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The Physicists

A Play

Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Translated by
James Kirkup

Samuel French – London
New York – Sydney – Toronto – Hollywood



Original German version by Friedrich Dürrenmatt
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THE PHYSICISTS

Presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre on 9th January 1963 with the following cast of characters:

(in the order of their appearance)

POLICE INSPECTOR RICHARD VOSS	<i>Clive Swift</i>
MARTA BOLL, the matron	<i>Doris Hare</i>
BLOCHER, a police photographer	<i>Edmond Bennett</i>
GUHL, a police stenographer	<i>John Corvin</i>
1ST POLICEMAN	<i>Peter Geddis</i>
2ND POLICEMAN	<i>Ian McCulloch</i>
POLICE DOCTOR	<i>Gordon Honeycombe</i>
HERBERT GEORG BEUTLER (NEWTON), a patient	<i>Michael Hordern</i>
FRÄULEIN DOKTOR MATHILDE VON ZAHND, alienist	<i>Irene Worth</i>
ERNST HEINRICH ERNESTI (EINSTEIN), a patient	<i>Alan Webb</i>
FRAU LINA ROSE	<i>Patience Collier</i>
OSKAR ROSE, her husband, a missionary	<i>Michael Burrell</i>
ADOLF-FRIEDRICH	<i>Paul Greenhalgh</i>
WILFRIED-KASPAR	<i>Ian Lindsay</i>
JÖRG-LUKAS	<i>Pip Rolls</i>
JOHANN WILHELM MÖBIUS, a patient	<i>Cyril Cusack</i>
MONIKA STETTLER, a nurse	<i>Diana Rigg</i>
UWE SIEVERS, chief male attendant	<i>Tony Steedman</i>
MCARTHUR, a negro male attendant	<i>Kenneth Gardner</i>
MURILLO, a male attendant	<i>Jonathan Holden</i>

Directed by PETER BROOK

Designed by JOHN BURY

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the Play passes in the drawing-room of a "villa" belonging to the private sanatorium known as "Les Cerisiers"

ACT I

An afternoon in November

ACT II

An hour later

Time—the present

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(See also page ii)

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ACT I

SCENE—*The drawing-room of a "villa" belonging to the private sanatorium known as "Les Cerisiers". About 4.30 on a November afternoon.*

The immediate neighbourhood is an unspoiled lakeside which gradually deteriorates into a built-up area and then into a medium-sized or even smaller town. This formerly neat and charming little spot with its castle and Old Town is now adorned with the hideous edifices of insurance companies and exists chiefly on account of a modest University with a recently added theological faculty and Summer Courses in Foreign Languages; in addition there is a business college and a dental school, a boarding-school for young ladies and light industries of no great importance: the town for the most part steers clear of the hurly-burly of modern life. So the landscape is, in a superficial way, restful to the nerves; there are blue mountain ranges, hills geometrically afforested and a fairly large lake, as well as a broad plain, once a dismal moor, which turns misty in the evenings and is crissed-crossed by canals and irrigation ditches and is therefore very fertile. There is a house of correction somewhere in the vicinity which has undertaken large-scale agricultural schemes, so that everywhere there are to be seen silent and shadowy bands and little groups of criminals hoeing and digging. Yet these general surroundings really play no part in what follows, and are only mentioned in order to lend precision to the setting, the "villa" of the mad-house (alas, the word slipped out). Even there, we never leave the drawing-room, and we have decided to adhere strictly to the Aristotelian unities of place, time and action. The action takes place among madmen and therefore requires a classical framework to keep it in shape. The "villa", originally the Zahnd summer residence, was where once all the patients of the establishment's founder, Fräulein Doktor Mathilde von Zahnd, were housed—decayed aristocrats; arterio-sclerotic politicians—unless still in office; debilitated millionaires; schizophrenic writers; maniac depressive industrial barons and so on; in short, the mentally disturbed élite of half the western world, for the Fräulein Doktor is a very celebrated person, not just because the hunch-backed spinster, in her everlasting white coat is descended from a great and very ancient family, of which she is the last presentable member, but because she is also a philanthropist and a psychiatrist of enormous repute; one might almost call her world-famous—her correspondence with C. G. Jung has just been published. But now the distinguished but not always very pleasant patients have been transferred long since to the elegant, light and airy new building, where for terrific fees, even the most disastrous past experiences are turned into blissful memories. The new building spreads over the southern section of the extensive park, branching out into various wings and pavilions (stained glass windows in the chapel by Erni) that descend towards the plain, while the villa's lawns, dotted with gigantic trees, slope down to the lake. There is a stone embankment along the edge of

the lake. Now only three patients, at the very most, occupy the drawing-room of the sparsely-inhabited villa; as it happens, they are all three physicists, though this is not entirely due to chance, for humane principles are put into practice here, and it is felt that "birds of a feather" should "flock together". They live for themselves, each one rapt in the cocoon of his own little world of the imagination; they take their meals together in the drawing-room, from time to time discuss scientific matters or just sit gazing dully before them—harmless, lovable lunatics, amenable, easily-handled and unassuming. In fact, they would be model patients were it not that certain serious, nay, hideous events have recently taken place; three months ago, one of them throttled a nurse, and now the very same thing has just happened again. So once again the police are back in the house and the drawing-room is more than usually animated. The room is semicircular in shape with a tiled mosaic floor. The semicircular wall is off-white to cream, and rough stucco in texture. There is a heavy and ornate cornice. The main entrance is by elaborate double doors L, that have pictures painted in their panels. At the back, there are three bedroom doors, which are startlingly modern, black padded, with metal studs, and with clinical white frames. There are windows down R and down L, with built-in window-seats. Above the window-seats are ornate jibs from which curtains are suspended. Each curtain has a long tasselled cord. The jibs are of the same length and curve as the window-seats, and the grilles which are pulled over the windows in Act II cover exactly the area between the jibs and the seats. Little is required for the furnishing of a stage on which, contrary to the plays of the ancients, the satire precedes the tragedy. The impression conveyed by all the furniture is of slightly seedy gentility. The carpet is of good quality, but a little worn. There is a settee RC and a large, carved, wooden elbow chair LC; a low coffee-table in front of the settee; a small circular dining-table down LC; three upright chairs, one each R of the bedroom doors and a stretcher trolley above the double doors. At night the room is lit by two fluorescent strip pendants RC and LC and a standard lamp R, with brass switches below the double doors. Over the double doors there hangs a portrait of an old man with a pointed beard, enclosed in a heavy, gilded frame. The door up R leads to the bedroom occupied by NEWTON and is furnished with a hospital bed and a chair. The door up C leads to the bedroom occupied by EINSTEIN, and is furnished with a hospital bed, a piano, a piano stool and a music stand. This room has a window in the back wall. The door up LC leads to the bedroom occupied by MÖBIUS and is furnished with a hospital bed, a desk and a chair. This room also has a window in the back wall. The two bedroom windows are provided with grilles to be fitted over them for Act II, and have white net curtains. There are red and green signal lights fitted over the three bedroom doors.

When the CURTAIN rises, the room is empty, in the relatively sunny November light. The music of a violin and piano is heard from Einstein's room. The tune is the "Kreutzer Sonata". The signal light over the door shows red. The lights over the other two doors show green. The dead nurse is lying on the floor down L in a tragic and quite unmistakable attitude, and it is

impossible not to see that a struggle has taken place. The furniture is in great disorder. The standard lamp and the coffee-table have been knocked over, and the dining-table has been overturned. After a moment, the POLICE DOCTOR enters by the double doors. He carries his medical bag. GUHL, the police stenographer, and two uniformed POLICEMEN follow him on. The DOCTOR kneels L of the body and examines it. GUHL stands R of it and the two POLICEMEN above it. All four become aware of the music and react. The POLICEMEN move up LG and look at the red signal light over the door up C. They turn, survey the room then move to the double doors and inspect the pictures painted on the panels. BLOCHER enters by the double doors and crosses to R of Guhl. He has his camera and other equipment in a box hanging from his shoulder. The two POLICEMEN see the INSPECTOR approaching off L, move and stand by the stretcher trolley. POLICE INSPECTOR RICHARD VOSS enters by the double doors. He carries a brief-case. He looks at the body then hands his brief-case to Guhl. GUHL crosses to the window seat R, sits, takes out a notebook and pencil and prepares to take notes. The INSPECTOR surveys the room, moves above the chair LG, takes out his cigar-case and extracts a cigar. MARTA BOLL, the matron, enters by the double doors, looking as resolute as she really is. She watches the INSPECTOR who becomes aware of her presence and turns to her. The DOCTOR takes a length of flex from the neck of the body, and rises.

INSPECTOR. All right if I smoke?

MATRON. It's not usual.

INSPECTOR. I beg your pardon. (*He replaces the cigar in his case*)

MATRON. A cup of tea?

INSPECTOR. No brandy?

MATRON. You're in a medical establishment.

INSPECTOR. Then nothing. Blocher, you can take the photographs now.

BLOCHER. Yes, sir. (*He puts down his box, takes out his camera and takes flash photographs of the body from all angles*)

INSPECTOR (*to the Matron*) What was the nurse's name? (*He moves down RC and turns to face the Matron*)

MATRON. Irene Straub.

(GUHL makes notes)

INSPECTOR. Age?

MATRON. Twenty-two. From Kohlwang.

INSPECTOR. Relatives?

MATRON. A brother in Liechtenstein.

INSPECTOR. Informed?

MATRON. By telephone.

INSPECTOR. The murderer?

MATRON. Please, Inspector—the poor man's ill, you know.

INSPECTOR. Well—the assailant?

MATRON. Ernst Heinrich Ernesti. We call him "Einstein".

INSPECTOR. Why?

MATRON. Because he thinks he is Einstein.

(GUHL laughs)

INSPECTOR (*turning sharply to Guhl*) Have you got the statement down, Guhl?

GUHL. Yes, sir.

(*The INSPECTOR crosses above the settee to the body, examining the three bedroom doors as he passes them*)

INSPECTOR (*to the Doctor*) Strangled, Doctor?

DOCTOR. Quite definitely. With the flex of the standard lamp. (*He hands the length of flex to the Inspector*) These madmen often have gigantic reserves of strength. It's phenomenal.

INSPECTOR (*moving to L of the chair*) Oh, is that so? In that case I consider it most irresponsible to leave these madmen in the care of female nurses. (*He whips the chair with the flex*) This is the second murder—

MATRON. Please, Inspector.

INSPECTOR. —the second accident within three months in the medical establishment known as Les Cerisiers. (*He drops the flex behind the chair, takes out a notebook and refers to it*) On the twelfth of August a certain Herbert Georg Beulter, who believes himself to be the great physicist Sir Isaac Newton, strangled Dorothea Moser, a nurse. (*He puts the notebook in his pocket*) And in this very room. If they'd had male attendants such a thing would never have happened.

MATRON. Do you really think so?

INSPECTOR. I do.

MATRON. Nurse Moser was a member of the League of Lady Wrestlers and Nurse Straub was Ladies' Champion of the National Judo Association. (*She picks up the coffee-table*)

INSPECTOR. And what about you?

MATRON. Weightlifter. (*She sets the coffee-table violently on its feet in front of the settee*)

INSPECTOR. Now I'd like to see the murderer.

MATRON (*picking up a cigar-box and ashtray from the floor and putting them on the coffee-table*) Please, Inspector.

INSPECTOR. I mean—the assailant.

MATRON. He's playing his fiddle.

INSPECTOR. Doing what?

MATRON. Can't you hear him?

INSPECTOR (*crossing to the window-seat R and picking up his brief-case*) Then kindly request him to stop.

(*The MATRON does not react*)

I have to ask him some questions.

MATRON. Definitely not.

INSPECTOR. Why not?

MATRON. We cannot allow it, on medical grounds. Herr Ernesti has to play his fiddle, and play it now.

INSPECTOR. But damn it, the man's just strangled a nurse!

MATRON. Inspector. He's not just any man, but a sick man who needs calming down. And because he thinks he's Einstein he can only calm down when he's playing the fiddle.

INSPECTOR. Can I be going mad? (*He moves to L of the settee*)

MATRON. No.

INSPECTOR (*sitting on the settee*) I'm getting confused. (*He wipes the sweat from his forehead*) Warm in here.

MATRON. I don't think so.

INSPECTOR. Matron Boll. Kindly fetch the doctor-in-charge.

MATRON. Quite out of the question. The Fräulein Doktor is accompanying Einstein on the piano. Einstein can only calm down when the Fräulein Doktor plays his accompaniments.

INSPECTOR (*rising*) And three months ago the Fräulein Doktor had to play chess with Sir Isaac Newton, to calm *him* down. We can't have any more of this, Matron. I simply must speak to the doctor-in-charge.

MATRON. Certainly.

INSPECTOR. Thank you.

MATRON (*sitting firmly in the chair LC*) But you'll have to wait.

(*The INSPECTOR sits on the settee. The two POLICEMEN move the stretcher trolley down L and helped by the DOCTOR, load the body on to it. The DOCTOR spreads the sheet over the body*)

INSPECTOR. How long's this row going to last?

MATRON. Fifteen minutes—an hour. It all depends.

(*The INSPECTOR controls his impatience*)

INSPECTOR. Very well, I'll wait. (*He suddenly roars*) I'll wait!

BLOCHER (*packing his camera*) We're just about finished, sir. (*He moves behind the chair LC*)

INSPECTOR. So am I.

(*There is silence except for the faint sound of the music. The INSPECTOR wipes his forehead*)

(*To Blocher*) You could take the body out.

BLOCHER. Very well, sir.

(*The two POLICEMEN push the trolley off by the double doors*)

MATRON (*rising*) I'll show them the way through the park to the chapel.

(*The MATRON exits by the double doors.*)

The DOCTOR collects his bag and follows her off.

BLOCHER collects his camera and exits after the Doctor.

GUHL rises, crosses and exits by the double doors, closing them after

him. *The violin and piano continue. The INSPECTOR rises, removes his hat and coat and puts them with his brief-case on the window-seat R. He crosses to the bedroom door up LC and gently tries the handle, but the door is locked. He moves to the door up C and again unsuccessfully tries the handle. He then moves to the door up RC, which is suddenly opened from inside.*

HERBERT GEORG BEUTLER—NEWTON—*enters up RC. He wears a costume from the beginning of the eighteenth century and a full-bottomed wig*)

NEWTON (*moving C*) Sir Isaac Newton.

INSPECTOR (*moving to R of the settee*) Inspector Voss.

NEWTON (*with a step towards the Inspector*) I'm so glad. Really very glad. I heard a noise in here, groans and gurglings, and then people coming and going. (*He takes another two steps towards the Inspector*) May I enquire just what has been going on?

INSPECTOR. Nurse Straub was strangled.

NEWTON. The Ladies' Champion of the National Judo Association?

INSPECTOR. The Ladies' Champion.

NEWTON (*moving to L of the settee*) Gruesome.

INSPECTOR (*with a step towards Newton*) By Ernst Heinrich Ernesti.

NEWTON (*turning on the Inspector*) But he's playing his fiddle.

INSPECTOR. He has to calm himself down.

NEWTON. The tussle must have taken it out of him. He's rather highly-strung, poor boy. How did he . . . ?

INSPECTOR. With the cord of the standard lamp.

NEWTON. With the cord of the standard lamp. (*He advances on the Inspector, swerves below him and examines the bare end of the flex from the standard lamp which is protruding behind the settee*) Yes. That's another possibility. Poor Ernesti. I'm sorry for him. Truly sorry. And I'm sorry for the Ladies' Judo Champion, too. (*He crosses above the settee to the overturned dining-table, picks it up and in a business-like manner sets it on its feet against the wall above the double doors*)

(*The INSPECTOR crosses down L and watches Newton*)

Now you'll have to excuse me. I must put things straight.

INSPECTOR. Do. We've got everything we want.

NEWTON. I simply can't stand disorder. (*He crosses to the standard lamp*) Really it was my passion for order that made me become a physicist. (*He picks up the standard lamp and sets it against the wall below the bedroom door up RC*) To interpret the apparent disorder of nature, in the light of a more sublime order. (*He takes a packet of cigarettes and matches from his pocket*) Will it disturb you if I smoke? (*He lights a cigarette*)

INSPECTOR. On the contrary, I was just thinking . . . (*He takes out his cigar-case*)

NEWTON (*moving C*) Excuse me, but we were talking about order just now, so I must tell you that the patients are allowed to smoke here, but not the visitors. If they did it would stink the place out.

INSPECTOR. I see. (*He puts his cigar-case in his pocket*)

NEWTON. Will it disturb you if I have a nip of brandy?

INSPECTOR. Not at all.

(*NEWTON sits c of the settee, and with a practised air, and without looking at it, lifts the right-hand cushion of the settee and produces a bottle of brandy and a glass. The INSPECTOR moves uneasily a little up LC*)

NEWTON (*pouring himself a drink*) That poor Ernesti. I'm really upset. How on earth could anyone bring himself to strangle a nurse? (*He puts the bottle on the coffee-table*)

INSPECTOR (*moving above the chair LC*) I believe you strangled one yourself.

NEWTON. Did I?

INSPECTOR. Nurse Dorothea Moser.

NEWTON. The lady wrestler.

INSPECTOR. On the twelfth of August. With the curtain cord.

NEWTON. But that was something quite different, Inspector, I'm not mad, you know. (*He raises his glass*) Your health.

INSPECTOR. And yours.

(*NEWTON drinks*)

NEWTON. Dorothea Moser. Let me cast my mind back. Blonde hair. Enormously powerful. Yet, despite her bulk, very flexible. She loved me and I loved her. It was a dilemma that could only be resolved by the use of a curtain cord.

INSPECTOR. Dilemma?

NEWTON. My mission is to devote myself to the problems of gravitation, not the physical requirements of a woman.

INSPECTOR. Quite.

NEWTON. And then there was this tremendous difference in our ages.

INSPECTOR. Granted. You must be well on the wrong side of two hundred.

(*NEWTON stares uncomprehendingly at the Inspector*)

NEWTON. How do you mean?

INSPECTOR. Well, being Sir Isaac Newton . . .

NEWTON. Are you out of your mind, Inspector, or are you just having me on?

INSPECTOR. Now look . . .

NEWTON. Do you really think I'm Sir Isaac Newton?

INSPECTOR. Well, don't you?

(*NEWTON looks suspiciously at the Inspector*)

NEWTON. Inspector. (*He beckons to the Inspector to sit beside him*)

(*The INSPECTOR avoids the invitation, but sits in the chair LC, keeping as far from Newton as possible*)

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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