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## INTRODUCTION

Max Frisch wrote his first play when he was nine years old. His parents, both theatre enthusiasts, had just surprised the boy with a birthday present of a very special kind. In the attic of their house in Zurich they had set up an elaborate toy theatre, complete with a wooden proscenium arch, a pair of painted backdrops, six figurines made of cardboard, and a system of metal tracks to move these figurines in and out of sight.

The young boy was delighted by this present, and indeed in the weeks to come became entranced by it. Manually very dexterous, he supplemented the little toy theatre with further scenic devices. He added the shell of a prompter's box, installed a system of tiny, battery-operated light bulbs, and added a curtain. In short, he persistently began to transform the little stage into a complex miniature world of its own. This perfectly functioning machine, this toy theatre in the attic, however, could only come to life if it was animated by a dramatic event, a scenic impulse, a play. The architectural shell was there; it now had to be imbued with a story.

The nine-year-old Frisch sat down and provided these stories. His first play, a short and grim tale, *The Robber Hotzenplotz*, was barely four pages long; yet, that seemed enough to contain a wedding ceremony, a thunderstorm, the assault on a castle, two songs, a cavalry parade, and a snowstorm. Frisch's dramatic imagination appeared to know no bounds: the little toy theatre had unleashed a world of dramatic fantasies, of fantastic drama.

In years to come this toy theatre was to engage the young boy with unusual force. In a continuous and dynamic process he would re-design and re-construct the little stage, and he would compose scenarios,

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sketches, plays to suit his own, his very own theatre. *The Lost Letter* (*Der verlorene Brief*), a bloodcurdling melodrama, and *Journey to the Moon* (*Die Reise auf den Mond*), a space odyssey patterned on Jules Verne, were particularly successful with the audience of school friends, family, and neighbours that by now gathered every Sunday afternoon for a spectacle in which Frisch was the proud master of ceremonies.

The success of this domestic enterprise led Frisch, in a daring leap of faith, to believe that he was ready for the professional theatre. With the self-confidence, or rather the audacity, that only an adolescent can muster, the fourteen-year-old schoolboy decided to send his newest, most ambitious play, *Steel* (*Stahl*), to the German National Theatre. The parcel went off to Berlin. Six weeks of nervous waiting followed, then the answer arrived: it was a politely phrased, yet very firm rejection.

Frisch was devastated. His long-held hopes to succeed in the theatre, hopes that were nourished by his parents and strengthened by his friends, were dashed by one letter. Frisch did not know what to do; and then, suddenly, he did. In a violent romantic, or rather pseudo-romantic gesture, he gathered all of his dramatic scripts, fragments, plans, tied them into two bundles, carried them into the forest of the Zurichberg, and burned them. A chapter was over: his lively little toy theatre suddenly fell into silence.

For years to come Frisch would not write a single dramatic line; the pain inflicted by the letter from Berlin was too acute. But he felt that he had to continue writing. And so, in a very conscious effort to rebuild his self-confidence, he now turned to prose. He began with short, very short stories, his writing still tentative, exploring the miniature form. Soon he became more self-assured. By the time he was nineteen, he had assembled an impressive body of prose writing: short biographical profiles, travel sketches, journals, political essays, short stories, and finally, in 1934, at the age of twenty-four, his first expansive piece of prose, the novel *Jürg Reinhart*. Critics and readers immediately agreed: here was a new voice, both elegant and authentic.

The response to this first novel by an unknown writer was unusual,

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both in its force and its degree of sophistication. *Jürg Reinhart* was admired for its narrative economy, its unerring precision in creating multi-layered characters, its clever use of an entire system of ironies, and, above all, for its modernist, self-reflexive stance, that informed the entire text with rich ambiguities.

One of the readers who had been completely taken by Frisch's novel was Kurt Hirschfeld, the Chief Dramaturge of Zurich's Municipal Theatre. He invited the young author to dinner, expressed his enthusiasm, and extended an offer: Frisch should write a play for the Zurich Theatre. The author's response was cautious; he thought he had said farewell to the stage long ago in that incendiary act in the forest. So he resisted. But, over weeks and months, even years, Hirschfeld pursued his offer with diplomacy and force. He twisted Frisch's arm ("almost to the point of breaking his bones", he later recalled), and he finally won. Frisch sat down, after fifteen years of dramatic silence, to write not one play, but two: in a veritable torrent of creativity, within eight weeks, *Santa Cruz* and *Now They're Singing Again* were born. A spell had been broken; Frisch was a playwright once again.

The young author, who was thirty-three by now, could not have been offered a more stimulating venue for his enterprise. The Municipal Theatre of Zurich was, quite simply, the strongest company in Switzerland. It could boast a small, yet splendidly equipped stage; it had over decades managed to attract a uniquely ambitious and gifted group of actors, directors and designers; and it could rely on an audience that was young, intellectually curious, and very demanding.

The crucial year of 1933 had brought with it another substantial strengthening of the company. Hitler's access to power had driven many of the leading theatre artists out of Germany. A considerable group of these refugees found a safe haven in Zurich, and within weeks they were integrated into an already stellar company. By the time Max Frisch began his collaboration with the Zurich Theatre, it fully deserved its title as the most prestigious theatre company not only in Switzerland, but in all of the German-speaking world.

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Kurt Hirschfeld, who over a lifetime was to become Frisch's closest friend, his most generous mentor, and his severest, sincerest critic, was the intellectual force of this theatre. His uncompromising anti-fascist stance and his rigorous aesthetic standards shaped what theatre historians have come to call "The Zurich Dramaturgy". The heart of this dramaturgical program was the systematic fostering of new talent. Hirschfeld was convinced that the true dramatist did not write *for* the stage, but *with* the stage. He therefore actively encouraged the integration of prospective stage writers into the day-to-day process of theatre-making. Frisch, too, was invited to this inclusive method of working and learning: he attended rehearsals of all the plays in the repertory; he sat in on discussions with the design team; took actors aside to argue over subtle shadings in the script; deliberated with technicians on lighting cues; discussed any use of incidental music. In short, Frisch was intimately familiarized with the craft of staging. He came to realize that the dramatist was more than simply a provider of words, but had to become the creator of a rich *theatrical* emblem. This was the lesson Frisch learned under the mentorship of Kurt Hirschfeld. It was a lesson that was put to a test, and to splendid success, in his first full-length play, *Santa Cruz*.

\* \* \*

*Santa Cruz* tells the story of a stern, hard-edged army captain who uses all of the instruments of patriarchy with unbending force. He seems to enjoy limitless wealth, and resides in a castle that is lavishly maintained by a varied set of servants whom he bellows at and orders around as if he were on the battlefield. For seventeen years now he has been married to Elvira, a woman of ethereal beauty and a delicate mind; but the marriage has turned into an emotional wasteland. One night, in the midst of winter, a poor, handsome, mysterious stranger begs to be let into the castle, where he is fed by the servants, given new clothes, and a bundle of hay to sleep on. Next morning, it is a Sunday, he is introduced to the castle's master and mistress, who each respond to the intruder in very

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different ways. The Captain is suspicious and immediately senses a threat to his dominant control. Elvira, however, quite helplessly and hopelessly falls under the intoxicating spell of the stranger. Who is he? Could he be that mysterious sailor with whom, seventeen years ago, she spent one single rapturous night? Is he the liberator she has so fervently been dreaming of, who could free her from the wasteland of her marriage? Could he, by some magic coincidence, be the father of her child, who has just turned seventeen? Or was he, beyond all romantic linkages, simply a good-looking beggar asking for food and shelter on a snowy winter night? Elvira does not know, and will never know, for the stranger dies of a mysterious affliction. His seven-day visit to the castle has set forth a range of turbulences, of hopes, fears, memories and desires, but, in the end, has not effected any change. The marriage continues, locked into what seems an eternal stalemate, until, some day, some night, another stranger might knock at the door . . .

Frisch's first play was a fairy tale. The term he himself used was "romance" (*Romanze*), and indeed *Santa Cruz* is a poetic meditation on *Sehnsucht*, that eternally unfulfilled yearning for something beyond the coarseness of the material world. This yearning for complete transcendence beyond the deadening codes of rule and order propels Elvira. Touched, or rather burned, by the liberating grace of the stranger, she dreams of shedding the chains of bondage. What she so fervently longs for is the revolutionary act of being, instead of simply seeming. This desperate attempt to celebrate one's authentic self, this longing for a holy communion beyond the law of domestic convention, places Elvira securely in the late-romantic tradition of heroines with eternally unfulfilled desires.

In conversations about *Santa Cruz* Frisch has repeatedly referred to his first play as a seasonal battle (*ein Kampf der Jahreszeiten*). In this conceptual model the Captain represents the figure of Winter, enthroned in his castle, which is covered, like a shroud, by thick layers of snow. The wells are frozen, the bitter cold seeps indoors, and forces everyone to be packed in fur and thick cloth. It is the world of the

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frozen heart. The castle has turned into an ice palace, ruled by the King of Winter.

But there is the other world, the world of adventure, of passion, of pleasure and heat. It is the world of the stranger, who comes not from the frozen north, but from the steaming, tropical seas of the south. He is turbulence, fertility, intoxication, danger, and life. He is the dynamic principle, always in motion, always in commotion. He is, with his laurel of vines, the God of Spring.

Elvira stands on the battlefield of these formidable forces, torn by the reality of winter and the promise of spring. The tensions of duty and pleasure, of rule and freedom, and, ultimately, of Thanatos and Eros, come to shape her life, a life that ends in darkness, with Elvira submitting to the yoke of a loveless marriage once again.

*Lebendig begraben*, buried alive, was an earlier title of this play. It is a hard and bitter play, with Winter in command. And yet, at the very end, literally in the last few lines, there is hope, or at least the faint glimmer of hope. The daughter appears, very real and tangible, and yet almost like an apparition, to offer, however faintly, a new beginning. As long as we believe in adventure, Frisch seems to imply, and as long as we continue to hope, there will be renewal, and spring will, possibly, return.

In *Santa Cruz* Frisch deals with a grand topic in a bold and adventurous manner, and stylistically, too, he takes some extraordinary risks. One of the more striking dramatic features is Frisch's highly inventive and complex handling of time. Instead of relying on the proven dramatic formula of chronometric progression, Frisch constructs a temporal frame in which various time-levels overlap and interlock. What he achieves in the process is a conglomeration of time, in which the past is very tangibly brought in through re-enactment, and where the future is forcefully evoked in verbal fantasies. Seventeen years of marriage and seven days of the stranger's visit collapse into the real time of theatrical performance. What we, as readers and audience, witness is the contraction of measured and imagined time into one single, immensely rich and complex temporal experience. Ever fond of geological imagery,

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Frisch has compared this to the violent shifting of tectonic plates, where, in the process of commotion, the layers have begun and continue to interpenetrate in the most surprising ways. Time, Frisch argued, cannot be captured in any linear, mechanistic model; it defies chronometry, and must be understood as something he once called “continuous undulation” (*ewige Wellenbewegung*).

According to Frisch, not only our temporal experience, but our spatial sense, too, is informed by this undulation. In *Santa Cruz* the scenes shift, slide and slither continuously from one dramatic locale to the other. They do this with dream-like assurance, and with no need to justify their shift in any rational, reasonable way. The castle’s kitchen; the deck of the pirate ship on the high seas; the seedy brothel near the harbour; the ominous chamber of death: all these locales are sketched out by Frisch with the loving care of the realist. And yet, in their collective summation they all add up to a richly patterned *mythic* space that embraces a variety of worlds in one potent and complete scenic metaphor.

Frisch’s deliberate and artful play with time and space brings *Santa Cruz* as a dramatic construct very close to the experience of a dream. In both there is the fluidity of time that seems to move, then halt, and then move again at ever shifting speed, and in ever changing directions; and in both our sense of space is always surprisingly located, then re-located and dis-located, in a torrent of prismatic images. Linearity of plot and clarity of action are abandoned, to give way to a dramatic narrative that replicates the particular and peculiar laws of the dream.

But whose dream is being dreamt? Is it the Captain’s fantasy of power, or is it Elvira’s dream of liberation? Is it the servants’ proletarian dream of freedom, or the daughter’s dream of a returning spring? Or could it be Max Frisch’s collective dream, that subsumes all the dreams of all the characters? Like any good artist, Frisch provides us with questions, but refuses an answer. What he leaves us with in *Santa Cruz* is a dramatic metaphor of infinite complexity, that is as rich and rewarding, but ultimately as impenetrable as a dream.