Play Review

Eine Kleinian Nachtmusik

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The darkened stage becomes slowly illuminated; in the background, the solemn strains of a Brahms sextet. Mrs. Klein, Uta Hagen, her body taut, intense, is seen arched over a cluttered desk in an elegantly furnished old drawing room, behind her, a self-conscious young woman, Paula. This genteel setting, backdrop for the unfolding of an intricate thematic counterpoint, belies its impending role as battleground, betrayed only by the curve of Mrs. Klein's body, poised as if to pounce. The production, which takes place in a single convulsive night, encompasses all the turmoil of the early days of psychoanalysis, all the bitter conflicts over theory and practice, and all the poignancy and tragedy of a family's life, its melange of fratricidal, infanticidal, homicidal and oedipal struggles.

What follows in this drama by Nickolas Wright, which enshrines as its centerpiece a tour de force of virtuoso acting by Uta Hagen, is the story of Melanie Klein's relationship to her children, her colleagues, her relatives, her marriage, her profession, her writing and her theoretical ideas. Although only three individuals ever appear on stage, the room is crowded with the unseen presence of dozens of people. Some of them are real, familiar names such as Edward Glover; others represent the internal characters of the three protagonists, their inner ghosts, their imagined representations of one another, the apparitions of their longings and hatreds toward each other and themselves. The scenes depicted in their conversations, crowded scientific meetings of the psychoanalytic society, railway stations, restaurants, a funeral, become vivid proscenia for the enactment of their lives and their psyches. As the play unfolds, we are witness to the players' stormily ambivalent, often completely discrepant views of one another and to the kaleidoscope of characters in their shared lives, simultaneously their inner and outer worlds. If a mere three people represent such a multitude, what must be the ghostly psychic population of a larger group?

This intricate lacework, like a piece of fine chamber music, can be viewed, grasped and analyzed from a variety of perspectives: as theater, its
theatricality, its dramatic line or its superb acting; as history, its portrayal, albeit with poetic license, of the drama and tragedy of Melanie Klein's life, her contentions with the professional community of her time, a depiction of the often questionable practices of the early analysts, the theoretical wrangles and bitter struggles for preeminence, and the often provincial attitudes that permeated that atmosphere; as psychodynamic exploration, in the playing out of the psychic worlds of the characters, their needs, hopes, yearnings, terrors and defenses; as interpersonal relationships, in the struggles and the tug-of-war in which they constantly indulge; and as symbolism, in the metaphorical weight of the events, the exchanges, and even the tangible articles that the characters handle, and that take on compelling symbolic significance. In this short article, we can only approach some of these potential riches. We will leave it to others to fill in the gaps.

The play opens with a conversation between Mrs. Klein and Paula, in which Paula says virtually nothing and Mrs. Klein holds forth effusively and at great length. We discover that Mrs. Klein is about to leave for what is ambiguously either a vacation or a funeral. As she entrusts to Paula the care of her house and the editing of her latest book, we begin to see something of her character in the precision, the detail, even the fussiness of her instructions, as well as in her penurious style. Her reservations and niggardliness become even more evident as we later learn and witness her locking virtually everything in the house, to render inaccessible even the necessary towels. The carefully hidden keys to her file and her liquor closet, to be discovered later by Paula, are meticulously and meaningfully squirreled away in a bookshelf behind a copy of "The Interpretation of Dreams." This small detail, I believe, alerts the audience to adopt an attitude of dream interpretation to the entire work, to view the events simultaneously in the light of history and fact, and as the chimeral representation of the psychic world, as well as the intensely subjective representation of the outer world of the participants: we are witness to a dream. Or perhaps a nightmare. That is the key.

Those hidden keys, however, hold even more meaning. They represent the access—or lack of it—to the inner feeling life, the emotional responsiveness, the giving capacity (such as it is) of Mrs. Klein herself. With them, she locks away everything in her house, rendering it cold and unwelcoming: blankets, towels, every amenity, and most certainly that symbol of jollity, camaraderie and friendliness, the liquor, just as she locks away her own inner warm and maternal feelings. Only later do we learn the extent to which this is and has been true throughout their shared lives, and how tragic and poignant has been the result.

Paula appears rather timid and acquiescent throughout these beginning exchanges. Under Mrs. Klein's questioning she reveals her impover-