

何聞：話劇「車站」觀後

Postscript: On Seeing the Play *The Bus-stop*

He Wen's Critique in *Literary Gazette*

Translated by Chan Sin-wai

THE SCRIPT OF the play *The Bus-stop* was published in the journal *Shiyue* (October) in May, 1983. Beginning in June that year, several experimental performances were staged by the Peking People's Art Troupe. Watching the live performance is a more vivid experience than reading the script.

1

... THE IMPRESSION one gets from the play is this: a particular bus route and the Bus Company which operates it were originally set up to serve the public, but have now come to disregard the needs of the public and are instead a cause for public indignation. The passengers are ordinary members of society, each with his own quite reasonable and ordinary wishes to fulfil ('being fêted by cronies' is hardly reasonable, but has become deplorably customary). But these very ordinary wishes are frustrated by the extreme irresponsibility of the Bus Company. The bus-stop sign is so worn and faded as to be illegible and the would-be passengers have to wait interminably for the bus to come. It is such a long distance from the suburbs into town and all their hopes are pinned on the bus. But they have been made fools of.

... Is this play, which conveys so strongly the would-be passengers' anger, pain, pessimism, humiliation, and despair at their failure to get onto their bus, simply criticizing the problems existing in one particular transport department in real life? Of course it is doing more than that. *The Bus-stop*, while depicting the despair of the would-be passengers, also relates, through the mouths of its main characters, all kinds of malpractice, various unhealthy tendencies existing in our society: traffic disorder, bad service, shortage of supply of certain goods, the science of "connections", "backdoorism", lack of civilized manners, job-transfer through powerful connections in town, poor rural education, and so on and so forth. Watching this performance, we are made to feel that our lives are in total disarray, and that there is hardly any hope or future.

There are, to be sure, many serious malpractices and great difficulties in our present life. And we are now waging an arduous struggle to overcome them, a struggle in which we have achieved considerable, if gradual, progress. Despite the

difficulties, our future is full of hope, China is sure to be revitalized, and the socialist cause is certain of an even greater victory. Creative writers and artists should truthfully reflect this struggle and the course of its development. Naturally, art should expose the dark side of life, but this exposure should do more than merely arouse attention; it should also enhance the confidence to find a remedy. *The Bus-stop* has failed to produce this effect; it has actually encouraged the loss of confidence.

The author once made the remark that this play "attaches great importance to artistic abstraction, or what may be termed an 'essential likeness'." He also said that the play has a "certain symbolic meaning". The question is: what does it symbolize? It is possible that the play contains abstruse doctrines such as "freedom of choice", deriving from existentialism, but the direct impression it creates is this—the Bus Company and the fate of those waiting would-be passengers symbolize the general condition of our present lives.

Perhaps some may say: Surely we are allowed to expose the dark side of life. But the problem with *The Bus-stop* is not that it exposes the dark side of life; it is the way it exposes, and the things it "symbolizes", that constitute a distortion of our real life. There is a line in the play which summarizes this: "Everyone sees it, but there is no solution." If "there is no solution", how can there be any hope at all?

2

SOME SAY that *The Bus-stop* aims at attacking some kind of "national characteristic" of the present time—the vacillation, waiting, frustration, discontent, and inertia. These failings can hardly be called a "national characteristic." But even if they are simply the individual weaknesses of a certain number of people, they still ought to be criticized. However, what the play shows is in fact something quite different. The fault, in this whole bus-waiting incident, lies entirely with the Bus Company: to go into town from the suburbs, the public is dependent on the bus service. It is only too understandable that they should go on waiting and waiting for the bus to come. They truly deserve our sympathy. Is there anything that we can find fault with in it? What the play mocks and criticizes is not the vacillation and waiting, but the way in which this group of people, while waiting for the bus, continue to cherish illusions about a Bus Company which totally ignores them and fools them again and again. The dilemma the play presents us with is: these people rest their hopes on something which is patently corrupt and unreliable, and the lessons derived from reality will not awaken them, so much so that it is only after they fail to make out whether the bus-stop sign is still in use, that they start to walk hesitantly. How pitiful, lamentable, and laughable are their illusions about life!

So what is the way out? In contrast to those pitiful, lamentable, and laughable common people, the play features a Silent Man who slips away from the group and walks into town while the others begin their long hopeless wait for the bus. Although his appearance on the stage is brief and quite wordless, the Silent Man has a special signature tune of his own, a prominent *leitmotif* which runs throughout the play. (After the Silent Man leaves, his signature tune can be heard several times,

and the author compares the tune to "exploration", "satire", "the voice of the universe", and "a march".) This is clearly the real message of the play.

But is this Silent Man really so superior to the rest of the group; is he really an ideal figure for us to emulate? The programme-notes for *The Bus-stop* say: "The Silent Man symbolizes the call of the times; the future belongs to those who talk no nonsense, waste no time, and have a genuine sense of initiative." In real life, there are indeed many such enterprising individuals. They have their revolutionary ideals and their world outlook, and, working together with the masses, are boldly innovative, persistent in struggle, and diligent in enterprise. They are part of the masses, and at the same time life's pioneers. How can there be the slightest similarity between the symbolic figure in *The Bus-stop* and those new socialist men whose initiative responds to the call of the times? The Silent Man is no more than a "Superman", a narcissistic figure setting himself apart from the masses. He is the kind of person who claims to be "sober while all men are drunk". Disillusioned and deprived of hope, he disdains the fantasies and expectations that people have towards life and goes his own way. The pitiful and sad experiences of the other would-be passengers only serve to prove him right. Such is the ideal personified by this figure in the play. But is this the correct attitude towards reality and towards the masses? People cannot help asking why the ideal figure in the author's mind does not care about the suffering of the people, does not join with the masses to change the present situation, but instead adopts an indifferent attitude towards those around him and simply stalks away? This attitude towards life and way of behaviour, which we should strongly oppose, is whole-heartedly endorsed in the play. What hope does the play offer to the passengers or the audience?

3

WHEN *THE BUS-STOP* was performed, *The Passer-By*, a one-scene dramatic prose-poem from Lu Xun's collection *Wild Grass*, was staged as a prelude. Furthermore, the actor playing the role of the Passer-By also played the role of the Silent Man in *The Bus-stop*. Why should it have been so arranged? Let us put aside the appropriateness of presenting Lu Xun's prose-poem *The Passer-By* on the stage at all; even with regard to the philosophical content of these two works, it is impossible to see how they can be related. However, the performers proclaim in their programme-notes that *The Bus-stop* "is the descendant of the theatrical technique created by Lu Xun half a century ago; it is an attempt to take Lu Xun's technique a step further by introducing some new ideas" This gives the impression that *The Bus-stop*'s reflection of life is also inherited from Lu Xun.

The Passer-By was written in March 1925. In it, Lu Xun created the figure of a revolutionary Passer-By who severs all ties with the dark old society; fearless, and regardless of personal gain or loss, he moves resolutely forward. The Passer-By also feels lonely, bewildered and weary, but he believes neither the old man nor the young girl. He faces reality soberly, accepts no charity, and trudges doggedly on. *The Passer-By* and other works in *Wild Grass* truthfully reflect the process of transformation that Lu Xun underwent at this time, from a Darwinist to a fighter for

communism. What we see in *The Passer-By* is the scientific attitude of Lu Xun, his strict ideological self-examination, and his thoroughgoing revolutionary spirit as a fearless fighter for anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism.

The age of *The Passer-By*, needless to say, is gone. Our social ideals and spiritual condition have far transcended the historical and philosophical limitations of *The Passer-By*. Even when judging the two works on their own merits, we can barely mention the Silent Man of *The Bus-stop* and the Passer-By of *The Passer-By* in the same breath. How can we put a lonely, arrogant individualist who sets himself above the masses on a par with an indomitable revolutionary? To stage two plays of contradictory philosophical composition at the same time, and to describe *The Bus-stop* as a theatrical descendant of *The Passer-By* is to say the least rash, and at worst a deliberative confusion.

The Bus-stop does not continue the tradition of *The Passer-By*. It is a product of the blind worship and mechanical copying of the social viewpoints and creative theories of modernist drama in the West. The author of *The Bus-stop* has written a book entitled *A Preliminary Discussion of Contemporary Narrative Techniques* (hereafter abbreviated as *Preliminary Discussion*). In this small book, which contains many philosophical and theoretical contradictions and distortions, the author twice approvingly mentions Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In his other writings and speeches, he also repeatedly discusses this work. The two-act play *Waiting for Godot*, written by the Irish playwright Beckett in 1952, is one of the representative works of the Theatre of the Absurd in the West. The play is about two wretched-looking tramps who wait aimlessly for Godot on a deserted country road. The play does not tell us who Godot is, and why he should be waited for. Even when the play ends, Godot has not come. Like other playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, Beckett considers the objective world absurd, cruel, and unthinkable, and that is why the words and deeds of the characters in the play *Waiting for Godot* are also unthinkable. Some critics in the West consider that this play "exposes the dilemma of humanity in an absurd universe." This work mirrors to some extent the life and the human spiritual condition of a capitalist society, and can be of some help in understanding the absurdities of capitalist society; but the world outlook, the philosophical and social stance of the playwright are "idealistic" and nihilistic. We support the discriminating use of the best modern literature from the West. It has already been shown that when this is done properly, it helps our own creative writers. But we must certainly not lavish uncritical praise on the social attitudes and creative concepts of the Theatre of the Absurd. Let us see how the author of *The Bus-stop* evaluated *Waiting for Godot* in his *Preliminary Study*:

After World War II, (Samuel) Beckett, the representative figure of the *avant-garde*, wrote a modern tragedy *Waiting for Godot* that shocked the Western world . . . Beckett's message is very clear: The Godot who never appears, however long the characters in the play wait for him, is the future that men wait for, pray to as if it were a deity. They hope to free themselves from poverty and suffering, and therefore wait endlessly for Godot; but he never appears.

Godot represents Beckett's observation of modern society, or to put it another way, it is the artistic condensation of his world outlook.

His audience and his readers can freely draw their own conclusions from this abstract figure Here we have to admit that in artistic presentation, the playwright's technique is outstanding. We may call the method employed by Beckett to portray the figure of Godot a method of artistic abstraction.

The dialogue in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is written in a deadpan style, something like fragments of conversation in real life. Taken as a whole, the play is both utterly absurd and, on closer reflection, surprisingly profound.

Since the contents of the play are so "surprisingly profound," we can read between the lines that the author has an enormous veneration for Beckett. It is therefore not too difficult to understand why there is so much resemblance between *Waiting for Godot* as Gao sees it, and his own creation, *The Bus-stop*. The two plays are both about "waiting": waiting for Godot, waiting for the bus. And they both deal with "the futility of waiting": waiting in capitalist society, where the future offers no solution to those wishing to free themselves from poverty and hardship; and waiting in socialist society.

The Passer-By as depicted by Lu Xun is a fighter who abhors the old society, who never looks back, but keeps forging ahead to look to the future. The Silent Man in *The Bus-stop*, on the other hand, is a lonely individualist who goes his own way. Since the social connotation of these two figures is so strikingly different, how can it be said that *The Bus-stop* is the theatrical descendant of Lu Xun? Is it not more appropriate to say that it has been influenced by the social viewpoints and artistic outlook of such "idealistic" and nihilistic works as *Waiting for Godot*?

4

THE APPEARANCE of *The Bus-stop* is not fortuitous: it reflects the influence in literature and art of a certain erroneous trend in social thought.

The policies laid down by the Third Plenum of the Central Committee at the Eleventh National Party Congress have since led our country onto a prosperous broad road to build a modernized socialist society. In the last five years, we have achieved great success. There are still many problems and difficulties to be overcome, and we are now trying to do this and have achieved significant results. This is the present situation. Most of the people follow the Party line closely, and move forward with full confidence. However, as a consequence of the ten years of turbulence and of the corrosive effect of foreign bourgeois ideology, the thoughts of a certain number of people have for a long time been confused and unstable. Their individualism, liberalism, and anarchism have gradually developed into a kind of negative, pessimistic, and indifferent outlook with which they judge our reality, and have reached the point where they even express doubts and adopt a negative attitude towards the leadership of the Communist Party and the future of socialism.

A certain trend of thought in artistic and literary creation is often the manifestation of a certain trend of social thinking. Our writers and artists should, through their creative artistic activities and through their true reflection of life, enlighten the

benighted, and, with a clear-cut standard of love and hatred, exert a transforming influence on the people to heighten their awareness, and encourage them to have the will to fight for the great cause of socialist construction. Many of our works have given play to the progressive function of socialist art and literature. However, after a certain period, amidst an unprecedented literary and artistic blooming, some deviant works which distort history, twist the facts, spread all kinds of negative, pessimistic, corrupt, and vulgar ideas, and propagate all manner of bourgeois, idealistic, egoistic world views, creating harmful effects on readers and theatre-going public, have appeared. In literary and artistic theories, some comrades enthusiastically advocate Western modernist art and literature, trying to develop our country's art and literature along the lines of the Western modernists. Under the pretext of "discriminative borrowing", "blazing new trails", and "achieving eminence", they blindly laud the modernist school in the West to the skies, and plan to "transplant" indiscriminately the entire world outlook and artistic philosophy of the modernist school to China, and use it to serve as the guiding ideology for our creative writers and artists. *The Bus-stop* is surely a case in point.

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ILLUSTRATION from *Shiyue*