Chinese people for a more hopeful albeit uncertain future. Thus, nearly sixty years later, the Passer-By appears alongside the other passengers waiting at a bus-stop. A number of buses, represented by sound recordings and lighting effects, flash past heedless of the motley band of travellers who are busy arguing with each other and jostling for a place in line. The silent stranger, still consumed by his ancient *Wanderlust*, picks up his sack and continues his journey on foot.

Buses continue to roll past as the group push and shove so as to be first to get on. When none of the buses stop, they get into an orderly line in the belief that this will bring the next bus to a halt. Again a bus passes without stopping. The dialogue is fast moving and highly colloquial, combining the tempo of cross-talk 相聲 with the sardonic humour of Beijing dialect. Gao and the talented director of the production, Lin Zhaohua, are careful to avoid the leaden pedagogy and unconvincing characterization of other recent drama. The play continues in a light, semi-farcical naturalistic mood until the last bus whooshes past the small group. The bad-tempered recriminations and selfish jostling gradually give way to panic and fear that they will never get into town. Will a bus ever stop for them? Is it really a bus-stop they're waiting at? The sharp-tongued yobbo cries that he would have been able to *crawl* into the city by now if he hadn't stayed hanging around for the bus. Each character is caught in the dilemma of whether to go back or walk on into town. Nobody moves. The group is frozen by what appears to be a mass paralysis of will. A vision of the stranger entices some of them to action, and jarring music strikes up. The young student declares that five, no six, seven, eight . . . months have passed. In a dizzying play of disco lights accompanied by the ponderous ticking of a clock the years fly by, eight, nine, ten. Things fall apart, but the show goes on.

'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.' The band of travellers is as bewildered by the flight of time as is the unsuspecting audience; yet still they do nothing. Time, just like all those buses earlier, speeds by as they squabble, sigh over lost opportunities and dream about a future that in a flash has turned into an unredeemable past. Catapulted far into the future, they lose themselves for a while in talk of change, growth, decay and death, yet always come back to the central question of whether they should walk into the city. They still keep pulling in different directions. 'Life must have a meaning!' cries the earnest, now somewhat pedantic, young student: they should walk into town together. It starts to rain. Following a few frenzied moments during which each person tries to keep dry regardless of the others, they huddle together under a large sheet of plastic. As the rain comes to a stop they split into groups discussing their predicament with each other and then directly with the audience. They talk over each other; it is the first time

polyphonic dialogue and direct address have been used on the Chinese stage, so the actors are a little hesitant to really let go, still more concerned with verbal clarity than dramatic effect. This, along with the experimental use of a theatre-in-the-round stage, is all part of Gao and Lin's attempts to break down the 'glass wall' that still separates audiences from the stage in a country where Brecht and Artaud have never been given a hearing.

No bus will stop for them. There is no easy way out, no instant salvation. A casual Saturday afternoon outing has turned into a topsy-turvy nightmare. The fractionated interests and efforts of the passengers are gradually over-shadowed by the common realization of a need for resolution and action. The young student is the first to decide to walk, the others still talk on. 'I really don't understand . . . perhaps . . . they're waiting . . . time is not a bus-stop . . . life isn't a bus-stop . . . Yet they don't really want to go . . . Let's move, we've said everything that can be said . . . come on!'<sup>2</sup> They take up his call 'Let's go', echoing it in an impotent refrain. Eventually, as they make to go the podgy Director Ma calls out for everyone to wait a moment: he bends down to tie up his shoe-lace. The lights go out.

Perhaps all this smacks a little too obviously of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*? In fact, Gao Xingjian is frank about his debt to Beckett, Artaud and a host of writers and theorists of the Theatre of the Absurd. Beckett said in his monumental play, 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful'.<sup>3</sup> If *The Bus-stop* is nothing more than a Chinese version of *Waiting for Godot*, then Gao has got it all wrong: nothing happens and nobody comes, but the irrepressible passer-by from the 1920s appears, waits momentarily with the others and then forges on regardless; the other passengers, forced to look beyond their petty differences and individual concerns, frustrated by their own inaction and weighed on by the relentless passing of time, become wayfarers in turn, united in the hope of getting to the city by their own efforts. Ma stops to tie up his shoelace and the play ends; maybe they will all be reduced to meaningless back-biting again; they might simply just keep on talking about walking into town; or, perhaps they will finally make a start. A group of prisoners who saw *Waiting for Godot* in San Quentin took to the play immediately; they had no trouble understanding Vladimir and Estragon's dilemma, 'Godot is society . . . He's the outside'. The prisoners knew 'what is meant by waiting . . . They knew if Godot finally came, he would only be a disappointment'.<sup>4</sup> Gao Xingjian's passengers are waiting too; the bus comes but never stops, though that is more their fault than anything else. They are left waiting, certainly, but they have an aspired direction; their dilemma is far from being either existential or absurd. It is rather one of strategy and means—when and how they should move on. There is never any real doubt that they can and must go towards the city. Gao's work does not aim at forcing the audience to confront the half-realized fears and anxieties of the human mind. Rather his positivistic view of contemporary Chinese society has a definite moral undertone: unite and work together, but be careful not to neglect the importance and value of the individual. Gao might be inspired

<sup>2</sup>See *October*, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup>See *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin, Penguin Books, 1968, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>*Waiting for Godot*, Faber & Faber, London 1959, p. 41.

by Beckett and Ionesco, but he is keeping his themes well within the didactic tradition of Ibsen and Stanislavsky.

Gao Xingjian is well-suited to be the first writer to introduce erstwhile European *avant-garde* culture to a receptive young Chinese audience. Now in his early forties, Gao studied French as a university student, and was given work as a translator on the French-language edition of *China Reconstructs* after graduation. While at university he read widely in French as well as making a systematic study of classical Chinese literature; a familiarity with the literature of both Europe and China, though expected among writers of the 1930s, is all but unheard of among his contemporaries. Five years in a cadre school during the Cultural Revolution brought him into direct contact with the crude realities of life in the Chinese countryside, while at the same time providing him with ample opportunity to read and write. Following a short period back at the Foreign Languages Press, Gao was transferred to work as a translator in the Chinese Writers' Association, continuing to write in his spare time. Caught up in the post-Cultural Revolution writing boom, he published his first novella in early 1978. Three years later he was given another transfer, this time to the People's Art Troupe 人民藝術劇院, China's foremost performing arts company, as a writer, not a translator. He has written eleven plays to date, the first of these to be performed being *Alarm Signal*, which though controversial at the time has cleared the way for more 'abstract' and daring works to be staged, such as *The Bus-stop*. *Alarm Signal* enjoyed a solid run of one hundred performances in Beijing, an impressive record for an art form badly hit by the recent upsurge in television entertainment and a revived film culture. Restaged by companies throughout the country, the play, which relies heavily on the use of unconventional sound and lighting effects—unconventional for Chinese audiences, heavily overused in the West—has given some Chinese writers and directors a glimpse at a range of new potentials for the theatre as a medium for artistic expression and human communication. Though some critics bewailed the nearly heretical break the People's Art Troupe had made with its solid socialist-realist traditions in performing *Alarm Signal*, more kindly disposed commentators hailed it as a 'new signal for experimentation and reform in Chinese drama'.<sup>5</sup>

In both *Alarm Signal* and *The Bus-stop* the influence of the formidable French dramatist, God-madman, Antonin Artaud is evident. Gao Xingjian is open about his interest in Artaud's view of 'theatre as the double of life' and desire for a drama in which each performance is 'une sorte d'événement' (a kind of happening) which can shake the audience and have a cathartic effect on them. Gao's use of the theatre-in-the-round, various stage effects, polyphonic dialogue, and so on, are all part of post-War western theatre conventions that Chinese audiences are just beginning to learn about. Yet it has only been five years between the publication of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* in Chinese, introduced in a lengthy article about the Theatre of the Absurd by the literary historian Zhu Hong in 1978,<sup>6</sup> and the performance of China's first attempt at a Theatre of the Absurd drama, *The Bus-stop*.

<sup>5</sup> "A Signal Worthy of Our Attention—Introducing the play *Alarm Signal* performed by the People's Art Troupe" 一個引人注目的信號——介紹北京人藝演出的《絕對信號》, by Tang Sixia and Luo Jun.

<sup>6</sup> See *World Literature* 世界文學, No. 2, 1978, pp. 213-310.

As is usual in such cases of adaptation and experimentation, purists of either western or Chinese drama are likely to take umbrage at Gao Xingjian and Lin Zhaohua's hard-won achievement. I personally see these plays as a striking departure from out-dated theatrical convention, stereotyped characterization and acting, as well as unimaginative and unpopular playwriting. Gao's plays have positively enriched the range of expression open to artists involved in all forms of the performing arts in China, and have encouraged people to look into their own cultural heritage and literature to see what positive contributions it can make to the contemporary arts scene.

The *avant-garde* might just be coming into its own in mainland China after a hiatus of nearly fifty years,<sup>7</sup> but elsewhere it is all somewhat *passé*. It is more than likely that the present interest in 'modernism' among the educated urban élite will come under increasing attack by those in favour of 'national forms', as it did in Taiwan in the late 60s and the 70s. In fact, just such a 'popular reaction' is presently being orchestrated by the authorities in the form of a debate about 'national forms' in the arts. Gao Xingjian is an adept at the juggling of mainland cultural jargon, and so far he has been careful to emphasize the 'traditional' and 'Chinese' aspects of his experimentation in the theatre and writing. Taiwanese writers managed to weather that period of 'native soil' reaction—during which a large body of well-written 'native soil literature' was produced—along with its slight touches of xenophobia, to create what appears to be a unique and modern Chinese culture. It is doubtful that 'modernism' will have a similar fate in the mainland. That 'modernism' has been able to develop in mainland China over the last few years at all is astounding; that it will flourish and result in a revolution in content and not just a faddish experimentation with artistic forms is unlikely. I personally think that the movement, though interesting and much needed, is doomed, as it is hard to imagine that the authorities would ever allow the arts to outstrip official policy, much less venture into areas where Communist orthodoxy is loth to go, and where the *avant-garde* will perforce lead it.

On a more optimistic note, towards the end of the year Gao Xingjian's third play is due to be performed in Peking. This time he will be concentrating his efforts more on a melding of Western stage craft with traditional Chinese theatre in what he calls 'modern opera-drama sketches' 現代折子戲. With his background in Western literature and culture as well as a thorough grounding in Chinese theatre and writing, Gao is the first member of the middle-aged generation of Chinese writers to be capable of such experimentation. As such, his work is naturally given more attention than it would otherwise deserve, but until more writers like him come along everything he does will be eagerly awaited by audiences in China and those interested in the Chinese cultural scene overseas.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>As early as the 20s even relatively obscure young writers like Li Jinfa and Feng Zikai used journals such as *Literature Weekly* 文學週報 to introduce the Western *avant-garde*. Li continued to write his little-understood poetry (see "Modernism in Modern Chinese Literature", 浪漫之餘 by Leo Lee, Taiwan 1981, pp. 39-74), while Feng wrote and lectured

about Dadaism, the Constructionists and abstract art (see 西洋美術史, by Feng Zikai, Kaiming Shudian, Shanghai 1928, pp. 233-46).

<sup>8</sup>Editor's note: The Spiritual Pollution campaign intervened at the end of 1983, and Gao's plans had to be shelved.

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高行健：車站

## *The Bus-stop*

By Gao Xingjian

Translated by Geremie Barmé

*THE FOLLOWING EXCERPT is translated from the Chinese text of The Bus-stop as published in the bimonthly literature journal, Shiyue (October), 1983 No. 3, pp. 119-38. This translation starts from the third line on page 129 and finishes with the third last line on page 133 of the published text. The original play would have taken over four and a half hours to be performed on stage; the present version of the work lasts for just over an hour. The text of the play may well have been further altered following the first performances of The Bus-stop in June, 1983. The descriptions of the characters have been added by the translator, who saw the play at a preview in Peking.*

*Characters (in order of appearance)*

- SILENT MAN: A middle-aged man carrying a bag. He impatiently waits for the bus and, as if responding to some inaudible call, starts out for the city by himself without a word to any of the others. His silhouetted form reappears from time to time along with the music of his 'signature tune'.
- DIRECTOR MA: An ageing and porcine cadre, approximately fifty years old. He is a petty dealer and seeming expert in *guanxixue* (the 'science of connections and backdoorism' as presently practised on all levels of Chinese society) who is going to town for a banquet which, he claims, he doesn't care if he misses.
- GLASSES: A studious young man of thirty years who breaks off conversations to swot English. He generally affects the attitude of a somewhat idealistic young intellectual.
- OLD MAN: A man in his late sixties who is going to the Cultural Palace in the city to have the chess game of his life.
- MOTHER: Forty years old; very obviously on the threshold of a mid-life crisis.
- GIRL: An ungainly woman in her late-twenties, paranoid about becoming a spinster and tormented by bouts of melancholia and hysteria as a result. She's off into town to meet a last-hope blind date.
- LOUT: A brash and inconsiderate young man of about nineteen. He has his heart set on testing the latest 'city-side' taste sensation—yoghurt.
- CARPENTER: About forty-five. A dull-witted, 'salt of the earth' type with a heavy (Shandong) accent.

*(Up to this point the action of the play has largely consisted of the characters getting angry with the LOUT for jumping the queue, squabbling between themselves and making various ineffectual attempts to get onto one of the buses that occasionally speed by. One by one they have revealed their reasons for going into the city. Meanwhile, GLASSES has noticed to his astonishment that time is slipping by at an alarming rate—one year has passed since they started waiting at the bus-stop. The SILENT MAN has also disappeared; presumed to be walking into town.)*

DIRECTOR MA: Wait here if you want to, I'm going back. Any of you going to come with me?

*(Silence. The lights dim and the sound of a bus can be heard in the distance. The signature tune of the SILENT MAN becomes audible again, soft yet distinct. The searching beat of the music becomes clearer.)*

GLASSES: Listen, can you hear it? It's . . . .

*(The music fades.)*

GLASSES: Why couldn't you hear it? That fellow must have got into the city ages ago. We can't wait any longer; it's useless to keep on waiting. This is meaningless torture.

OLD MAN: You're absolutely right. I've been waiting my whole life. Waiting just like this, always waiting. Now I'm an old man.

MOTHER: *(at the same time as the GIRL)* If I'd known there was going to be so much bother, I wouldn't have brought such a large bag with me. It would be such a waste to throw these dates and sesame seeds away.

GIRL: *(at the same time as the MOTHER)* I'm exhausted, and I probably look a wreck. I know I'd feel much better if I could just have a short nap.

LOUT: Cut the crap. We could have all crawled into town by now if you lot hadn't just hung around here yapping.

CARPENTER: Why didn't you make a start then?

LOUT: If you go first, we'll all crawl after you.

CARPENTER: I'm no damned maggot that crawls around in a cesspool. I use my hands for my work.

GLASSES: *(facing the audience)* Hey, still waiting for the bus, are you? That's strange, no reply.

*(Louder)* Anybody over there waiting for a bus?

GIRL: It's pitch black. I can't see a thing; it's night. Now there really won't be any buses.

CARPENTER: We'll wait till dawn. The bus-stop's not going to disappear. They can't fool me.

DIRECTOR MA: And if the bus still doesn't come? I suppose, like a right ass, you're going to wait here for it for the rest of your life.

CARPENTER: I've got my trade—they need people like me in the city. What would anyone want you for?

DIRECTOR MA: *(feeling slighted)* I'm invited for a meal, but I don't care if I never make it.

CARPENTER: Why don't you get off back home then?

DIRECTOR MA: I've been thinking about it for a while now. *(Troubled)* I'll have to go all the way back through the open countryside; no houses or villages for miles. What if a dog leaps out at me from the darkness—Hey, which one of you wants to go back with me?

OLD MAN: I've been thinking of going back, too. But it seems to be the less inviting alternative: walking along that path in the dead of night.

LOUT: I'm gonna have a taste of yoghurt if it's the last thing I do. I'll have five jars of it in one go.<sup>1</sup> *(To GLASSES)* Don't waste your time on them. Let's just the two of us get going.

GLASSES: What if the bus comes after we leave? *(Faces the audience and continues as if thinking out loud.)* And if it comes but fails to stop again? Looking at the problem rationally, I know I should start walking; it's just that I'm not one hundred percent sure. What's stopping me is the nagging suspicion that it'll come. I must make a plan! *Desk, dog, pig, book,*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In China yoghurt is presently packaged in small jars not unlike old-fashioned honey pots, which are sealed with a thin paper cover. Generally sold chilled as a beverage in the warmer months, it is commonly 'drunk' through a straw, though spoons are occasionally provided at road-side stalls for those who prefer to eat it. Yoghurt has only become fashionable, indeed only deemed edible at all, in the last few years.

<sup>2, 3</sup> GLASSES, being a pseudo-intellectual, prefers English red herrings. The words and sentences in italics here were in English in the original text. GLASSES mumbles mysterious English incantations throughout the play.



- should I stay or go? It's the enigma of our existence. Perhaps Fate has decreed that we must wait here forever, till we all grow old and die. But why do people accept the capricious rulings of Fate? Then again, what exactly is Fate? (*Addressing the GIRL*) Do you believe in Fate?
- GIRL: (*softly*) Yes.
- GLASSES: You can think of life as a coin. (*Takes a coin out of his pocket.*) Do you believe in this? (*He flicks the coin in the air and catches it.*) Heads or tails? *Pig, book, desk, dog*, that's decided it! *Are you teachers? No. Are you pig?* No, I'm none of those, *I am I*.<sup>3</sup> I am who I am. You don't believe in yourself, but you do believe in this? (*Self-mockingly he flicks the coin again and catches it.*)
- GIRL: What do you think we should do? I don't even have the strength to make a decision.
- GLASSES: Let's gamble with Fate: heads we wait, tails we go. It all depends on the coin—(*He flicks the coin into the air. It falls to the ground and GLASSES covers it over with the palm of his hand.*) Do we stay or do we go? Stay or go? Let's see what Fate has decreed.
- GIRL: (*hurriedly pressing her hand over his*) I'm scared. (*Realizing that she's touching his hand she recoils suddenly.*)
- GLASSES: What, scared of your own fate?
- GIRL: I don't know; I don't know anything any more.
- LOUT: Those two really take the cake. Oi, are you two going or aren't you?
- CARPENTER: Haven't you gone on enough already? Whoever is going to walk, get moving and be done with it. Look, here's the bus-stop and there are people waiting at it. How come there's no bus? How can they expect to stay in business if they don't pick up any passengers? (*Silence. The sound of an approaching bus and the tune of the SILENT MAN can be heard, and gradually become more distinct.*)
- DIRECTOR MA: (*waving his hands as if to disperse the disturbing sounds*) Hey, any of you going to walk? (*The sounds stop. The OLD MAN, who has been leaning against the bus-stop napping, lets out a snort.*)
- OLD MAN: (*without opening his eyes*) Is a bus coming?
- (*No one replies.*)
- LOUT: It's like we're all glued to this bus-stop. What a bummer! (*Takes a wok and then flops down on the ground despondently.*)
- (*The others variously crouch or sit on the ground. A bus can be heard approaching. All listen intently, but no one makes a move. The sound gets louder as the lights in the theatre become brighter.*)
- LOUT: (*still lolling on the ground*) A bus, wow.
- MOTHER: It's about time. Come on, old man, wake up—it's dawn and a bus is coming.
- OLD MAN: Uh, a bus? (*Getting up hurriedly*) You're right.
- GIRL: It won't drive by and leave us standing here again, will it?
- GLASSES: If it looks like it's not going to stop we'll block the road.
- GIRL: I just know it isn't going to stop.
- OLD MAN: They wouldn't dare; it's their job.
- MOTHER: Yes, but what if it really doesn't stop?
- LOUT: (*jumping to his feet*) Hey, carpenter, do you have any nails in your bag?
- CARPENTER: Why?
- LOUT: If he doesn't stop, we can blow his tyres; then no one'll be going into the city.
- GIRL: You can't—it's against the law to disrupt transportation services.
- GLASSES: I still say we should block its path. All right everyone, line up along the road.
- CARPENTER: Right you are.
- LOUT: (*picking up a stick*) Hurry up, it's coming. (*Everyone stands up at the sound of the approaching bus.*)
- GIRL: (*shouting*) S—t—o—p!
- MOTHER: We've been waiting a whole year.
- OLD MAN: Hey you—stop! Stop I say.
- DIRECTOR MA: Ahooy . . . .
- (*They all push to the front of the stage and make to block the road. A horn sounds.*)
- GLASSES: (*directing everyone*) One, two . . . .
- ALL TOGETHER: Stop! . . . Stop!
- GLASSES: It's been a whole year!
- ALL TOGETHER: (*waving and shouting*) We can't wait any longer! Stop, stop. S—t—o—p . . . .
- (*The sound of a horn blaring wildly.*)
- LOUT: (*running forward with his stick upraised.*) I'll show you.
- GLASSES: (*holding him back*) You'll be run over.
- GIRL: (*closing her eyes in horror*) Dear . . . .

CARPENTER: (*rushing forward he pulls the LOUT to a halt*) Do ya' wanna' get yourself killed?

LOUT: (*breaking free and running after the bus, he throws the stick after it*) Damned well hope ya' flip into a river and the fish suck ya' brains. (*The sound of the horn fades into the distance.*)

CARPENTER: (*at a loss*) It was full of foreigners.

MOTHER: It was a bus-load of tourists.

GLASSES: Thinks he's some big deal, that driver does. Just because he's driving a bus full of foreigners.

OLD MAN: (*grumbling*) Wasn't even full.

CARPENTER: (*baffled and hurt*) We're waiting here at the bus-stop just like we should. We'll buy tickets; what's wrong with our money?

DIRECTOR MA: Do you have foreign currency?<sup>4</sup> You need foreign money to get onto that bus.

OLD MAN: (*stamping his feet in frustration*) But this isn't a foreign country.

GIRL: I knew it—I said they wouldn't stop for us. (*At this moment a number of vehicles flash past them. They are represented by different colours and sounds, and are moving in opposite directions.*)

DIRECTOR MA: This is just too much. They're playing games with us. If no one's going to stop, we might as well not wait here any more. But let me tell you something: if the Bus Company isn't given a shake up, there's no way the transportation situation will improve. What you all have to do is to write an official complaint. I'll take it to the Transportation Department personally. (*Pointing at GLASSES.*) You can write it.

GLASSES: All right, but what should I say?

DIRECTOR MA: What? Oh, well, you say, . . . see, well . . . What type of intellectual are you supposed to be? Why, you don't even know how to write a letter of complaint.

GLASSES: What good would it do anyhow? Won't we still be left standing here?

DIRECTOR MA: You can keep on waiting here if you want, I'm not in any particular hurry. I

<sup>4</sup>Or in full, Foreign Currency Exchange Certificates (*waihuiquan*), known to foreigners as 'funny money'. This is a clone currency of China's *Renminbi*, except for the fifty *yuan* note, and is supposedly restricted for use by people who are not citizens of the People's Republic.

didn't want to have that meal in town in the first place; and what should I care about any of you? Go on and wait if you want. See if I care.

(*They all remain silent. The signature tune of the SILENT MAN starts up and becomes a quick and taunting melody in triple time.*)

GLASSES: (*looks at his watch. Shocked*) I don't believe it.

(*The GIRL goes over to look at his watch. They count the numbers indicated on the face of the watch in time with the music.*)

GLASSES: (*continuously pressing the indicator button on his digital watch*) Five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen months . . . .

GIRL: . . . one month, two months, three months, four months . . . .

GLASSES: . . . five months, six months, seven months, eight months . . . .

GIRL: . . . one year and eight months altogether.

GLASSES: Another year has just gone by.

GIRL: That makes it two years and eight months.

GLASSES: Two years and eight months, . . . no, it's three years and eight months. No, I'm wrong—five years and six months . . . . Seven, eight, nine, ten months.

(*They all look at each other in amazement.*)

LOUT: This is crazy.

GLASSES: I can assure you that I'm quite sane.

LOUT: Wasn't talkin' about you. I said my watch's had a nervous breakdown.

GLASSES: Mechanical devices don't have nerves. A watch is a mechanism that measures time and it isn't influenced by the psychological states of its owner.

GIRL: Please don't, I beg of you.

GLASSES: Don't try to stop me. None of this is up to me. There's no way you can hold back the passage of time. Come on everyone and have a look at this watch.

(*All crowd around GLASSES and peer at his watch.*)

GLASSES: Six years, seven years, eight years, nine years. See, ten whole years have passed just while we were talking.

CARPENTER: Are you sure you haven't got it wrong? (*Grabs his wrist, shakes it, holds it to his ear and listens, then looks at the face of the watch.*)

LOUT: (*coming forward he grabs the button on*

*the watch.*) See—no numbers now, just a blank dial. (*Raising GLASSES' arm for all to see.*) One touch of that knob and it's all over. (*Smugly*) Nearly got taken in that time.

GLASSES: (*gravely*) How can you be so stupid? Just because you've switched off my watch, it doesn't mean that Time itself has stopped. The existence of Time is an objective reality; it can be proven by mathematical formulae— $T = \sqrt{a + \beta \times \Sigma^2}$ , or something . . . . It's all in Einstein's Theory of Relativity.

GIRL: (*hysterical*) I can't take it any more.

OLD MAN: This is a disgrace; (*coughs*) making passengers stand around waiting till their hair turns grey . . . . (*Suddenly becoming quite decrepit.*) Preposterous, absolutely preposterous.

CARPENTER: (*pained*) The Bus Company must be trying to get even with us for something. But we haven't done anything to them, have we?

MOTHER: (*overcome with exhaustion*) What's going to happen to my darling Peipei and her father now? They don't even have a decent change of clothes . . . and him without a clue about sewing.

*(The LOU walks to one side and kicks stones along the ground, then sitting down despondently he spreads his legs out and stares straight ahead in a daze.)*

GIRL: (*numbly*) I want to cry.

MOTHER: Yes, dear, have a good cry. It's nothing to be ashamed of.

GIRL: But I can't . . . .

MOTHER: It's not our fault that we were born women. We're doomed to wait, it's simply our lot in life. It starts when we wait for the right man to come along, and then we wait until we get married. Then we wait for a child, after which we wait till the child grows up. By then we've already grown old, and . . . .

GIRL: I'm old already . . . . (*Leaning on the MOTHER'S shoulder.*)

MOTHER: Go on and cry if you want; you'll feel much better if you do. If he was here and held me in his arms, I'd just cry and cry . . . I can't tell you why I feel like this, it's hard to explain.

DIRECTOR MA: (*turns to the OLD MAN balefully*) I'm telling you it's not worth it, old man. Why not grow old in the peace and calm of your own home. All this playing of the lute, chess, calligraphy and painting<sup>5</sup> is for whiling away

the hours at home. Why do you have to go into the city to find yourself a partner anyway? Is it worth throwing your last years away here on the road?

OLD MAN: What would you know about it? All you can think about is your infernal wheeling and dealing. The whole point of chess is the feeling of exhilaration you get from it; it's all a matter of the spirit of the thing. The spirit of the thing, that's what life's all about.

*(The LOU, looking extremely bored, swaggers up behind GLASSES and gives him a hard slap on the shoulder which snaps him out of his silent reverie.)*

GLASSES: (*angrily*) You don't understand what pain is—that's why you're so indifferent. We've been cast aside by life, forgotten. The world is fleeting by in front of you and you don't even see it. You might be happy to muddle along like this, but I'm not.

CARPENTER: (*sadly*) I can't go back. I'm a carpenter, I make hardwood furniture. I'm not going into the city just to make money, I've got a service to provide. Back home I get by pretty well—with my tools I can knock a bed together, make a dining-room table or a cabinet. We get by all right we do, my family and me. I can't let the craft that's been handed down to me by my ancestors die out like this. You might be a big-wig Director, but there's no way you can understand how I feel.

GLASSES: (*pushing the LOU aside*) Leave me alone. (*In a sudden fury*) I need some quiet. Can't you understand? I need to be left alone.

*(The LOU moves away obediently, makes to whistle but then takes his fingers out of his mouth.)*

GIRL: (*facing the audience and thinking out loud*) I've had many dreams in the past, some of them very beautiful . . . .

MOTHER: (*facing the audience and saying to herself*) Sometimes I wanted to dream.

*(The following speeches are spoken simultaneously and weave together as the characters address the audience, ignoring each other.)*

GIRL: I've dreamt that the moon can laugh out loud . . . .

<sup>5</sup>*Qin, qi, shu, hua*, the elegant pastimes of the 'retired scholar' in classical times.

MOTHER: But then I'd always collapse on the bed dead tired. I could never get enough sleep . . . .

GIRL: I dreamt he was holding my hand and speaking in my ear softly. I really wanted to stay close to him . . . .

MOTHER: From the moment I opened my eyes Peipei would be standing there in front of me with a toe sticking out of one of her socks . . . .

GIRL: I don't have any dreams left now . . . .

MOTHER: The hem on the sleeve of her father's sweater would have come undone, too . . . .

GIRL: No black bear would ever jump out at me now . . . .

MOTHER: Peipei wants a little battery-drive car . . . .

GIRL: And no one chases after me ferociously . . . .

MOTHER: Twenty cents for a kilo of tomatoes . . . .

GIRL: I won't be having any more dreams now.

MOTHER: That's how mothers are. (*Turning her head in the GIRL's direction*) I wasn't a bit like you when I was your age.

(*The following is a dialogue between the GIRL and the MOTHER.*)

GIRL: You can't imagine how much I've changed—I've become so petty. I can't stand to see prettily dressed girls. I know it's not right for me to feel the way I do, but whenever I see city girls all done up and wearing those high-heel shoes, it makes me feel as though they've walked all over me and are flaunting themselves in front of me just to rub it in. But I know I shouldn't have these feelings.

MOTHER: I understand. I don't blame you . . . .

GIRL: You'd never believe how jealous I feel; I hate them all.

MOTHER: Come now, don't be so silly. You shouldn't be so hard on yourself.

GIRL: I've always wanted to wear one of those floral dresses. You know, the type that's all just one piece, with a little zip at the waist. But I don't even dare make one,—in the city it's different, everyone walks around in public in dresses like that. How could I ever wear something like that here?

MOTHER: (*caressing the GIRL's hair*) Let me give you some advice: whatever you want to do don't wait until you're my age to do it. You're still young, there's sure to be boys who'd be interested in you. You'll fall in love, then

you'll bear his child and he'll care for you for the rest of your life.

GIRL: Go on, don't stop. Have you really found some grey hairs?

MOTHER: (*inspecting her hair*) No, no. Really, I haven't.

GIRL: Don't lie to me.

MOTHER: Well, yes; but there's only one or two strands.

GIRL: Pull them out.

MOTHER: But you can't tell, honestly. If I pull them out you'll only get more.

GIRL: Please, I beg of you.

(*The MOTHER pulls out a strand of grey hair. Suddenly hugging the girl to her she starts to cry.*)

GIRL: What's wrong?

MOTHER: I've got so much grey hair—my hair's almost white.

GIRL: No it isn't. (*Hugging her they cry in each other's arms.*)

LOUT: (*sitting on the ground. He slaps a bank-note down, takes some playing cards out of his pocket and throws them on the ground as well*) Okay, I'll take on any of ya' for a fiver. All or nothing.

(*The OLD MAN feels his pocket fretfully.*)

LOUT: Don't worry, I made it all doing odd jobs. If luck's with ya' you can make yourself a little ready cash, no sweat. I don't care—there's no way I'm going to hang around here any longer.

(*DIRECTOR MA and the OLD MAN move closer.*)

LOUT: All right, which one of you's puttin' up the stake? Three dollars in one hand, four in the other—I've only been able to harvest a 'crop' of five bucks—just enough for a return fare to town and a drink of yoghurt. It's all here.

DIRECTOR MA: How's a young fellow like yourself managed to fall into such bad ways?

LOUT: Aw, give over. Keep your speeches for your own kids. How about you old man, feelin' lucky? Come on, you can put money on two of the cards. It's only a fiver. If you pick the right card it proves luck's on your side; if you lose, well, a few dollars isn't anything to a man of your age and stature. If you wanna bet for a round of drinks, don't worry—I'm buying.

(*The CARPENTER walks over to join them.*)

LOUT: Gate to Heaven, Gate to Earth, Green

- Dragon, White Tiger.<sup>6</sup> Come on, which'll it be?  
*(The CARPENTER cuffs him.)*
- LOUT: If I can't go into the city and have my yoghurt, what else is there for me to do?  
*(Bursts into tears.)* Let the bloody city dudes prance along their damned roads then . . .
- OLD MAN: Come on m'lad, pick 'em up.  
*(The LOUT rubs his eyes with the back of his dirty hand, blows his nose and picks up the money and cards. Lowering his head he continues to whimper. Silence. Gradually, the sound of traffic intermingled with the tune of the SILENT MAN becomes audible in the distance, rising and falling in pitch. The tempo of the music speeds up and it turns into a lively melody.)*
- GLASSES: There's not going to be any bus. *(With finality)* Let's start walking, like that man. While we've been wasting all this time at this bus-stop, he's had time enough to get into the city and really do something. There's nothing worth waiting for here.
- OLD MAN: You're absolutely right. *(To the GIRL)* Don't cry any more. If you'd gone along with that man you'd have been married long ago, and your child would be walking by now. Instead we've all stayed here waiting, getting more and more bent with age. *(With difficulty)* Come on . . . *(Staggers forward.)*  
*(The GIRL hurries over to support him.)*
- OLD MAN: I'm only worried that I won't be able to make it. *(To the MOTHER.)* Are you coming with us?
- GIRL: Do you still want to go into the city?
- MOTHER: *(smoothing down the GIRL's hair with her hands)* How unfair. You can't tell me no one wants a nice girl like you. I'll introduce you to someone. *(Picks up her travelling-bag.)* I only wish I hadn't brought such a heavy bag.
- GIRL: Here, let me take it.
- DIRECTOR MA: You've been buying up for your organization?
- OLD MAN: Are you coming or not?
- DIRECTOR MA: *(thoughtfully)* If comfort's what you're after, it's nice and quiet in a country town. Even if you can put up with everything
- else, let me tell you old man, the roads in the city—what with those confusing red and green traffic lights—before you know what's happened you'll have got yourself run over.
- CARPENTER: I'm going.
- LOUT: *(having regained his composure)* Do you expect us to carry you in a litter or something?
- DIRECTOR MA: What are you making such a fuss about, eh? I've got high blood pressure and hardening of the arteries. *(Angrily)* I don't have to take this. *(Moves to exit; looks back.)* I forgot to take my medicine: it's a compound of wolfberry and formalin sedative with special nutritive additives.  
*(All watch him exit.)*
- OLD MAN: Has he gone back?
- MOTHER: *(muttering)* He's gone back.
- GIRL: *(feebly)* Don't go.
- LOUT: Let 'im go. Come on.
- CARPENTER: *(to GLASSES)* Are you coming?
- GLASSES: I'm just taking one last look to see if a bus is coming. *(He takes off his glasses, polishes them and puts them back on.)*  
*(They all split up and pace up and down the stage, some of them obviously wanting to make a start, others remaining motionless; they collide.)*
- OLD MAN: Get out of my way!
- LOUT: Go on then!
- MOTHER: What chaos.
- GLASSES: Ah, life . . .
- GIRL: Do you call this living?
- GLASSES: Sure it is. Despite everything we're still alive.
- GIRL: We might as well be dead.
- GLASSES: Why don't you end it all, then?
- GIRL: Because it seems like such a waste to come into this world and then get nothing out of life.
- GLASSES: There should be some meaning to life.
- GIRL: To live on like this, not really alive and not dead either—it's so boring!  
*(All walk on the spot and then turn around in circles as if possessed.)*
- CARPENTER: Let's go.
- GIRL: No—
- GLASSES: No?
- LOUT: Come on.
- MOTHER: Yes, coming.
- OLD MAN: Let's go—  
*(Silence. The sound of falling rain.)*

<sup>6</sup> *Tianmen, dimen, qinglong and baihu* are names used to indicate the position of the cards in relation to the 'bank'. In other contexts these terms may have an astrological, military or indeed sexual significance.

*Author's Suggestions for the Performance of The Bus-stop:*

*Note:* Following the resounding success of Gao's first play, *Alarm Signal*, in October 1982, drama troupes throughout the country performed it, often ignoring or completely unaware of the tremendous attention the writer and director had given to stage effects, lighting and characterization in the original performance. Gao Xingjian appended a list of *Playwright's Suggestions* to the published text of *The Bus-stop*, clearly in the hope of avoiding similar 'misinterpretations' of this play. These 'suggestions' are of interest not only in that they give us something of an insight into the author's artistic perceptions, but that they also show just how far the average 'drama worker' is from an immediate understanding of Gao's style of theatre. G.B.

1. In creating this play I have experimented with the use of the 'multiple soliloquy'. At times there are two or three, or even as many as seven, characters speaking at once. Due to the technical limitations of the printed text, it has not been possible to indicate the use of this device here effectively. But then, drama is primarily for presentation on the stage.
2. Just as one does not demand that every instrument in an orchestra be played at the same pitch, so the multiple voice-over soliloquies need not be delivered at the same volume. The main [vocal] theme should be complimented by different harmonies and accompaniment, but not overwhelmed by them . . . .
3. As drama, like music, is an art governed by time, I believe that the various forms of music can be applied to it. In this play I have used both the *sonata* and *rondo* forms to replace the conventional Ibsenesque dramatic structure . . . .
4. Sound [effects], including music itself, should not be purely expository. In the play sound effects and dramatic situations work as a combined whole, sound often being added as counterpoint, and the contrast between combinations of harmony and disharmony is used to give the music an independent role, allowing it to carry on a dialogue with both the characters and the audience. If when presenting this play conditions permit the composition of music for the whole work, the music for the SILENT MAN should act as a *leitmotif* attenuated by musical variations.
5. In traditional Chinese Opera drama and poetic force have always been closely allied. This play is an attempt to meld modern drama and contemporary poetry. I hope that the actors who perform this play will pay particular attention to expressing the poetic qualities of the work.
6. In this play artistic abstraction, or what can be termed an 'essential likeness' (神似), is of more importance than mere realistic detail. Precedents for such an approach can be found in traditional opera, especially in the vivid and subtle performance of Mei Lanfang in *The Consort Gets Topsy* (貴妃醉酒) and Zhou Xinfang in *Xu Ce Rushes to the City* (徐策跑城). Care must be taken to create characters similar to those in contemporary society, and exaggeration is to be avoided.
7. This play aims at combining dramatic action and inaction. When emphasis is to be given to action then attention should be paid to the clarity of physical movement, while at those times when inactivity is indicated physical stasis should be stressed while language takes over from the action.
8. The *parole* of the characters is at times clear and direct, while at other times it is vague and purposely inept, or uttered merely for the sake of speech, just as the very act of waiting for the bus comes to preclude the reasons and meaning for doing so. This use of dialogue can express the comic aspect of the characters . . . .
9. This play is best suited to performance in theatre-in-the-round, assembly halls and open air theatres. If it is performed on a conventional stage, the performing area should ideally be extended in length and the action concentrated on the front end of the stage.

The above suggestions are for your reference only.